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Abstract

On the basis of interviews, we highlight important historical elements with potential traumatic implications in order to understand some of the psychological roots of the current conflict-ridden relationship between French-speaking and Flemish Belgian citizens. We suggest that this conflict has a complex psychodynamic structure. Due to former experiences of shame, humiliation, disdain and contempt, two concomitant but asymmetrical defensive processes can be observed: repression in the French-language group, dissociation or rejection in the Flemish group. In particular, we hypothesize that the war experiences traumatized the Flemish identity in a complex way, generating an internal defensive pressure characterized by dissociation. The impact of these psychological processes on the current political situation is explored.

Keywords

Belgo-Belgian trauma, individual narratives, psychodynamics, psychoanalytical concept of 'après-coup'

Introduction

We intend to show the value of applying psychoanalytic concepts to a corpus of narrative material in the effort to understand some psychological aspects of the relationships between Flemish and French-speaking Belgians. In our analysis, we shall make use of the psychoanalytic concepts of trauma, shame, defence mechanisms and phenomena of retroactive resignification ('après-coup'), in order to understand the basis of the current conflicts between the two communities: a strong tendency

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of the Flemish to reinforce their political autonomy or even to split the country and the incomprehension on the French-speaking side.

First, however, we will discuss the psychoanalytical concepts we are referring to.

Trauma and shame

Trauma

In psychodynamic theory, a trauma is ‘an event in the subject’s life, defined by its intensity, by the subject’s incapacity to respond adequately to it and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychological organization’ (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1967: 465–9). In particular, for there to be trauma there must be no possibility of abreaction or emotional discharge of the experience; it therefore remains in the psyche as a ‘foreign body’ (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1967: 466). Trauma differs from a merely unpleasant emotional experience by the fact that, in the latter case, the experience is still mentally available, while trauma exceeds the individual’s capacity for psychical integration (Freud, 1955[1920]).

The main defence mechanism when trauma occurs is *dissociation* (Charcot, 1892[1885–87]) or *splitting of consciousness* (Freud, 1962[1894]: 46). Charcot compares this particular mental state with a hypnotic or *trance* state and suggests that, because of this, the traumatic event remains unconscious. Freud (1962[1894]) indicated that during an actual traumatic attack, the individual is in a numb state of consciousness, such that amnesia surrounds the event itself. The splitting of consciousness means that the unbearable event remains isolated from all possible associations. Nevertheless, the individual is under the constant threat that what has been dissociated may return: for example, a perception may bring back into consciousness ‘different, insufficiently subjectivized elements of [his or her] past’ (Roussillon, 2007: 437–8). Lacan, in the context of dissociation, speaks of *rejection* (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1967: 168).

While trauma induces a dissociative defence, events that are highly unpleasant, but still mentally available, may bring on an ordinary defence mechanism, for example, repression. Repression is a process by which representations are made unconscious but remain contained in the psyche. For Lacan (1988), in the case of *repression*, an event has been at one level acknowledged before it is set aside, while in the case of *rejection* the initial process of psychical integration of that event within the existing chain of associations has failed altogether. In both mechanisms – repression and dissociation/rejection – the crucial element is that unbearable memories can be ‘forgotten’ while they nonetheless keep affecting the subject.

When repressed representations are re-actualized, anxiety can emerge. The individual may defend against this anxiety by mental preoccupation and sometimes by symptoms often involving substitute representations derived from the originally repressed representations. Even if the symptoms affect behaviour, they are typically isolated to the discourse. Together, this is called the ‘return of the repressed’ (Freud, 1957[1915]).

Trauma leads to symptoms of suffering that are characterized by the compulsion to repeat certain actions as opposed to verbalization (Freud, 1955[1920]). Symptoms arise either immediately or after a latency or ‘incubation’ period (Charcot, 1887–88), which may last a while after the initial traumatic event. Laplanche (2002) compares this to a ‘time bomb’: the first psychic event is like a time bomb, which will be triggered by a second event. The subsequent consequences of a traumatic reality have a deferred retroactive impact, an ‘après-coup’: the traumatic event of the past is interpreted in the light of the present and thereupon provokes suffering that leads to symptom formation. The psychoanalytical concept of ‘après-coup’ is highly relevant for the comprehension of the psychic links between past and present events.

Historical trauma

If we have chosen to refer to these definitions it is because they offer sharp and useful conceptual tools for our historical analysis. Other researchers have similarly applied these tools to better elucidate the relationship between the Flemish and French-speaking Belgians:

Historical traumas [...] emerge from historical experience itself. The silence is here part and parcel of the past event itself: it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that the event is experienced at all. In contrast with historical taboos, historical experience is not suppressed later on, but is *dissociated* from consciousness the moment it occurs. There is a kind of *numbness* that goes along with the experience and wipes it out at the very moment it is happening. The denial is therefore not a conscious but an unconscious process. It is neither a conscious manipulation nor a downright falsification of the past event. (Van den Braembussche, 2002: 41, italics added).

