

The (im)pertinence of history. Nation-building and History: A Comparison Between Northern Italy and Flanders

L'(im)pertinenza della storia. Nation-building e storia: una comparazione fra l'Italia del Nord e le Fiandre

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Abstract. Northern Italy (in the 1990) and Flanders (after 2010), the economic motors of their country, have experienced a pro-independence drive, sustained by an identity discourse affirming the excellence of their region. The territory of both regions, contrary to many other minorities in Europe, however, does not correspond with a particular historical entity. In this article, I compare how the respective discourses on economic excellence are embedded within a historical narrative. To legitimize its Padanian identity discourse, the Lega's historical narrative essentializes the difference between the north and the rest of Italy. In Flanders, there is a tension between an economic success story in which history is marginalized and the historical heritage of the Flemish movement itself. These different uses of history reflect the respective evolution of national and subnational historical narratives and the specific political, ideological, and territorial logic of the actors involved.

Abstract. *L'Italia del Nord (negli anni 1990) e le Fiandre (dopo 2010), i motori economici del loro paese, hanno conosciuto una risorgenza indipendentista sostenuta da un discorso sull'eccellenza economica del territorio. Il territorio delle due regioni, contrariamente ad altre minoranze in Europa, tuttavia non corrisponde con entità storiche. In questo articolo, propongo una comparazione della dimensione storica dei rispettivi discorsi sull'eccellenza economica. Per legittimizzare l'identità padana, la narrazione storica delle Lega ha essenzializzato le differenze fra il Nord e il resto dell'Italia. Nelle Fiandre esiste una tensione fra il discorso sull'eccellenza economica nel quale la storia viene marginalizzata e l'interesse per l'eredità storica del movimento fiammingo. L'uso molto differente della storia riflette l'evoluzione particolare delle narrative storiche nazionali e subnazionali, e la specifica logica politica, ideologica e territoriale degli attori politici.*

Keywords: *identity, independentism, national history, Lega Nord, Flemish government, identità, indipendentismo, storia nazionale, Lega Nord, governo fiammingo*

1. Introduction

Sub-state nationalisms in Northern Italy and Flanders have several features in common. Both regions are the economic motors of their country, and they have experienced (Northern Italy mainly in the 1990s, Flanders mainly after 2010) a pro-independence drive, sustained by an identity discourse affirming the economic excellence of the region. As such they exemplify a nationalism of the rich, with moreover a predominantly right-wing ideological profile (cf., Dalle Mulle, 2017). Since history traditionally plays an important role in justifications of claims for independence (or for recognition of a community), this article investigates in which measure the identity claims in these regions focused on the present still contain a historical narrative (cf., Huysseune and Coppieters, 2002: 285-289). Constructing such narratives is in both regions particularly challenging since they also have in common that, contrary to many other minorities in Europe (e.g., Scotland, Catalonia), their territory does not correspond with a particular historical entity. The Lega Nord nevertheless attempted in the 1990s to elaborate a coherent historical narrative establishing Padanian identity. History has played a less visible role in the electoral revival of Flemish nationalism, but the Flemish authorities, led by the moderate right-wing nationalists of the Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-Va), recently (2019) declared their intention to establish a Flemish canon. This canon would consist of thematic windows that would increase historical knowledge and would reflect the collective memory of the region (Vlaamse Regering, 2020). This intention has engendered a lively debate on the specificity of Flanders, including its history.

I will first propose a theoretical reflection on the role of history in nationalism, with a focus on contemporary Europe. A second section analyses the historical component of the identity discourse of the Lega Nord, relating its elaboration (by its party leader, Umberto Bossi and by fellow travellers, amateur scholars united around the review *Quaderni padani* and its editor, Gilberto Oneto) to narratives on Italian national identity. A third section studies the case of Flanders, and the present debate on the canon, with a focus on interventions by historians. In the conclusion, I propose a short comparative reflection on the use of history in both cases.

2. Sub-state nationalist movements in Europe and their use of history: a discussion

It is a truism that history and history writing have played a prominent role in nationalism. Anthony Smith has been the theoretician of nationalism most

attentive to its functions. In his *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, he analyses the role of history in modern nation-building discourses. He associates its role with what he considers a paradox of contemporary society, “the appetite for innovation combined with deep nostalgia” (Smith, 1986: 174). This nostalgia is a consequence of the anomie caused by capitalism and bureaucracy, and in this context, the nation becomes a meaning-giving entity, and nationalism a surrogate religion (Smith, 1986: 175-176). While romanticism has provided a dramatic format for historical narratives, such narratives also provide blueprints for the future. “Nostalgia is so often linked with utopia, our blueprints for the future are invariably derived from our experiences of our past, and as we travel forward, we do so by looking backwards to a past that alone seems knowable and intelligible and which alone can ‘make sense’ of a future that is forever neither.” (Smith, 1986: 177).

History writing itself, characterized by methodological nationalism taking the nation-state and its territory for granted, has a long tradition of involvement in giving legitimacy to national identities. National history writing has never happened in a vacuum: “[i]magining the nation was impossible without a series of comparative activities” since “national histories were to give an account of the reputation and the place of a nation” (Liakos, 2013: 317-318). These comparisons followed the predominant mode of interpreting histories based on “a single, linear developmental course of civilization in time, space, and values, with Western Europe (or simply ‘Europe’ or ‘the West’) on top” (Liakos, 2013: 318). When national history does not conform to this canonical model, it can lead to a negative consciousness in which this history is characterized by deviances and absences (Liakos, 2013: 332).

