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Anomie and aftermath: the historical residue of Flemish nationalism in present-day debates on refugees in Belgium

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By Eugene Raikhel

I. 'Everything is the same level as the ground'

As protests against Assad morphed into slaughter, Khalid [i] did his best to avoid fighting. At the time, he was a law student, but the advent of war meant he was no longer exempt from military service. Once the government stooges came around, yanking young men off the streets, forcing them into the fight, he knew his time was running out. 'I don't mind the idea of dying, but I don't want to kill anybody,' so \$1,000 later he was on a crowded raft, taking on water in the nighttime darkness, before washing up on the shores of Greece.

'Why do you come here?' the authorities badgered him.

'Why else? To visit the Acropolis and enjoy Greek food.'

He shows me his phone. A picture of him on a pebbled beach, wrapped in an emergency blanket, his eyes down, pale.

Weeks before the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, Khalid and I are standing outside the Taalencentrum, the Ghent university language center, where we are enrolled together in Level 1 Dutch. We are on class break. A fine, cold mist hangs in the air. Khalid rolls himself a cigarette. He sought asylum in Belgium because his older brother was already here, but not by choice: after getting robbed of all his money and paperwork in the Brussels Metro, his brother turned himself into the Belgian police. By law, he had to apply here, rather than Sweden, where he had hoped to go. Khalid followed some time later, passing through a refugee center in Namur and eventually coming to Ghent. Having obtained asylum, he is now committed to learn Dutch, take an 'integration class,' and find a job. He later tells me that because I am an American, he thought I was in the CIA.

Across the street from us is the Vooruit building — *vooruit* means 'forward' in Dutch, and it was the name of Ghent's socialist cooperative

and newspaper in the late 1880s. Ghent was ground-zero for Belgium's socialist movement during the *Belle Époque* (1871-1914), a time of optimism and relative peace that witnessed *verzuiling* ('pillarization'), the formation of ideologically-based 'pillars' such as unions, mutual aid groups, and sports and leisure clubs that later formed the basis of the welfare state.^[ii]^[iii] Pillarization has been understood as both an emancipatory movement against economic exploitation as well as a means to control the masses by pillar elites.^[iv]

The *Belle Époque* was marked by intense poverty and class struggle. In Ghent, textile and other industry workers formed pillars to push back against appalling living and working conditions.^[v] Those conditions are brought to life in Stefan Hertmans' novel *War and Turpentine*, which draws on the memoirs of Hertmans' grandfather, who grew up poor in Ghent at the turn of the century. The grandfather's childhood reads like a tale from Dickens — working in an iron foundry at age 13, begging for coal so that his mother, exhausted from working for a bourgeois family, 'would be delighted to see that they could heat the house and eat a cooked meal that evening.'^[vi]

The ornate Vooruit building became the Festivities Hall for socialist gatherings. On the eve of the First World War, a photo shows men in work shirts next to women and young girls, holding ladles in giant vats of soup to feed striking factory workers.



Soup distribution for striking factory workers, Ghent, 1913. Photo from Deneckere, G. and Pieters, H., "Een showcase voor het socialisme. 'Vooruit' in de vitrine van de wereld."

Today, the Vooruit building is a cultural arts center with a café, complete with vegetarian dishes. Khalid sits across from me. A song from Nirvana's *Unplugged in New York* plays overhead. People nearby drink Maes beer and eat tapas.

'Some things I can't forget, and other details I can't remember,' he says, almost surprised at himself. His recollections come in bursts, not always chronological: his father tries visiting the family farm, which had fallen under the control of the Nusra Front. He is kidnapped and taken to an 'Islamic Superior Court.' There, they interrogate him over his presumed allegiance to Assad. Fortunately, the family has enough money for his release, but his mother 'lost her control.' Khalid hints at some sort of mental breakdown.

Upon his release, his father tries replacing his identity cards at the local government clerical office, since the Nusra Front had confiscated all his papers. The government, suspicious of anyone who had hung out long enough with opposition militias — whatever their calling — immediately detains him in a secret jail. He undergoes various forms of torture, enough for any 65-year-old man to endure. His mother — Khalid's grandmother — is called a whore. He is beaten. He is locked in a two-by-two-meter room with 15 people. Given the lack of space, they take turns in allowing one person to sleep while the rest stand upright. To secure his release (yet again), the family sells the rest of the business. 'If you don't pay money, they kill you, government or religious people,' he says simply. When released, his father's skin is red and peeling. On Google Maps, Khalid wants to show me his old neighborhood. He zooms in; Arabic names appear on the streets. He switches to satellite mode. Brown mountains fill the screen; more zooming in. 'It's updated,' he says. There is only rubble. 'Everything is the same level as the ground now.'