It is remarkable how close this definition is to the above-mentioned psychodynamic mechanisms of trauma at the subject level.

The concept of historical trauma is especially important because we hope to demonstrate through the analysis of our narratives that the Flemish community has experienced, through the successive war experiences,¹ a series of aversive events that led to a collective form of the ‘après-coup’ phenomena. We hypothesize that due to the nature, the intensity and the time succession structure, these aversive experiences acquired a traumatic character. Indeed, what also emerges from the narratives is a sense of humiliation through repression immediately after the Second World War, and also in the years and generations after the war, because of the extreme barbarity of the former ally: Nazi-Germany. This humiliation greatly damaged the Flemish identity. In this case, the trauma is ‘historical’ as the same events affected large groups of individuals at the same time; moreover, the trauma can be considered specifically ‘Flemish’ because it affected the Flemish population selectively.

This identity trauma could lead to (unbearable) shame. Indeed, when faced with aversive events, the defensive organization attempts to fend off the feelings of *guilt* about the subject’s (or the group’s) actions. In contrast, when traumatic events occur, the defensive organism attempts to fend off feelings of *shame* about the subject’s (or the group’s) *being*, i.e. its identity. In the former case, defence is typically repression, in the latter, a dissociative process is mobilized (André, 2009: 59–60).

Shame

An important emotion in the realm of trauma is shame. A person who feels ashamed lives in a constant tension between maintaining their identity and the temptation to abandon that identity. Shame may lead individuals, faced with painful self-awareness, either to hide or to leave behind some of their particular characteristics. Hiding away avoids the painful sense of discomfort and embarrassment. Shame and the wish to hide can be associated with self-exposure to others with whom one identifies (Kingston, 1983).

Shame is a powerful and painful emotion, evoking perceptible weakness and inferiority, and is not easily forgotten. When recalled, the emotion itself may be strongly re-experienced. The feeling of exposure is linked to the fact that ‘there is always an awareness of an observer, a possible observer, a former observer, or a fantasized observer’ (Yorke, 1990: 380).

In his description of shame and the possible reactions to it, Erikson (1968: 111) writes:

There is a limit to a child’s and an adult’s individual endurance in the face of demands which force him to consider himself, his body, his needs, and his wishes as evil and dirty, and to believe in the infallibility of those who pass such judgement. Occasionally, he may turn away from things around, become secretly oblivious to the opinion of others, and consider as evil only the fact that they exist.

Table 1. Some demographic data of the interviewees

Pseudonym	Age	Mother tongue	Actual main language	Parents language	Grandparents language	Current place of residence*
Dirk	52	Flemish	Flemish	Flemish	Flemish	Flemish Brabant
Jean	62	French	French	French	Flemish	Walloon Brabant
Lisa	40	Flemish	Flemish/ French	Flemish/ French	Flemish/ French	Brussels
Michel	65	French	French	French	French	Walloon Brabant
Moni	66	Flemish	French	Flemish	Flemish	Wallonia
Peter	68	Flemish	Flemish	Flemish	Flemish	Flemish Brabant
Sophie	57	French	French	French	French	Wallonia
Willem	63	Flemish	Flemish	Flemish	Flemish	Flemish Brabant

*Flemish and Walloon Brabant and Wallonia are regions in Belgium, each one with its own dominant language

Another option for overcoming negative self-evaluation is to obtain frequent and often public acclamation and admiration.

Hypothesis

We propose that the Belgian conflict can be understood as a complex and asymmetric psychodynamic structure with, on the one hand, *repression* of Flemish antecedents by French-language Belgians (especially in Brussels) and, on the other hand, *rejection/dissociation* of French cultural components by Flemish Belgians because of their complex traumatic history. Latent shame in the context of former Flemish socioeconomic inferiority and collaboration in the two World Wars is an important reason for these defence processes.

Though seemingly a mirror-process, we propose that both defence processes have relatively independent historical roots.

Methodology

We met eight Belgians for extensive interviews in order to understand their individual experiences, past and present, concerning the other linguistic group. Each participant had a personal experience of the growing division between Flemish and French-speaking Belgians. Table 1 summarizes some characteristics of our respondents.