The use of history is also determined by how societies envision themselves within time, in what François Hartog has referred to as regimes of historicity (Hartog, 2015). The contemporary context is characterized by presentism, a mode predominant from the 1980s on and particularly after the fall of communism. Hartog defines it as “the sense that only the present exists, a present characterized at once by the tyranny of the instant and by the treadmill of an unending now.” (Hartog, 2015: xv). Presentism implies the exclusion of visions of a different future, and history hence loses its role as a provider of blueprints for them. Notwithstanding this predominance of presentism, history is not absent from the contemporary world rather obsessed with memory and heritage (Hartog, 2015).

The European context allows observing how presentism functions in the articulation of historical narratives. Identity discourses in the European Union relate to the post-national format of EU narratives that interpret the process of European integration as transcending the previously predominant competitive and antagonistic nationalism (Stråth, 2000; Stråth and

Triandafyllidou, 2003). Articulations of identity at both the national and subnational levels are formatted as narratives in which the nation's history leads to its inclusion in the EU as a space of democracy, non-antagonistic national identities, and economic modernity. This narrative has many similarities with Fukuyama's "end of history" paradigm, and in line with the nature of the European integration process, it precludes envisioning a future much different from the present. Notwithstanding this post-national mode of European identity discourse, several European countries witnessed in recent decades a noticeable revival of interest in national identities that also influenced interpretations of national history. This revival was motivated by a presumed crisis of these identities but was frequently also a reaction against the anti-establishment contestation of the 1960s and 1970s and in history writing against generally left-wing deconstructions of national rhetoric and preference for social and gender history. Such a revival took place both in countries without significant national minorities – Germany – as in those confronted with such minorities – France, United Kingdom, Italy (Berger et al., 1999; Passmore et al., 1999; Berger and Lorenz, 2010; Huyseune, 2019).

EU identity discourse itself is also constructed against significant others, articulating European civilization superiority (Stråth, 2000). The 2008 financial crisis has moreover reinforced internal divisions within Europe, particularly the normative opposition between the so-called "crickets" and "ants", the northern countries assumed to be virtuous versus the laggards of the generally southern periphery. Such articulations of presumed civilizational superiority, like earlier oppositions between "modern" and "backward" societies, often imply a historical narrative explaining this superiority. Especially in countries at the (real or perceived) borders of European civilization, national identities are inserted in a historical narrative contrasting them with neighbours described as non-European (cf., Stråth and Triandafyllidou, 2003). The example of the Lega Nord shows how such opposition between modernity and backwardness may also be articulated within one country, while Flemish nationalists also sometimes propose a less systematic and historically grounded opposition between Flemish "ants" and Wallonian "crickets". Lega Nord and the extreme-right Vlaams Belang party moreover exemplify how the discourse on European excellence easily translates into racially marked ethnocentrism, reflecting the recent revival in exclusive and ethnocentric articulations of national and subnational identities (cf., Stråth, 2017).

The processes described above condition the use of history by European sub-state nationalist movements. These movements have been undergoing a process of Europeanization, which has marked their identity discourse notwithstanding their recently more critical stance towards the European Union (De Winter et al., 2005; Massetti, 2009; Cirulli et al., 2018). Because

European integration is predominantly state-centred, these movements moreover struggle to affirm their interpretations of the regional territory (Kernalegenn, 2021). As a rule, national minorities have constructed historical narratives similar in their structure and their tropes to majority narratives and have developed institutions for this purpose (Bruckmüller et al., 2012). How the historical narratives of these minorities have evolved recently, has not yet been studied in a systematic way. Many of these narratives have their origin in romanticism, but the Europeanization of sub-state nationalism has corresponded with the demise of essentialist narratives, and the integration of identity discourses within a European framework. They are, however, in some cases also marked by the revival of state-nationalist historical narratives. These dynamics explain, for example, the renewed interest in history in the Catalan case, which concerns both the history of Catalan nationalism and of Catalan self-government until 1713. In this context, Neus Torbisco Casals defends the legitimacy of re-interpretations of official histories that deny the specificities of communities and past oppressions and humiliations (Torbisco Casals, 2017: 207-213). Typically, past forms of self-government attract the attention of sub-state nationalists. Besides Catalonia, it plays for example a prominent role in Corsica where the figure of Pasquale Paoli, the 18th century leader of the island's rebellion against Genoa, looms large, but also in Brittany, where the territory of reference of Breton nationalists corresponds with the medieval duchy of Brittany (Toutous, 2021). It is the absence of such historically validated territorial demarcations that characterizes both northern Italy and Flanders, giving saliency to a comparison of the respective strategies to cope with this absence.

3. Northern Italy and the Lega Nord's historical narrative

It is a commonplace to state that the Lega Nord has created an artificial and non-existent northern Italian identity. This creation, however, was only possible because mainstream understanding of Italian identity itself was since the unification of the country strongly concerned by the dichotomy between a modern (and "European") North and a South presumed backward (and "African" or "Levantine"). Essentially, the Lega's identity discourse representing a modern and economically successful North recycled themes that have a long standing (albeit in many periods subterranean, not often articulated in public discourse) in Italy.