II. 'Our People First:' Flemish nationalism and the rise of the Belgian Far-Right

Ghent is located in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking northern half of Belgium. Since Belgium's founding in 1830, the rich-poor divide fell mostly along linguistic lines. The majority-Flemish were subordinate to the French-speaking *bourgeoisie*, whose wealth was tied up in the coal mines of Wallonia, Belgium's French-speaking southern half.[\[vii\]](#) A property-based suffrage system consolidated the power of the *bourgeoisie*.

Poor Flemish bore most of the military sacrifice of the First World War.

Anecdotes describe lower-class, Flemish soldiers dying senselessly from orders they could not understand, since French-speaking officers commanded them.[\[viii\]](#) Until the 1930s, French was the official language of the Belgian army, parliament, courts, and central administration.[\[ix\]](#) The Belgian Constitution was not available in Flemish until 1967.[\[x\]](#) A year later, the country's oldest and most venerated university, the Catholic University of Leuven, split into separate French and Dutch-language campuses to satisfy student unrest over courses taught only in French.

However, while language was a clear marker of class, all working-class Flemish did not flock to socialism. Working-class Catholics in particular were skeptical.[\[xi\]](#) Catholic priests railed against 'the Reds' as 'common people who had forgotten their place in the world [...] instead of humbly doing their jobs.'[\[xii\]](#) Hertmans describes this rift: his Catholic grandfather would 'fulminate against the "riffraff" from the back alleys — even though he came from the same place.'[\[xiii\]](#)

Keeping within Catholic pillars, Flemish nationalists focused on the lower-class status of Flemish.[\[xiv\]](#) The movement gained strength after the Second World War, as the Belgian state became increasingly centralized and its largely francophone capital, Brussels, crept further into the Flemish countryside.[\[xv\]](#)

In the post-war period, Flemish nationalism had to reconcile an unsavory legacy while contending with contemporary social and political change. During both world wars, some Flemish nationalists, who had collaborated with the Germans, tried to re-enter the larger pro-Flemish movement. To do so, they downplayed their war-time collaboration as a strategic attempt to gain autonomy from the French *bourgeoisie*.[\[xvi\]](#) By granting entry to extreme right-wing elements, Flemish nationalism was forced to deal with an extreme faction whose fascist notions contradicted an original, emancipatory agenda.[\[xvii\]](#)

Concurrent to these internal debates within the Flemish movement, Belgium contracted with Southern European and North African countries as well as Turkey to supply a cheap workforce. In Belgium, these foreign-born laborers enjoyed rights to housing, healthcare, and social security but were excluded from political citizenship.[\[xviii\]](#) As economic crises in the 1970s took hold, the foreign-born population were cast as a threat to Belgium's welfare programs.

In this way, certain cultural and ethnic groups — broadly lumped under the general term *vreemdelingen*, or 'foreigners,' were seen as theoretically equal but in practice so different that their integration into Western society was impossible. Not only that, their very presence entailed a drain on the country's economic solvency. This discourse penetrated all political

parties through the 1970s.[\[xix\]](#)

No party took up the explicit rejection of immigration more stridently than Vlaams Blok ('Flemish Bloc'), formed among the tightly-knit network of extremists with fascist roots. Founded in 1978 from disgust at coalition compromises by the Volksunie, the prevailing Flemish nationalist party of the time, Vlaams Blok fashioned itself as a populist, anti-establishment party — its slogan going into the 1991 elections was 'We say what you think!'[\[xx\]](#) and later *Eigen Volk Eerst* (Our Nation/People First). The phrase 'Our People' went back to the early days of Dutch-speaking solidarity,[\[xxi\]](#) but it became reactivated by Vlaams Blok to mark a native 'us' from an immigrant 'them.'