We met the respondents for an unstructured interview for about two hours. All interviews were conducted in French.² The interviews were recorded with the permission of the respondents. We focused on understanding how they actually made contact with people belonging to the other linguistic group, and on the social and subjective representations that formed the basis for these encounters. However, the interviews were entirely unstructured with no systematic question recurring for all respondents. In particular, we avoided asking people about their ‘experiences as Belgians’ or addressing them as Flemish or French-speaking Belgians, which would have implied attributing them a priori a given identity and would have carried the risk of simply soliciting stereotypes. Instead, we allowed

them to talk at some length about their personal experiences from childhood onwards and welcomed associative digressions. By doing so, we hope to avoid reproducing stereotyped answers concerning matters of identity and to tap into underlying unconscious preoccupations.

The interviewees, far from sampling the general population, all have professional occupations involving (self-)reflexion and articulation of ideas (e.g. academics, psychologists, psychoanalysts), though they have not necessarily been asked about their linguistic opinions concerning Belgium before. Clearly, the idea is not to draw a more or less statistically truthful portrait of the current diversity of opinions in the Belgian population on the basis of a strategically chosen sample. Instead, we aimed at exploring intimate life stories and associated subjective ideas and preoccupations with the hope of uncovering important links between the subject's life experiences and their current ideas, preoccupations, emotions, etc. We theorize that what might be valid for one subject *at the level of these mechanisms* might also have some heuristic validity to the general population. Methodologically, then, our aim is to draw working hypotheses from those subjective narratives concerning the psychologically relevant elements possibly underlying the Belgian conflict. In order to do so, we first have distilled a number of psychodynamic events and mechanisms: trauma, defence mechanisms, shame and 'après-coup'. In a second step we applied these elements more systematically to the narratives, speculatively deducing an overarching theory about the linguistic conflicts in Belgium.

Presentation and analysis of excerpts

We would first like to emphasize that the interviews had a different impact depending on the linguistic background of the respondent. The French-language interviewees remembered the past without being emotionally upset and evoked events with calm and indeed pleasure. The Flemish respondents were visibly much more emotionally involved and evidenced a great deal of concern about the language issue.

Conflict-ridden and unstable Belgian identities

Apparent throughout the narratives are many indications of how conflict-ridden one's identity as a Belgian can be. We know that the Flemish want their language to be fully recognized. In their opinion, it is under threat from French-speaking Belgians, for example, on the outskirts of Brussels. Since the existence of Belgium and until the 1960s, the Flemish language was associated with poverty and inferior qualities (see below), which go along with shame for those being identified with them. The different identities in Belgium appear to be not only conflict-ridden but also unstable: testimonies frequently indicate abandonment in the past of the Flemish language in favour of French, and the underlying shame to which that paradoxically gives rise too:

Willem (Flemish): The nobility and the *bourgeoisie* spoke French. In order to have access to them, people rapidly became French-speakers – it took only two or three generations.

This situation is even described as a downright refusal of and disdain for Flemish language and culture:

Willem (Flemish): [Talking about a French-speaking friend living in Flanders] She was proud that she didn't speak Dutch. It was a refusal on her part – she felt that it was the language spoken by maids and cleaning women, and that it wasn't a beautiful language.

This widespread disavowal of the Flemish had a price on a psychological level because it led many of them to cut themselves off from their cultural and family background:

Jean (French-speaking): I certainly do feel uneasy with regards to the connection I have with my roots, in the sense that I have the impression that I was, very early on in my life, completely cut off from them. All four of my grandparents were Flemish; they came from different regions in Flanders.

Moni (Flemish): It was not without good reason that, as an adolescent, I falsified my identity card, changing my name from 'Monica' to 'Dominique' because it sounded better; I felt it was better to look like a French-language person than a Flemish one. [...] It really did bother me. I told my friends that my name was Dominique but whenever anybody shouted out 'Moni' [...] I would blush and I would say that I suffered from language neurosis.

The example of Moni shows how heavily the cultural and language conflict can weigh, leading to alienation in order to fight shameful feelings – in this case to the change of one's given name, which is a core part of one's identity (Kingston, 1983).

These various examples suggest that Belgian identity is problematic and unstable for our respondents. Moreover, the actual words used (e.g. 'strangers', 'refusal', 'cut off') led us to suspect that defensive processes may underlie these identity conflicts. Therefore, we decided to apply the above-mentioned psychodynamic concepts to the narratives. As a result, we propose a speculative model in which the complex Belgian situation might be understood as the result of two concomitant but asymmetric defensive processes: (1) the repression of their Flemish roots by (a number of) French-speaking Belgians; and (2) the rejection of an identity alliance with French-language Belgians by (a number of) Flemish Belgians.