The formulation of a northern Italian identity discourse moreover occurred at a moment of national self-doubt, reflected in the rhetoric on Italy's incomplete modernization and its need to become a fully modern and civil

country, like those in north-west Europe (Huyseune 2006, pp. 39-79). The identity discourse articulated by the Lega Nord starting from the early 1990s also fits in well in the presentist mode described above. In its first versions, it very explicitly related its identity claim to the demise of communism, and its programme has always implied the acceptance of the present capitalist order without any intention of substantially modifying it (e.g., Bossi and Vimercati, 1992: 196-197; Bossi and Vimercati, 1993: 12 and 179-181). As such, it resembles other contemporary European articulations of national identity that emphasise their nation's modernity and normality (Huyseune, 2006: 33). In Italy itself, in the 1990s the terms "modernity" and "normality" became an obsessive presence in mainstream public discourse, which moreover implicitly located these values in northern Italy (Huyseune, 2006: 220).

The historical component of such reflections was not always strongly articulated, but it could easily rely on a tradition of negative consciousness in history-production in Italy. This tradition bemoans the absences and weaknesses that allegedly characterize Italian history, such as the absence of Protestant Reformation, its unification as only a revolution from above without popular participation, or fascism as a revelation of national vices.¹ The supposed weaknesses of Italy could be considered national, but also as engendered by the allegedly backward South. It fits in the habit of locating examples of Italian excellence – the medieval city-states, the Renaissance – only in northern or central Italy. The American political scientist Robert D. Putnam has produced the most comprehensive historical narrative distinguishing northern from southern Italy. In his famous *Making Democracy Work*, published in 1993, he gave international confirmation of the North-South dichotomy, arguing that civic traditions characterized the northern regions, contrasted by the South dominated by amoral familism. This difference has for him its origins in history: he opposes the northern regions of Italy with their medieval self-governing city-states to the authoritarian and feudal government of the Kingdom of Naples, installed by Frederick II. History has path-dependently reproduced these respective traditions (Putnam, 1993: 121-127).

Since the 1970s, representations of northern Italy also make use of the category of the Third Italy (Terza Italia).² The term refers to the regions of Northern and Central Italy outside the traditional centre of industrialization, the Milan-Turin-Genoa industrial triangle. The industrialization of the Third Italy is characterized by the predominance of small and medium-sized en-

¹ For a recent in-depth discussion of Italian historiography focusing also on these issues, see the contributions in Benigno and Mineo, 2020.

² The term "Third Italy" was originally coined by Arnaldo Bagnasco (Bagnasco, 1977). For an overview on the literature, see Huyseune, 2006: 99-106.

terprises clustered in industrial districts with strong social and cultural roots in local society. Research on these districts has revealed how within them previous expertise (artisanal, in agriculture, but also organizational skills) has been operationalized in new industrial enterprises (e.g., Cento Bull and Corner 1993, see also Huysseune 2006: 101-104). Described as a model of endogenous regional development, these regions were also characterized (until the 1990s) by their political stability: those of the centre and the northern region of Emilia-Romagna dominated by the communist party (PCI), the ones in the rest of the north by the Christian democrats (DC). It is the latter part of northern Italy, the territories of the so-called white subculture, that would become the main electoral constituency of the Lega.

Discourses of northern identity were therefore ready-made, seemingly only waiting to be deployed by the Lega. What differentiates the Lega Nord from those mainstream representations on the North-South divide is its articulation of a coherent historical narrative explaining and essentializing this dichotomy.³ While it readily quoted Putnam (Bossi and Vimercati, 1993: 122; Oneto, 1997: 112), it also gave an ethnic twist to the North-South dichotomy absent from Putnam. From early on, the Lega provided some elements of this narrative. The original name of the main branch of the party, the Lega Lombarda, is an all-too-obvious reference to the 12th century league with the same name, an alliance of northern cities in their opposition to the emperor Frederick Barbarossa, ending with the League's victory in the battle of Legnano in 1176. This battle has also been a foundational element of Italian national history, but Bossi recycled it as a specific northern Italian event (Coleman 2004). Overall, however, Bossi was only moderately interested in long-term historical reconstructions. The books he published in the early 1990s, written together with the journalist Daniele Vimercati, mainly refer to recent history. *Vento del Nord* (1992) focuses on the political crisis Italy was undergoing in the late 1980s and early 1990s. *La Rivoluzione* (1993) does pay more attention to history. It emphasizes how Italian unification was an artificial process without popular participation, a war of conquest (Bossi and Vimercati, 1993: 22-33), a narrative inspired by the leftist tradition decrying unification as an elite enterprise, a passive revolution, and (ironically) by a southern narrative deploring the forceful annexation of that region. It also sketches the history of autonomist aspirations with an emphasis on the post-World War II period (Bossi and Vimercati, 1993: 37-55), as well as a pointed critique of the limits of the country's regionalization starting from 1970 (Bossi and Vimercati, 1993: 56-68).

³ The best and most comprehensive analysis of the Lega's use of history remains Avanza, 2003, which is also the starting point of my analysis.

Because of their hostility towards state centralism and the imposition of Italian national identity, the Lega and Bossi also emphasized their hostility towards fascism and their sympathy with the Resistance. The title of Bossi's first book, *Vento del Nord*, refers to statements of the socialist politician Pietro Nenni, who had affirmed that the resistance against the German occupation in northern Italy would produce a progressive transformation of the country. While praising the Resistance, Lega authors tended to emphasize its northern, autonomist and federalist dimension (e.g., Corti, 1996: 30). They have been particularly interested in the *Carta di Chivasso* (1943), a declaration by partisans claiming autonomy for the Alpine populations (e.g., Micol, 1998).