'How stark the contrast,' reflects Hertmans, between the 'humanist movement' of Flemish nationalism's early days and when it became 'infested with neo-Nazis' in the early 1980s.[\[xxii\]](#) Vlaams Blok framed the rejection of immigrants as a defense of Flanders,[\[xxiii\]](#) and made gains in every general election since 1981.[\[xxiv\]](#) In 1991, the party picked up 10 additional seats in the Belgian Chamber of Representatives, etched into the country's collective memory as 'Black Sunday.'

Anomie is a term that Durkheim used to refer to a breakdown in solidarity and sense of loss due to economic change, which marked much of the *Belle Époque*, when Durkheim was working on these ideas. [\[xxv\]](#) His insight provides a useful analytic frame to consider who voted for Vlaams Blok, and why, during the party's startling rise. Studies of electoral change showed that nearly one-fifth of Vlaams Blok voters were former Socialists[\[xxvi\]](#) — those in unstable job sectors. Further statistical analyses uncovered a 'content-related preference' for the Vlaams Blok platform: the strongest attitudinal disposition for voting for Vlaams Blok was anti-immigrant sentiment, while a smaller fraction appeared to vote for Vlaams Blok as an expression of protest or feelings of isolation, meaninglessness, and fear of the future, encapsulated by *anomie*.[\[xxvii\]](#)

Regardless of the party's electoral wins, all Belgian political parties refused to form coalitions with Vlaams Blok, isolating it within a parliamentary *cordon sanitaire*, akin to a 'political quarantine' that prevented the party from enacting its platform.[\[xxviii\]](#) But Vlaams Blok came to relish its pariah status. Critics charge that the *cordon sanitaire* freed the party from moderating its position, furthering its ends by grabbing the media's attention through inflammatory rhetoric.[\[xxix\]](#) In 2004, a court decision found that its propaganda violated the country's anti-racist laws, forcing Vlaams Blok to re-establish as Vlaams Belang ('Flemish Interest'), veiling its anti-immigrant discourse, but retaining the core features of Vlaams Blok. [\[xxx\]](#) Critics have charged that the Court's decision, like the *cordon sanitaire* and the larger role of the media in

covering the party, only bolstered its image as anti-establishment. [xxxii]



Sign outside Vlaams Belang political office, Antwerp, March, 2017. Message adjacent to crossed-out Islamic star and crescent: 'Antwerp remains ours'.

III. Baking Speculaas

Shortly after Trump is declared the winner of the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, on a frigid morning in December, a group of us meets at a bakery in Ghent's city center. We are the first shift of volunteers baking Speculaas, gingerbread-style cookies in the guise of Sinterklaas, the iconic, gift-bearing old man with a white beard. Each Speculaas cookie will sell for a few euros, money raised to support a small affiliate of Hand-in-Hand, a non-profit organization that helps refugees and undocumented persons find work, housing, and *erkenning* — recognition.

Speculaas are a tradition in Belgium (and so too in the Netherlands, where they are called *Speculoos*). On the morning of December 6th, kids awake to find Speculaas cookies and other gifts left by Sinterklaas. The legend goes back to Saint Nicholas, a Christian bishop who lived 300 years after Christ in a small coastal village in present-day Turkey. Aside from mystical acts of raising the dead and patronage of sailors, Saint Nicholas was renowned for his charity and gift-giving.

Anne, the volunteer coordinator, opens the sliding garage door, and we

step inside. Paul, himself a refugee from Cameroon, is emptying boxes of sugar into a large mixer. There are steel countertops for kneading dough. In the cold, our breath fogs in front of us.

I learn about Hand-in-Hand on a separate occasion, when Anne and her partner invite me to their home. We drink coffee in their kitchen. A school teacher most of her life, Anne spent her last 15 years in the workforce teaching the Dutch language to newly arrived immigrants and asylum-seekers. 'The parents consulted me not just about their kids, but about their asylum problems, and that's how I got more involved in legislation and rules regarding refugees.'

Hand-in-Hand was founded in Antwerp in 1992. 'It was because of Black Sunday, the elections in November, 1991, when Vlaams Blok shocked everyone by winning more than we expected,' Anne tells me. Antwerp and Brussels saw massive, anti-racist protests shortly thereafter, sparking a movement across Flanders that emphasized tolerance of minorities. The affiliate in Ghent helps those in precarious legal circumstances and holds cultural events that try to, as she says, 'decolonize minds.'