Repression of their Flemish roots by French-speaking Belgians

French language and culture are constitutive of Flemish identity. Let us first consider the Flemish situation. Flemish people speak Dutch. Dutch is today the majority language in Belgium, spoken by three-fifths of the population, who live mostly in the northern part of the country. However, historically Flemish culture implied French language and culture. The Burgundies established French as the official administrative language throughout Flanders in the 14th century and the use of French penetrated at that moment into the bourgeoisie and continued to spread during the various invasions and occupations that the Flemish suffered – Spanish, Austrian and Napoleonic (Cook, 2002). Moreover, when Belgium emerged as an independent kingdom in 1830, it was with one official language: French.

Peter (Flemish): It is also worth mentioning the paradox of those Flemish people who expressed their Flemish mentality in French [...] Only a minority of Flemish people have had enough pride to express, in their own Flemish language, the pride they feel within themselves at being Flemish. French, to all intents and purposes, was the language of the intelligentsia.

But this historical reality, linked to shame, also constitutes a present-day reality, as our respondents testify:

- Willem (Flemish): There are still some French-speaking people living in Flanders. But given the constraints that they have had to deal with, such as the restriction of their [linguistic] facilities [in the Dutch-speaking outskirts of Brussels], many have left and settled in Brussels. Those who stayed have all become bilingual. Amongst themselves, they still speak French. [...] They are Flemish, but French-speaking Flemish. [...] When I was a child, many families watched films or other programmes on the Belgian French-language TV channel. [...] In Flanders, then, people were genuinely interested in being part of French culture.
- Dirk (Flemish): We used to listen to French radio programmes and read *Salut les copains*, as well as a whole lot of books in French. So we were very much in contact with that other culture, and that seemed quite normal to us. Yet, we were never part of the French-language community – we were Flemish.

It was only in the second half of the 19th century that Flemish was revived as a literary means of expression in the young Belgian kingdom; a bilingual system was gradually introduced early in the 20th century (Vos, 2002). Nevertheless, in the light of the foregoing discussion, it makes sense to start from the observation that historically – as well as psychologically – French language and culture are an integral part of Flemish culture and identity.

Opposite emotional connotations

If we consider that Flemish identity is originally a hybrid identity, then we can understand that the stakes of the current conflict are not so much the refusal to embrace a foreign culture but, rather, the abandonment of an already existing facet of identity. Indeed, our testimonies appear to show that, in the course of history, many Flemish people abandoned Flemish language in favour of French, because Flemish had significantly negative connotations (e.g. shame feelings), whereas those of French were positive.

Flemish language and culture associated with poverty and destitution. Indeed, French was for centuries considered by the Flemish themselves as the ‘superior’ language, Flemish being reserved for the private sphere. Until recently, a considerable number of Flemish people, especially those belonging to the *bourgeoisie* or the middle class, were bilingual. Strikingly, we found numerous comments indicating a link between Flemish culture and destitution, or even between being Flemish and the fate of poverty itself:

- Sophie (French-speaking): [Describing Flemish people] There was a lot of poverty too. They didn’t have suitcases. They carried their belongings in bundles. Whole families lived in three rooms, the three generations all mixed together. When we went to visit them ... that was when I discovered a way of life that was much poorer and more modest than ours. That was in the 1960s. They were coarse in a way, and a bit vulgar. When I think of the workmen who came to do the flax – each of them slept in a kind of sleeping bag in the barn. They weren’t very demanding about where they could wash themselves – they would

- wash in the stables, because there was a water pump there. They made do with very little!’
- Michel (French-speaking): I quite clearly remember my father and his friends telling me about how these Flemish workers lived. Generally speaking, they were farm-workers who led a double life. They travelled from their home villages by bus. They did the night shift in the coalmines and, during the day, they worked on the farms. Where and when did they get any sleep? On the bus, while travelling back and forth! They did an eight-hour shift in the mines, then slept on the bus as they travelled back. So, at that time, Flanders was a poor country and we, the Walloons, had to give the Flemish people some support [...].
- Jean (French-speaking): Flemish was [...] the language of poverty. [...] *Being Flemish, above all, meant living in poverty.*

Our respondents even associated Flemish culture itself with inferiority:

- Sophie (French-speaking): The French-speaking population saw themselves as culturally superior to the Flemish. There was the idea that Flemish children went to school to learn French [...] They were to some extent looked upon as economic immigrants. [...] They had very little in the way of culture, and had a kind of coarseness about them. Although there were feelings of respect towards those people, there was nonetheless the idea that they were inferior on a social and cultural level. My father [...] always managed to make himself understood in Flemish [...] but, all the same, even today when he talks of the ‘Flamins’, there’s a derogatory tone to what he says.
- Michel (French-speaking): It was as though French culture and the French language were ways of getting connected to a civilized world rather than to that of the peasantry, of a backward people, of those who were too tied to the past and to their traditions.
- Peter (Flemish): the Flemish language was associated with a people, with a region where – my uncle used to say this disdainfully – people ate ‘spuds’, they struggled with the land and kept themselves alive through their attachment to the land. [...] For example, a large part of the farm was still owned by a Roman Catholic canon of noble descent who spoke French. My father had to work for him!