The party's interest in a nation-building discourse became more pronounced with its secessionist turn in the second half of the 1990s, when it also adopted the term Padania, to distinguish northern Italy more explicitly from the rest of the country. It collaborated for this purpose with the review *Quaderni padani*, founded in 1995 and directed by the architect and prolific author Gilberto Oneto. Oneto authored the most systematic attempt to define Padanian identity, *L'invenzione della Padania* (1997). His definition of the Padanian nation is strongly marked by language and by the alleged difference between northern Italian parlances from the rest of the country, a definition that limits Padania to regions north of the Apennines, excluding central Italy. His idea of a Padanian nation is strongly embedded in history, in a narrative that emphasizes its pre-Roman roots (Oneto, 1997: 79-83). Since pre-Roman northern Italy was predominantly inhabited by Celtic tribes, Oneto insists on the Celtic roots of Padania, thereby rendering Celtic paraphernalia an important feature of the Lega subculture. Non-Celtic tribes in northern Italy, like the Veneti, were according to Oneto nevertheless similar in their ethnic and cultural profile. The Celts, however, specifically symbolize northern opposition to Rome (and where Rome, republican or imperial, is an analogue for modern centralist Italy). They incarnate for Oneto moral and cultural values still present in northern Italy, including a preference for autonomy and self-government. Articles on the pre-Roman history of northern Italy therefore abound in the review. In their desire to establish ethno-territorial continuity, several authors have argued that northern Italian cultural specificity dates even from a much earlier period (Grisolia, 1997; Priuli, 1998; Rognoni, 1999).

Oneto's reconstruction has its internal logic, based on his belief in cultural and even ethnic continuity starting from the Celtic period. Oneto also appreciates the Lombard rule, mainly limited to northern Italy, since according to him Lombards had an ethnic profile close to the Celtic tribes and their rule was like the Celtic period characterized by local autonomy. He interprets

medieval municipal self-government essentially as a Lombard inheritance (Oneto, 1997: 84-85). He also outlines a continuous tradition of northern rebellions against authority that links Celtic resistance to the Romans, the insurrection of the heretic Fra Dolcino (late 13th and early 14th century), anti-French insurrections during the French occupation (late 18th century till 1815), and resistance during the second world war (Oneto, 1997: 82, n. 4). Concerning recent history, he reiterates the critique against the Italian unification process already voiced by Bossi and Vimercati, with explicit references to southern neo-Bourbon authors rejecting unification (Oneto, 1997: 25-26 and 87-92). The Risorgimento is not a central concern of the review, but it has regularly published articles denouncing the role of Mazzini and Garibaldi.

The historical narrative of the Lega eliminates all the aspects that traditional Italian historical narratives identify as problematic, mainly by locating these dimensions outside Padania. This is the case for organized crime, the Italian state and fascism. On the issue of another presumed defect of Italy's history, the absence of a Protestant reform, party discourse offers a more indirect answer affirming (paraphrasing Max Weber) that northern Italians have interiorized Protestant labour ethics (e.g., Oneto, 1997: 113). It emphasizes the insertion of Padania in the northern European sphere, a discourse that mirrors traditional categorizing of northern Italians as more modern and European. Characteristic is the desire to essentialize this closeness: the narrative on Celtic identity intends to confirm the historical embeddedness of such linkages.

The Lega and Gilberto Oneto put a strong emphasis on popular culture – vernacular architecture, decorative arts, music, cuisine, ... –, its presumed Celtic origins and its transmission through history. As such, its reading of northern history is only moderately interested in high culture, central (particularly the arts) in mainstream readings of Italian and northern Italian identity. Obviously, they also highlight economic virtues of northern Italians, since from early on the party identified them with the “people of producers”, “il popolo produttore”. This image has the advantage that it corresponds with social science literature on the Third Italy and its industrial districts. Scholarship has shown how the Lega's political discourse matched social values in the regions traditionally dominated by Christian Democracy, in particular the industrial districts in Veneto and provincial Lombardy (Cento Bull, 1992; 1993; 1996). Within these districts social networks oppose the producers, local entrepreneurs, and their employees, to outsiders, a differentiation reinforced by using dialect as a language of trust. Outsiders include the “parasitic” representatives of the state (often southern Italians) and immigrants, tolerated in subordinate positions in the production process but not accepted

as community members. Districts also tended to have gendered labour markets, with little career prospects for women who often gave up paid work after childbirth (e.g., Bagnasco 1999: 109), reflecting the persistence of traditional role models and family values.

The Lega has a long tradition of proposing itself as political referent of the small and middle enterprises of northern Italy. Oneto, suspicious of large cities, emphasizes the communitarian dimension of the economy in small cities (Oneto, 1997: 121-123). The *Quaderni padani* rarely indulge in descriptions of these industrial districts. They are, however, interested in establishing their historical and particularly ethnic pedigree. In its first issue, an article outlines – comparable to mainstream literature on these districts – how the economic excellence of Lombardy is a consequence of the transformation of traditional skills (artisanal and in agriculture) in modern economic activities. The article also argues that these skills are themselves a heritage of the Celtic past (Corti, 1995a). For this purpose, it situates the locus of most of those skills in the Alpine regions. Especially in the *Quaderni padani*, these regions symbolize ethnic continuity and excellence (Huysseune, 2010). Its population has been less contaminated by waves of immigration and has therefore better preserved its ethnic identity and culture. Moreover, according to this reading after each demographic crisis, people from the mountain regions repopulated the northern Italian plain, a process that preserved the ethnic specificity of northern Italy (Corti, 1995a). This discourse of ethnic purity, however, is unidirectional: influences and contacts from northern Europe are welcome – contributions describe the Alpine regions as a contact zone, not as a frontier (Oneto, 1997: 32). The delimitation from southern Italy (with the central Italian regions having a more ambivalent status) is much stricter. Contacts with territories towards the South and the East are denied or (in the case of trade contacts of Venice and Genoa) downplayed. Relations with these regions are often presented in a negative way, the best example being the issue of *Quaderni padani* that constructed Padania as an eternal enemy of Islam (*Quaderni padani*, 1999).