Baking Speculaas is the annual fundraising event for Hand-in-Hand, held every Christmas season. There are upwards of 500 Speculaas to bake today, calling for a real bakery, one whose owner could kindly loan the facility to Hand-in-Hand this morning. People rotate in and out all day. In addition to Paul, there is Akram, who left Afghanistan a few years ago with his wife, Haleema, and their children. They belong to a minority Shia ethnic group. Because she refused to wear a burka, Haleema was attacked by the Taliban.

Akram puts on a baker's apron. He sinks his hands into the dough, forms a ball, presses it into the wooden template with the engraved Sinterklaas figure, quickly turns the template upside down and smacks it onto the metal table, then gently picks it up and allows the newly formed Speculaas to slide off, scoops it up with a spatula, and places it on the baking sheet. Over four hundred more to go. A few weeks ago, the mosque in his neighborhood in Afghanistan was bombed.

Akram and his family left Afghanistan through smugglers networks: 'They always made us run; if you can't keep up, they leave you behind.' At night, awaiting their turn on the shores of Turkey, the smugglers said that the men would have to wait, since there was only enough room for women and children. Akram became separated from his wife and children in the melee. They had no phone or way of contacting each other, yet they reunited later in Belgium: awaiting a decision on her asylum application, Haleema and her children went to a mosque to honor *Ashura*, the Shia day of mourning. Her son recognized their father in the crowd.

In the bakery, there is soft chatter. We each find our rhythm. Paul places the racks of Speculaas in the oven and afterwards stacks them in a push-trolley to cool off.

Suddenly, there is a crash of metal: the racks have fallen out of the trolley as Paul was pushing it towards the wall. Freshly baked Speculaas scatter and break all over the floor — about one hour's worth of work among five people, a sizeable loss. Akram looks up at us from the table, wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, grinning. 'All that work for nothing!' he says with a chuckle, his hands covered in flour, and goes back to placing more batter into his wooden template.

IV. 'A dangerous precedent'

Vlaams Belang is not the biggest threat, Anne remarks in our earlier conversation. It is the N-VA, the *Nieuwe-Vlaamse Alliantie* (New Flemish Alliance), which presents a nicer sheen to the far-right. N-VA is an alliance of an older conservative wing and the Flemish Christian Democrats (CD&V). Like other mainstream Flemish parties, the N-VA has felt compelled to incorporate aspects of the far-right agenda.^[xxxii] As a 'moderately populist' party,^[xxxiii] it emphasizes the disconnect between Flemish interests and a ruling francophone elite in Brussels. As such, it embraces the traditional emancipatory roots of Flemish nationalism. What concerns Anne, however, is how the N-VA 'still focuses on fear. They'll say that Islam is a threat, and people without any contact with other people believe it.'

And any additional contact has been dramatically curtailed: Theo Francken, current Secretary of Asylum and Migration and leading figure in the N-VA, was recently vindicated by the EU Court of Justice for his refusal to grant humanitarian visas to a Syrian family from Aleppo. Francken argued that issuing visas would set 'a dangerous precedent' that would cause Belgium to lose 'control of its borders.'^[xxxiv]

Applying for asylum in Belgium is a separate bureaucratic procedure than seeking a *humanitarian* visa (as opposed to a work or travel visa). Asylum applications are filed once in the new country; visas are sought at that country's embassies (the Syrian family had applied at the Belgian embassy in Beirut). The court case centered on whether obtaining a visa on humanitarian grounds is a right held by the applicant or a favor granted by the other country.

Mr. Francken's point was that framing the visa as a right would inevitably 'open the door to thousands of people.' The EU Court's ruling

proclaimed that no EU member country can be forced to issue a humanitarian visa, regardless of the danger faced by the applicant. Thus, even if all EU countries are required to allow people onto their territory to apply for protection, 'none are obliged to help them in the first place.'^[xxxv] The smugglers who brought Akram and his family here, as well as Khalid and his brother, can rest assured that their business model will stay intact.



Carnival float mocking Theo Francken. Rough translation: 'Theo Francken dog shelter' with play-of-words 'Asiel' doubling as both 'dog shelter' and 'asylum.' Literally, 'Wir blaffen das' in German means 'We bark that,' a jab at Merkel's famous (and criticized) phrase, 'Wir schaffen das' (we will handle it) in response to the refugee influx. Phrases in local dialect above kennels, clockwise from top left: 'Sent back', [above pigs] 'No Halal', 'Down-and-out', 'Aleppo Terrier', 'Dirty dog.' Red placard: 'File rejected.' Aalst, Belgium, 2017.