French language and culture associated with superior values. By contrast, French language and culture are associated with climbing the social ladder and superior social status, associated with proud feelings:

- Jean (French-speaking): [My Flemish grandparents] were caught up in the logic of social climbing; [...] it meant that a complete and fundamental change of language had to be accomplished.
- Willem (Flemish): My father’s family had progressed somewhat on the social level and, in order to make that perfectly clear, parents like his would send their children to school in the Walloon region.

Peter (Flemish): A certain kind of *bourgeoisie* – even [...] in a Flemish part of the country – started talking in French as soon as they had to speak about some cultural or intellectual topic.

The dynamics of repression

Our interviewees, when given sufficient space to explore their associations, became aware of a causal relation between the abandonment of the Flemish language and a *defensive* move against Flemish culture:

Jean (French-speaking): My grandparents managed to send their children to [...] a very highly-regarded French-language school. [...] That really was social climbing, starting from a very poor background. My father always insisted *that we should never forget that*.

Sophie (French-speaking): [...] those people completely changed their standard of living. I think her grandparents were Flemish. Her father moved out of that situation, so that it became more or less *forgotten*.

This kind of apparent ‘forgetting’ resembles knowing – without acknowledging the fact of knowing: although acknowledged at one point, the unpleasant memory, together with its shameful associations, is pushed to the side. As indicated, this is known in psychodynamic theory as *repression*. We, therefore, suggest that a number of French-speaking Belgians have *repressed* their Flemish origins and argue that this abandonment was a *defensive* move against a past history of destitution, felt to be a shameful ‘disgrace’, and in a loyalty to the efforts put into social climbing. This defence mechanism could explain why in some French-speaking settings there is an overall *contempt* for anything to do with Flemish culture:

Michel (French-speaking): I went to [...] one of those ‘hyper fransquillons’³ schools in which anything Flemish was treated with scorn. Flemish lessons were, by definition, a time for larking around [...]! We came from the Uccle *bourgeoisie* and we had a kind of class-based *contempt* for the Flemish [...] We spent our holidays at the seaside. It was quite out of the question for us to talk to the shopkeepers in Flemish.

Although, apparently aimed at the other group, that contempt would then in fact be nourished by a refusal to acknowledge the proper – shameful – history of poverty.

Brussels as the return-of-the-repressed. If we consider the abandonment of the Flemish language as resulting from repression, a return of the repressed is only to be expected. We propose that this might have occurred in the form of the problematic status of Brussels. Indeed, Brussels was originally a Flemish city:

Michel (French-speaking): From about 1953–4 on, we lived in Brussels. [...] I then realized [...] that, with all these Flemish shopkeepers, Brussels had in fact Flemish roots. Those people had always lived there! Even as children we could sense that they’d always lived there.

Brussels is today partly populated by Walloons but also mostly by French-language Belgians who are *not* Walloons. Historically, as respondent Jean points out, ‘social betterment implied settling in Brussels and speaking French’. Therefore, we argue that, in many cases, French-language inhabitants of Brussels may have ‘repressed’ their Flemish origins:

Willem (Flemish): But this rejection [of the Flemish language] has other roots. I think it’s the price that has to be paid so that Brussels can become more and more of a French-language city.

This results in a ‘symptomatic Brussels’ at the core of the Belgian conflict:

Peter (Flemish): Brussels is a bit like an unfaithful wife or a mistress. [...] From the point of view of historical consciousness, it is as though Brussels were a Flemish city. Then, in the 1950s–60s, part of the Flemish population realized that Brussels had become French-speaking. [...] I was at secondary school at that time, and I remember that there was a kind of hostility whenever the waiters who were serving us in the cafes heard us speak in Flemish. We talked about that, saying to one another: ‘What’s this all about? Is this our capital city, or what?’ [...] It was in the 1960s that there were all those great demonstrations in Brussels [organized by the Flemish Movement]: We left our schools and travelled by train to Brussels to say ‘This is our city too’, even though we knew that the atmosphere had turned hostile towards us.

Flemish rejection of French influence: The dynamics of rejection

However, what is most significant in present-day Belgium is not the abandonment of the Flemish language in favour of French but a reverse dissociative process, namely the desire of Flemish people to gain more autonomy. As testified by one respondent, this may include a parallel wish to exclude French culture from Flemish identity:

Dirk (Flemish): the Flemish want nothing to do with the French-speaking citizens of Belgium. The basic feeling shared by young Flemish people is that Flanders as such could well be part of Europe.