Especially Oneto's historical narrative bases itself on the assertion of popular social and cultural virtues. It emphasizes the constant desire of autonomy and local self-government and pays only limited attention to political history. Articles in *Quaderni padani* on pre-unitary states in northern Italy are scarce, and never on the Piedmontese monarchy, because of its role in founding a centralized Italian state. The most positive appreciation is given to the pre-revolutionary Venetian and Genovese republics, particularly to the former. Defences of these states nevertheless remain low-key, since the Lega is suspicious of identity discourses focused on a specific region and especially the Veneto (Oneto 2003). The Veneto is the region where regional

autonomism is strongest and where it was first politically successful, and where several dissident regionalist groupings have emerged (Barcella, 2022: 35-36 and 95-96). It also has a powerful historical precedent in the Republic of Venice (which also included Friuli and part of Lombardy). Oneto argues that regionalism in the Veneto is often exasperated and self-focused, denying Padanian identity and the importance of a united front against Rome. He acknowledges the exemplarity of the Republic of Venice, but correctly points out that it was not limited to the Veneto only. He interprets its territorial expansionism in the 15th and 16th century as a (failed) attempt to realize Padanian unity (Oneto, 2003). The Lega is also suspicious of the concept of the Third Italy (Corti, 1995b: 19), or of the Nordest (North-East) (Bossi and Vimercati, 1998: 180) since they create artificial divisions within Padania. It prefers a “unity in diversity” understanding of Padania and its history and therefore also emphasizes that the Romans conquered northern Italy because of internal divisions (see Avanza, 2003).

The review is not particularly interested in post-unitary history. Besides regular denunciations of the centralism and authoritarianism of the Italian state, the main topic it addresses is the activism of autonomist movements. It typically blames the Italian state for everything that goes wrong in Italy and the north. This is, however, where an important internal contradiction of its narrative appears, since the Lega, but Oneto in particular claim that, thanks to its inherited ethnic identity, the population has preserved its cultural profile, but at the same time they denounce a massive process of deculturalization and the disappearance of vernacular culture (e.g., Oneto, 2001). Oneto, a romantic conservative, is suspicious of modern commercial culture, including its impact on the environment. His concern with cultural and environmental preservation certainly contrasts with the Lega Nord’s productivism indifferent to its social and environmental consequences. Contributions in the *Quaderni padani* generally blame outsiders – be it the Italian state, globalization, or immigrants – for environmental degradation, but nevertheless sometimes criticize administrators of the Lega for their indifference towards environmental issues (e.g., Oneto, 2002: 30-31). However, such critiques never really question the northern Italian economic model or of the productivist culture that is part of the political Dna of the Lega.

The Lega and Oneto have frequently been derided for their non-professional historical reconstructions. The contributions of Oneto and many other authors of the review combine in fact references to bona fide authors and to authors of a much more identitarian bent, prone to myth-history, and their essentialist conclusions would certainly not be considered acceptable by historians (although more official identitarian discourses in European countries sometimes equally do not shy away from such essentialism). The Lega

and the *Quaderni padani* situate themselves within a long-standing minority tradition of federalism and anti-centralism in Italian cultural life. Their interpretation of history moreover also fits into this tradition. Especially in pre-unitary 18th century-Italy, local and regional history attracted a lot of scholarly interest. Some 18th century authors envisioned, like the Lega and Oneto, the Romans as cruel colonizers destroying regional identities (Cavarzere, 2020: 209). No less a figure than the Neapolitan economist Antonio Genovesi proposed these pre-Roman Italic republics, federations of free cities founded on natural law, as a political model (Cavarzere, 2020: 180).

The nation-building claim of the Lega has engendered a unitary backlash: after a brief flirt with federalism in the 1990s (cf., Huysseune, 2006: 230-237), affirmations of national unity have quickly become predominant in the Italian intellectual and political community. Concerning history, this led to a positive reevaluation of the unification of the country, downplaying its more problematic dimensions (Avanza, 2003). Such unitary affirmations rarely tackle the northern discourse of excellence; they are more concerned with countering southern Italian neo-Bourbon critiques of unification. The challenge of the Lega produced, however, also more critical and theory-grounded responses. Scholars have raised serious concerns on the social and ecological sustainability of the northern Italian economic model (for an overview, see Huysseune, 2006: 136-143). Scholarship on southern Italy, reacting to the Lega's stereotyped representation of the region and informed by postcolonial theory, has provided novel interpretations of the region, including its history, challenging and deconstructing traditional images of backwardness and the modernity-backwardness dichotomy (for an overview see Huysseune, 2006: 143-161).