The irony of Francken's position — and mostly forgotten by the general population — is that during the First World War, one in seven Belgian civilians was a refugee.^[xxxvi] Most fled across the border to the Netherlands, prompting the German army to erect an electrified fence that would claim thousands of lives.^[xxxvii] In the United Kingdom, sympathy for Belgian refugees ran thin. A London diarist confided:

[T]he Belgians are not grateful. They won't do a stroke of work and grumble at everything[,] and their morals ...! ... save us from the Belgians!^[xxxviii]



Political cartoon by Dutch socialist Albert Hahn, which appeared in the Dutch weekly 'De Notekraker,' 1915. The original caption read: 'From the Belgian border: again a Belgian, who tried to flee over the border to Holland, was caught in the electric barbed wire and was killed by the high voltage.' [xxxix]

V. Anomie and aftermath

Durkheim first elaborated on *anomie* in *The Division of Labor* (1893), which describes how specialized occupational roles lead to an interdependent society. For Durkheim, solidarity depends on both *structures* that encourage social interactions across roles as well as *moral norms*, together comprising a 'nomic process' contributing to solidarity. A central concern for Durkheim were the 'disruptive tendencies' that social change brought upon solidarity. [xl] *Anomie* helps to explain the rise of

Socialist pillars during the days of Hertmans' grandfather, or the electoral loss of those very same Socialists to the Vlaams Blok decades later, when the Belgian economy began to favor cheap, imported labor.

Economic change links these historical points together, and as such some scholars contend that *anomie* is but the result of 'an unfettered striving for success in a capitalist society.'^[xli] If social values hinge on greater accumulation of wealth, then those who do not (or cannot) abide by those norms in turn become (and feel) devalued.^[xlii]

A much-discussed topic after the 2016 U.S. Presidential election was the proportion of white, working-class voters — previously a bastion of Democratic strength — that went solidly for Trump.^[xliii] Similarly, the industrial towns of France's northern region, once deeply Socialist but plagued by high unemployment, went to Marine Le Pen in the first-round of the French election.^[xliv] The pattern holds in Belgium, where the rise of the far-right was made possible by appealing to the working-class. In a landscape of rapid change, many of these voters no doubt struggle with, in Bourdieu's words, "a sense of one's place" but also "a sense of the place of others"^[xlv] Perhaps what is most at stake is *erkenning* — recognition.

And *anomie* — a sense of isolation and meaninglessness — surely extends to the refugee-volunteers gathered at the bakery in Ghent that day. In Belgium, as anywhere, there are new expectations and norms to manage. For example, when he is with his Syrian friend in public, Khalid tries to speak only in his new-found, broken Dutch, rather than his native Arabic, to avoid creating discomfort among passers-by. Akram and Haleema are scolded by their conservative Muslim neighbors, who tell them that it is sinful to work with Hand-in-Hand.

Solidarity and recognition are transnational ideas but also idioms that are 'invoked, debated, advanced, and resisted'^[xlvi] by local activists, organization participants, and electorates.^[xlvii] Groups like Hand-in-Hand attempt to fill the gaps created by policies like Francken's, yet solidarity and recognition are just as readily invoked — and exploited by — a far-right party to appeal to a left-behind working-class.

Well, if the old argument goes that the refugees gathered in the bakery in Ghent that day are a drain on society, what better way to prove their usefulness than by fashioning wildly popular cookies to raise money? *Speculaas*, made from dough kneaded by black African and Muslim hands, shaped into the guise of a Christian mystic renowned for acts of charity and protection of sea-going travelers. The little sticker on the packaging tells the kind-enough buyer: 'Hand-in-Hand thanks you for your support.' The *zuilen*, or pillars of turn-of-the-century Ghent, were split

along ideological or secular lines but in their own way followed the guideposts of solidarity and recognition. So it goes for groups like Hand-in-Hand: social pillars, rising out of yesterday's aftermath to shape a possible future.

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Notes

[i] All personal names, aside from politicians, are pseudonyms.

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