The Flemish refusal of an alliance with French-speaking Belgians might be a logical reaction to the contempt shown in the past by French speakers towards Flemish culture, as described. However, the Flemish discontent is not so much about the denigration of the other linguistic group or about the affirmation of a cultural superiority. Instead, it seems to intermittently grow and explode, sometimes rather violently,⁴ and quite directly takes the form of separatist demands. Take for example the break-up of the Catholic University of Leuven in the late 1960s⁵ when the Flemish demanded that the bilingual academic institution of Leuven in Flanders be split in two and that the French speakers would leave the Leuven university site (which is known as the ‘Walen buiten!’):⁶

Moni (Flemish): [...] my future husband, my cousin and me, we were just talking together [...] when my husband was pushed to the ground [...] by a gang of Flemish people who heard us speaking French. I yelled at them [...]: ‘Leave him alone! You’re a bunch of dirty bastards ...’ They insulted me: ‘You’re another of those bitches who goes to bed with a Walloon!’⁷ [...] it is hate and nothing else, no other word could describe it.

There have also been several demands to divide the country, initially coming from extremist right-wing groups and now much more explicitly from large groups of the population. In summary, the Flemish stakes are not as much rhetorical as was the case with the Francophone denigration but they are factual, material, territorial demands of recognition.

Tentatively, we propose that this Flemish protest is not simply a mirror reversal of the Francophone contempt. Indeed, we suggest that these characteristics reflect a defence mechanism, which is a *rejection* or *dissociation* rather than repression. From a psychodynamic point of view, rejection results in the expulsion of something to an external realm, where it is fundamentally unrecognizable as belonging to the subject or entity. In the context of inter-Belgian relations, it is striking that Flemish separatists speak in Flemish about French-speaking Belgium as ‘het buiten-land’, meaning both the ‘external country’ and the ‘country abroad’, or in French as ‘l’*étranger*’ with the double connotation of what is both strange (foreign, unrecognizable) and external. This was, for example, the case for the Flemish, who felt that the French-language members of the University were ‘strangers’/‘foreigners’:

Michel (French-speaking): It was only at the very end that we felt it. Some Flemish people probably had that feeling for a very long time before, [...]. But we had very little contact with them, we hardly knew anything about what they were thinking, we hardly had any discussions with them – so that we didn’t realize that they saw us as a *foreign body*. Probably in fact from the inter-war period we were felt to be a foreign body [...] but we knew nothing about it! In fact, that ‘Walen buiten’ landed on us as if it were a meteorite!

The disproportion between the relatively moderate rhetorical investment in complaints and scorns and the firmness of the factual demands may help elucidate why the Flemish demands appeared to erupt ‘suddenly’, ‘radically’ and incomprehensibly. The relatively composed discourse might wrongly be taken as proof that there is no real turmoil. Often politicians and the media are accused of fabricating or exaggerating a non-existent or minor problem. However, it may be that, on the contrary, this relative composure is a sign of deep-seated and sweeping discontent, with a tendency to act out rather than ‘cry out’ the demands.

Trauma

As we have said, in rejection, the mental integration process of an unbearable reality has failed altogether. This is in line with the mechanism that comes into play in the event of ‘historical trauma’, as highlighted by Van den Braembussche (2002: 41), according to whom dissociation leads to:

an unconscious *rejection*, a fateful but involuntary form of collective amnesia. [...]: the past event is simply *too painful and even too inconceivable to be experienced* fully and henceforth to be remembered at all. This is the reason why it is wiped out, cut off [...].

Applied to the situation in Belgium, the observed rejection, then, may also refer to a traumatic past concerning specifically the *Flemish* population. In what follows we highlight some events that may have given rise to what we shall call the ‘Flemish trauma’.

War experiences. During the First World War, Flanders was one of the worst battlefields of Europe and even if most casualties were foreign soldiers, local people were nevertheless caught in the war:

Peter (Flemish): The First World War brought about the destruction of the whole region – all that was left was *mud*.

Following this intense violence, the Flemish people were more widely engaged in a nationalistic aspiration for the recognition of their culture. This led them to collaborate in a more ideological way, and as representatives of their culture group, with the Germans during the Second World War – much more than was the case for French-speaking Belgians (Dujardin, 2005):

Peter (Flemish): One of my great-uncles flirted with the German occupying forces [...]. Every family was more or less involved in that kind of thing. [...] On the Flemish side, there were both aspects: one had to do with what the Flemish thought they could get out of a German Empire – i.e. respect for their native language, which is also Germanic, and the other was some degree of independence. The Flemish felt that they were in fact being governed by the French-language people – some, to tell the truth, felt that it was not just a matter of government, but of oppression.