4. Flanders and the debate on the Flemish canon

The recent (2019) decision of the Flemish government (a coalition of the centre-right Flemish nationalist party N-Va, Christian democrats, and liberals) to develop a Flemish canon has redrawn attention to the issue of understanding and interpreting Flemish history. Flemish identity-formation has a much longer history than its Padanian equivalent. Its use of history has, however, undergone important evolutions over time, to be contextualized within the history of the Flemish movement and Flemish nationalism as well as, like in Italy, the development of Belgian identity-discourses.

Belgian identity-discourses, including historical narratives, were already articulated in the 18th century and became an instrument of nation-building after the country's independence in 1830 (Stengers and Gubin, 2002; Dubois,

2005). Notwithstanding the practical dominance of French, this discourse generally interpreted the country as bi-cultural, a synthesis of Latin and German cultural influences. The need to distinguish the new state from its much more powerful southern neighbour certainly contributed to this preference. It also led, particularly in the 1860s when the country felt threatened by Napoleon III's expansionist mires, to an emphasis on anti-French moments in history, and hence a revaluation of the 1302 victory of a Flemish army against France (the so-called battle of the golden spurs).

The elaboration of a Belgian national history was helped by the romantic vogue for the Middle Ages since these offered more material for glorification than later, more controversial periods. The county of Flanders (not to be confused with the present region of Flanders, with which it only partly overlaps) generally played a leading role in these narratives, for its importance as a political power and its precocious economic development. The historical narrative found its most professional elaboration in the multi-volume history of Belgium written by Belgium's also internationally most renowned historian, Henri Pirenne, during the first half of the 20th century (Pirenne, 1908-1932). Pirenne described Belgium as a territory (whose present borders are the result of the contingencies of history) between external (French and German) political and cultural influences, and hence non-nationalistic. While often quite critical of the country's elites, he repeatedly highlighted the virtues of ordinary Belgians, in terms of their productive activities that sustained the country's economic take-off.

Pirenne's books were both the culmination and the endpoint of the development of an all-encompassing Belgian historical narrative, and the books themselves (out of press) have somewhat fallen into oblivion. The rise of sub-national identity discourses has contributed to a diminished interest in the Belgian national identity, and the process of institutional reform that has delegated all matters cultural and educational to the community level consolidated this tendency. What all these discourses have in common is the absence of the doubts and interrogations about insufficient modernity that have characterized debates on Italian history: because of its location in Western Europe, the economic development and modernity of Belgium and of its sub-nationalities are taken for granted and not problematized. Typically, the absence of Protestant Reform bemoaned in Italy does not appear in debates on Belgian or sub-national identities, notwithstanding the violent and traumatic nature of the history of Protestantism and its expulsion from Belgium. This episode undoubtedly played an important part in Belgian history writing as a struggle for national liberation. Its religious dimension, however, proved divisive, since only the anti-clerical liberals could really

identify themselves with the rebels, the Geuzen (“beggars”) (Goosens 1995; Thomas 2008).

The narrative originally developed by the Flemish movement from the 19th century on essentially reread the Belgian narrative in a Flemish key (van Ginderachter and Warland, 2013). This was facilitated by the fact that for the medieval period (the one also most highlighted by the Flemish movement), the county of Flanders had played a central role, and the very decision to use the name “Flanders” for all Dutch-speaking territories in Belgium had an obvious symbolic valence. The 1302 battle was reinterpreted in a Flemish national key, and its commemoration (on July 11th) became an important moment of community celebration, later institutionalized as Flanders’ official holiday. Both the Flemish movement and in its counterpart, the Wallonian movement, sometimes displayed essentializing tendencies, based on the racialization of cultural and language differences, in line with similar distinctions between the Latin and German races current in Europe in the second half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. Because neither Flanders nor Wallonia correspond to historical entities, while some of the historical principalities in the Belgian territory included both Dutch- and French-speaking territories, it proved for both communities very difficult to produce entirely separate ethnicized historical narratives. Such ethnic essentialism also lost its intellectual legitimacy after World War II.

Presently, inter-community controversies over the interpretation of history have tended to focus on recent periods, essentially since Belgian independence (Kesteloot, 2013). Collaboration of part of the Flemish movement with German occupying forces in the First and Second World War has provided enduring material for controversy. Evaluations of this collaboration vary from positions (within the Flemish movement itself) understanding it as an emancipation movement fighting for a just cause to one understanding it as a betrayal of the Belgian nation and marked by a radical right profile (a largely correct evaluation for collaboration during the Second World War, but wrong for the First World War). Especially the memories of the period after the Second World War remain divided: a liberation for the majority, a period of repression for many exponents of the Flemish movement.

The demise of essentialist historical narratives did not mean that identity discourses disappeared after 1945. Stimulated by the transformation, initiated in 1970, of Belgium from a unitary to a federal state, Flemish authorities have actively promoted a Flemish cultural and institutional identity (Oosterlynck, 2011; Huyseune, 2012). In a first stage, in the 1980s, they provided an economic identity describing Flanders as a technologically innovative region, with a neo-liberal model of economic governance with limited direct state intervention (Oosterlynck, 2011). Flanders has carefully cultivated its

image of a competitive and economically successful region (Keating et al., 2003: 81-94). In a publication from 1993, Flemish authorities extended their regional identity discourse to a more global vision of the region (Van den Brande et al., 1993). Besides the image of an economically dynamic and successful region, an example of good governance, it also proposed a vision of a democratic and tolerant political community. As such, the region was an early example of the adaptation of identity to the format since then standardized in the European Union. The consensus on this issue between the main non-nationalist democratic parties in Flanders (Christian-democrats, liberals, and socialists) undoubtedly facilitated adapting such a discourse.

This institutional version of Flemish public discourse proposed a domesticated and non-confrontational reinterpretation of Flemish identity, since it argued that Flemish self-government had realized the goals of the Flemish movement, a local version of the “end-of history” narrative of Fukuyama. It corresponded with a decline in interest in the Flemish historical narrative. This evolution has also touched the historiography of the Flemish movement. Traditionally a militant affair, tending towards the apologetic and hagiographic, from the 1980s on, reflecting the international evolution of scholarship on nationalism it has lost its militant outlook and become more scholarly and neutral (Vos 2002; Wils, 2005; De Wever, 2010: 41). Several historians of Flemish nationalism are militant anti-nationalists, for example Bruno De Wever, not coincidentally the brother of the president of the N-Va, Bart De Wever. Presently many Flemish intellectuals and artists are very hostile towards Flemish nationalism, a rather exceptional situation amongst European minority nationalities.

However, public Flemish identity discourse notwithstanding its ostensible post-national stance implies the juxtaposition of Flemish governmental efficiency with its significant Other, located either in the other regions (Wallonia and Brussels) or in the federal government, dependent on compromises with the Francophone political parties. This juxtaposition is more explicit in non-institutional Flemish discourse (political parties, economic interest groups, the media), in which especially Wallonia is represented as an economic laggard, focusing on the pockets of economic marginalization and unemployment in the region that are the outcome of the decline of its traditional industries (the coal mines closing from the 1950s on and the steel industry from the 1970s on). The narrative argues that Wallonia’s persistently high rates of unemployment are the consequence of the assistentialist policies of the dominant Socialist party, but in general (except for Vlaams Belang) does not articulate any essentialized and/or in history embedded contrast between the two regions.

The 2019 decision of the Flemish government to establish a Flemish canon is a continuation of previous Flemish identity politics. It nevertheless also reflects traces of a more nationalist view on Flemish history. It had been preceded by the publication of a booklet by the president of the N-Va, Bart De Wever, defending the necessity of reinforcing Flemish identity (De Wever, 2019). In its declaration motivating its decision, the Flemish government stated that, following the Dutch example, it would propose a Flemish canon: to provide, by means of persons, events and cultural heritage, a narrative of the historical and cultural development of Flanders as a European nation (quoted in Boone, 2021: 39). Theo Francken, one of the more right-wing N-Va personalities, defended the canon to promote pride in Flanders, in opposition to the leftist cultural elite hostile to Flemish identity (Francken, 2019). Another member of the N-Va, Paul Cordy, rather highlighted the pluralist nature of such a canon, proposing to include in it the relation of Belgian francophone writers (Maeterlinck, De Coster, De Ghelderode) with Flanders, normally an excluded topic (Cordy, 2020). Both Francken and Cordy stated that this canon should not hide the negative sides of Flemish history, i.e., its most controversial page, collaboration during the Second World War. This debate is political, since the N-Va tries to distance itself from collaboration (and particularly the persecution of the Jewish community) and the victimist narrative surrounding its post-War repression that was traditionally present in Flemish nationalism.

The Flemish authorities decided to handle the establishment of a canon with caution. The letter explaining the mission stated that in following the Dutch model of a canon the goal of the canon explicitly was non-identitarian (Vlaamse Regering, 2020). The commission they organized for this purpose predominantly included respected intellectuals with no association with Flemish nationalism. The decision of the Flemish authorities nevertheless engendered vivid polemics, especially amongst historians. Several prominent Flemish historians signed an open letter critiquing the canon from their discipline's perspective. They argued that such a canon would impose a teleological historical narrative leading to Flemish self-government, oblivious of the serendipity of history (Various authors, 2020). This debate, however, transcends strict political delimitations and even the left-right divide. The medieval historian Jan Dumoleyn, a confessed Marxist and member of the commission, defends in fact the idea of a canon as an instrument to give meaning to history (Dumoleyn, 2019). Most historians did not agree with Dumoleyn. In 2022, the Royal Flemish Belgian Academy of Science and the Arts published an opinion, authored by three Flemish historians and the cooperation of many colleagues (Tollebeek et al., 2022). The report reiterated the arguments of previous interventions, also pointing out more in detail

the negative effects of canon-construction in the Netherlands and Denmark (Tollebeek et al., 2022: 24-29 and 44). It stated that the commission was a strange alliance between Flemish nationalism and anti-globalism, represented by Jan Dumoleyn. It argues that his anti-globalism is based on a rejection of cosmopolitanism, relativism, and mass migration as threats to local culture, connectedness, and authenticity (Tollebeek et al., 2022: 18-19).⁴

This polemic reveals different approaches towards the use of history. Dumoleyn intends to activate the meaning-giving role of history writing and to give it a local embedding. From his viewpoint, a critical discussion on the history of Flanders effectively makes sense. He proposes to deconstruct exclusively nationalist narratives of Flemish history, introducing on the contrary a “history from below” popular perspective (Dumoleyn, 2019; ACOD Cultuur, 2021). As an example of a meaningful local event, Dumoleyn returns to the 1302 victory against the French, describing its actors as the medieval equivalent of the Bolsheviks, and highlighting its importance in triggering off democratic reform in the region. Following a narrative traditionally proposed by the Belgian worker’s movement but neglected in recent years, he attributes a social and emancipatory rather than a Belgian or a Flemish meaning to this event (Vandaele, 2020).