Dirk (French-speaking): My grandfather came from Furnes, the region of Belgium where the First World War took place. He and his sons were in close contact with the somewhat right-wing Flemish groups. Those organizations came under very strong attack after the war. In my grandfather's house, meetings were held with local groups belonging to organizations like *Verdinaso*.⁸ We didn't talk very much about that at home, but as far as I know, after the war, my father and one or two of his brothers were locked up in prison for a couple of weeks. My father was 19 years old at the beginning of the war; he made no secret of his affinity with the Germans and the Nazis. He was very much a Flemish nationalist and, towards the end of his life, he voted for the 'Vlaams Blok' [Flemish far-right party]. [...] I think there was probably a lot of anger in all of that.

The aftermath of war. After the war, collaborators in Flanders were widely punished, often publicly; a retribution that was often inflicted not by justice decision but by individuals upon other citizens. Those events have become known as the 'repression'⁹ (see, e.g. Huyse et al., 1991):

Willem (Flemish): A lot of people sympathized with the enemy [...] I was told about the very violent reaction in the post-war period against the *Zwarten* ['Blacks', people who had collaborated]. My grandfather who [...] was [...] burgomaster [...] tried to put an end to that violence, especially when it was directed against women whose hair was shaved off because they had been too friendly with the Germans. In a very derogatory sense, the word 'riffraff' [*crapules*] was used to describe those who took part in that repression against the people who had associated with the Germans. My own opinion, frankly, is that they were frustrated people from the lower classes who felt that they were being otherwise oppressed and who were at that point able to express their frustration.⁷

Lisa (Flemish): At the Liberation, the militia [...] came to arrest my grandfather. According to my uncles, there weren't very many real Resistance fighters in the militia. Many witnesses have said that it was Resistance fighters who on several occasions actually saved my family from being treated violently. The oldest

of my uncles [...] still feels the threat hanging over him. [...] The militia came back to the house. Not knowing where to turn, my grandmother asked the local convent if she could hide there with her children. The convent refused. So she asked her neighbour if she could hide there. [...] That neighbour, whose husband had been in the Resistance [...] didn't much like the idea, but she did say yes all the same. So they hid in the annex [in the neighbour's garden]. My mother was just four years old [...] My grandmother's youngest child was about six months old. The militia men [...] knocked on the neighbour's door saying that they knew they were there and if they did not get them out, the house would be set on fire. In a panic, the neighbour told my grandmother that they would have to leave. [...] the militia men surrounded the garden [...]. When my grandmother and her ten children [...] came through the hole in the hedge one by one, they were booed and humiliated. [...] They took my grandmother and one of my aunts up onto the first-floor balcony. [...] One of my aunts [...] begged the militia men not to kill her mother. [...] The boys [...] saw their mother being taken away. I think that they never forgave themselves for being 'cowards' and for not trying to protect their mother. That's my interpretation. My grandmother and my aunt had their hair shaved off. [...] There were many such incidents. I'm thinking of one particular one right now, but I have been explicitly asked not to talk about it because it is even more humiliating.

It is probably fair to say that the repression in Flanders – with its violence, characterized by humiliation and personal revenge in the context of a general feeling of lawlessness and impunity – was directly traumatic. In the extract quoted above, for example, more than half a century later there are still traces of missing episodes, a testimony to the power of the trauma. This becomes even more evident in the following excerpt:

Moni (Flemish): I was born in 1944 [...]. I've heard people say that [my father] was afraid from time to time while the war was going on [...] and that, shortly after the war had ended, he was again fearful, but I don't know why. I didn't ask him about that, so I don't know what really happened. My impression is that [...] my father was pro-German. [...] he admired the Germans for their discipline and work ethic. My father was an orderly and methodical kind of man. There was something about that movement that fascinated him. [...] And then, of course, came the war and *all the horrors that went with it ...*

In this extract one can almost feel the 'holes' left by the traumatic event: 'I don't know why', 'I didn't ask him about that', 'I don't know what really happened'. We propose the following interpretation: Moni implicitly suspects her father was a collaborator and that he feared retribution at the end of the war, but she has no means to express this clearly/explicitly. The events might have been traumatic for her father and therefore might have been quite impossible to process mentally. Since there was no integration in the associative network, nothing was transmitted explicitly, but what have nevertheless been passed on to the following generations are the gaps and the accompanying emotional tensions.

It is worth noticing that Moni's statement ends with 'the war and all the horrors that went with ...', as if she in fact were saying: 'It is difficult enough for me to reconstruct a past in which I suspect some unclear (and possibly gloomy) events related to my father – but then, when one also takes into

consideration all the horrors of war that were gradually revealed, how can one deal with the meaning of all these events in hindsight ...'. That unfinished sentence, we suggest, refers to the traumatic impact of a retroactive resignification ('après-coup') of the meaning of the collaboration with Nazi Germany.