The historians opposed to the official canon are hostile towards any national instrumentalization of history. Some of them nevertheless are also proposing such a meaning-giving role of history. An example is the publication, following a model first proposed in France, of a *World History of Flanders*, that embeds the history of the region in broader European and global trends and hence offering an alternative, non-Flanders-centred model of history (Beyen et al., 2018). These historians also sometimes reflect upon Flemish specificity and are aware that a strictly constructivist perspective perceiving it exclusively as an identity created by elites is insufficient (Beyen, 2005). Research on Flemish identity formation has retraced bottom-up dynamics, for example on the historical roots of the predominantly more conservative political identity of the region (De Smaele, 2009), or on the predominantly Flemish identity of socialist workers in Ghent (van Ginderachter 2019).

In May 2023, the Flemish authorities finally publicized the Canon of Flanders, consisting of sixty thematic windows (Vlaanderen, 2023). Much of it is devoted to significant events having taken place on the territory of present-day Flanders and accomplishments of its citizens (including economic

⁴ It is only fair to say that while Dumoleyn is certainly interested in local culture, the accusation of hostility towards cosmopolitanism, relativism, and mass migration seems far-fetched. It is interesting that the same focus on local culture and autochtony, inspired by the Zapatista movement, was also present amongst the no-global movement in the Veneto (Apostoli Cappello, 2017).

accomplishments, although these are not predominant). The Canon also follows the European format of nation-building discourses, paying attention to European integration, highlighting the region's adherence to European values, democracy, women's rights, LGBT+ rights, and respect of cultural diversity, and it includes a critical evaluation of colonialism and the persistence of global inequalities. It does not include any negative Othering, of the Belgian state, or of Francophones. It is certainly attentive to the development of the Flemish movement, the creation (1962-1963) of the language border delimitating the Flemish territory, Flemish self-government, and the transformation of Belgium into a federal state (1993). Its description of the history of the Flemish Movement is cautious, but it is nevertheless explicit in criticizing the extreme-right turn of Flemish nationalists in the 1930s and their collaboration with Nazi Germany. It certainly does not present an essentialist view of Flemish identity, since it highlights that Flanders is an imagined community invented in the 19th century.

After the virulent polemics of the previous years, the reception of the canon was overall cautious. Historians opposed to the canon acknowledged that it was overall equilibrated and realized in a professional way. They nevertheless reiterated their critiques of the canon for its inadequacy for teaching historical awareness and its role in promoting Flemish identity (Anonymous 2023). Identity undoubtedly remains a controversial topic in the Flemish intellectual community and amongst historians. It has engendered both innovative research and interest in theoretical reflections. Contrary to the Italian case, critiques of Flemish identity have not really led to strong reaffirmations of a historically embedded Belgian identity, but rather to deconstructions of teleological identity narratives in general. In this context, it does not seem that the possible establishment of a Flemish canon will lead to a new grand narrative of Flemish history, and certainly not an essentialized one. Intellectually, the climate is too hostile for such an enterprise, and the government itself is not pushing in that direction. At most, it may contribute to a somewhat more systematic version of the already existent discourse on Flemish excellence, in which historical examples mainly figure as tokens of this excellence.

5. Conclusion

Economic excellence is foremost in the discursive identity construction of Flemish authorities and the Lega Nord. Its articulation, however, differs widely. In Flanders, economic excellence is taken for granted and does not require an extensive historical narrative to explain it. The qualities required

for economic excellence appear as self-evident, like in Henri Pirenne's grand narrative on Belgian history. There is a lack of interest in those medieval entities like the county of Flanders that had attracted major attention during the 19th century. There is admittedly some concern about the dark pages of history, specifically the relation of Flemish nationalism with its extreme right past and collaboration. While Vlaams Belang still vindicates this past, both the N-Va and the Flemish Canon – in line with European identity discourse – reject this extreme-right past and collaboration with Nazi Germany.

In Italy, the Lega Nord indeed felt a more acute need of a more coherent historical narrative, especially in the late 1990s when it promoted a Padanian identity. Oneto and many contributors of the *Quaderni padani* did construct an essentialized identity of northern Italy, in which economic virtues play an important role. These virtues are embedded in a broader articulation of a historical identity with Celtic roots with centrality given to popular culture and attachment to self-government and federalism. Self-government and federalism oppose the North to the central state. This anti-centralism also allowed the Lega to reject (more easily than Flemish nationalists) fascism and to identify itself with the Resistance. References to previously existent territorial entities are rare because the most likely precedent, the Venetian Republic, is claimed by the competing Veneto identity discourse.

The differences between these cases reflect the cultural and intellectual context in the respective countries, as well as their geographical location: the self-assuredness without complexes in Belgium, securely located in the core of Western Europa is in marked contrast with the insecurities that have characterized the public debate on Italian identity and history. Belgium experiences intense debates on identity, reflected in scholarly engagement with theories on nationalism. These debates tend, however, to focus on the present and recent history, without existential questions on the Belgian economic model. The larger measure of insecurity in Italy on the contrary explains reactions to the Lega's nation-building discourse. While its identity-dimension was almost unanimously rejected, its opponents rarely challenged its image of northern Italian excellence, since it was important for a positive representation of the country in its entirety. The tendency to re-legitimize national unity and the process of national unification as a reaction to the secessionist challenge was also much stronger in Italy than in Belgium, where the Belgian revolution of 1830 only draws limited interest. On the other hand, reflections on Italy and its history, but particularly on the South, have raised questions on the pertinence of modernity that are largely absent from debates in Belgium.

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