Indeed, one might suspect that when the full extent of the extreme violence by the German Nazi regime gradually came to be acknowledged, the significance of the collaboration was reinterpreted in this light. These revelations may have induced, in a retrospective way, the potential trauma of affiliating one's identity with a horrendous ally. In the mean time, the traumatic impact of the post-war repression, intended as a punishment for this affiliation, was immediate. As is becoming clear, the psychodynamics of trauma in this case are complex because the two traumatic elements do not neutralize each other but simply add up. Punishment sentence, as a result of a court justice procedure, can be an effective instrument for social reconciliation. However, in this case we believe the punishment did not have this effect because it was broadly carried out in terms of personal humiliation and retribution.

We argue that this succession of variously traumatic events went beyond the capacity for mental integration and struck at the heart of Flemish identity. In other words, this desynchronized succession of traumatic events culminated in the global traumatization of a cultural group and led to a more general '*numbness* that goes along with the experience and wipes it out at the very moment it is happening' (Van den Braembussche, 2002: 41).

Dissociation. As indicated, such trauma is thought to induce dissociation and rejection processes. A manifestation of such a dissociation might be seen in the divide between 'white' (resisting) and 'black' (collaborating) families in Flanders. Indeed, these labels were widespread and persistent during and (long) after the war and have largely influenced identities in Flanders:

Peter (Flemish): The two wars were endless topics of conversation indeed! 'So and so lives here ... and so and so lives there ... these are people who have collaborated ... these people have protected the common folks ...' We always referred to the war and people were ethically and morally classified in reference to the war. There were the pro-Germans, radical Flemish people thus, and those who were in favour of the people, but who were Flemish nonetheless!

While this divide has subsided over the last decennia, another dissociation process has become acutely apparent, one that paradoxically reunites the Flemish, namely the dissociation of the country itself. We propose that the complex trauma and the ensuing numbness are probably important reasons for these dissociative processes. Reconstructing an integrated Flemish identity beyond those traumatic events and that could function as a source of stability may prove challenging.

Conclusion

On the basis of interviews, we have highlighted important elements in order to understand some of the psychological roots of the current conflict-ridden relationship between French-speaking and Flemish Belgians. We suggest that this conflict has a complex psychodynamic structure because of two concomitant but asymmetrical defensive processes – repression in the French-language group, dissociation or rejection in the Flemish group – which work in favour of a splitting along pre-existing fault lines.

For the repression on the French-speaking side, these fault lines run along the historical association of Flemish culture with destitution, associated with shameful feelings, leading to the abandonment

of Flemish roots. We propose that this has resulted in a Francophone population who have ‘repressed’ their Flemish origins as a result of feelings of ‘disgrace’ and in efforts towards social climbing.

For the dissociation on the Flemish side, we argue that this dissociation resulted from an ‘internal’ trauma tied to especially the Second World War and its aftermath, which is not historically associated with the French-speaking population. Nevertheless, this led to increasing distance between the two communities expressed along the Flemish/French-language-fault line, because of French-speaking contempt and a Flemish vulnerability tied to the troubled war identity. Dissociation implies the impossibility of mentalizing the past events. These come back to reality in the form of a breakdown – an incapacity to coexist. We argue this dissociation at an individual level in the past, is now an acted-out dissociation on the current political level: the threatening dissociation of Belgium.

Notes

1. Concerning the two world wars and the cultural differences in experiencing them see the article by Rosoux and van Ypersele in this issue.
2. Although French was not the mother tongue of each of our respondents, they were all fluent in that language, see also Verougstraete, 2009.
3. From the Flemish term ‘franskiljon’, ‘small French’, Flemish who choose to speak French in order to be associated with the French-speaking bourgeoisie of Flanders.
4. Though very rarely implying physical violence.
5. See also the article about the specific conflict by Klein et al. in this issue.
6. ‘Walloons get out!’
7. Note the reappearance in this context of one of the major accusations against women who had to undergo public hair shearing as a humiliation in the aftermath of Second World War, namely the fact that they had ‘slept with a German’.
8. Verbond der Dietsche Nationaal-Solidaristen – a Belgian anti-democratic party founded in 1931. The ‘Verdinaso’ was fighting for the territorial division of Belgium and for a new political map of the region to be drawn up.
9. Here the term ‘repression’ refers to the punishment of Flemish collaborators at the end of the Second World War. It should not be confused with the psychoanalytic term ‘repression’ as a psychical defence mechanism.

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