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CULTURE, POLITICS AND BORDERLANDS : A SMALL-SCALE CASE HISTORY

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MAASTRICHT AND THE NATIONALITIES OF EUROPE

The place-name "Maastricht" has come to stand for a set of treaty negotiations on the continuing integration of Western Europe. After the Treaty of Rome and the Single European Act, "Maastricht" has become a cipher, a signal, the header under which people are now debating the extent to which the member states of the European Community should pursue their federative goals. In the public debate, "Maastricht" has come to designate a Euro-colossus striding towards us, with an impetus not wholly under our control, a vision of the future that is large-scale and disconcerting.

But Maastricht is something else as well. The real Maastricht is a city (founded in Roman times) situated in the extreme south-eastern tip of The Netherlands, at the point where three language areas meet (German, French and Netherlandic). Historically, it was one of Europe's main strategic fortresses at the gates of the Low Countries, and as such was often besieged and contested by various neighbouring powers. And the area around Maastricht, viewed historically, offers us a picture of territorial disintegration unparalleled elsewhere in Europe. The Maastricht region was subject to so many competing spheres of influence that these conflicting centres of gravity between them tore the area apart, over the centuries, into a minutely splintered mosaic.

The *ancien régime* map of the area is like a patchwork quilt. Within a very restricted space — say, a circular area with a diameter of ca. 50 KM, wedged between the cities of Aachen and Liège — certain landholders would be in effect independent, subject only (nominally) to the German Emperor; their neighbours would obey the Prince-Bishop of Liège, their neighbours would, at various points in time, be subject to the Duke of Brabant (part of the Burgundian lands) or to the Duke of Gulick (part of the Westphalian lands), to the King of Spain succeeded by the Austrian Emperor, or to the Estates General at The Hague. Amidst all this vacillation and fragmentation, there were two waves of French rule (under Louis XIV and in the period 1795—1815). Throughout the *ancien régime*, the city of Maastricht itself was a *condominium* shared between the Prince-Bishop of Liège and the Duke of Brabant (who was succeeded in his co-suzerainty over the city by the Parliament of the United Provinces).

Thus, the Maastricht region, over the last few centuries, offers a miniature model of a West-European type of Balkanization: a continuing

fragmentation of territory under the competing attractive influence of diverse nearby power centres. Like the Balkan, the Maastricht area sits squarely on an ancient linguistic frontier (in this case, the one between Germanic and Romance languages) and was the scene of conflicting religions (in the wars between the United Provinces and Spain, which knew their longest and most volatile vicissitudes here). Is it an ironic twist of fate, then, that the heads of states of the European Community should have negotiated the most ambitious stage of multinational European integration in this periphery of peripheries, this most ambivalent of European regions¹.

The Maastricht debate as it is argued out presently in Western Europe is only a pale shadow of what has been happening in Eastern Europe since the collapse of Soviet Communism, culminating in the frightful tragedy of Yugoslavia. But there are qualitative, if not quantitative, similarities. In both cases, we witness a resurgence of national/ethnic thought. In the East, a multi-ethnic federal state is disintegrating after the dissolution of its binding element, authoritarian communism; while attempts in the West at creating a multinational federacy seem to founder in national atavisms, and extreme right-wing parties and racism are on the rise in Germany, France and Belgium. Regional tensions become more pronounced in Spain and Italy, while forces of separatism and irredentism are reemerging along all the old state lines of Eastern Europe. To be sure, the parallel between Eastern and Western Europe is skewed because of the huge difference in intensity, violence and actual harm inflicted; but given that enormous difference in degree, both halves of the European Continent resemble each other in that they are marking the end of the Cold War by a resurgence of old-fashioned national thought.

In this parallel, the millennial history of the disintegration of the Maastricht region in the period 800 to 1800, well-documented as it is, ceases to be a Lilliputian, small-scale anecdote, and may gain some applicability to current developments in other parts of Europe.

Various power centres have at various moments in history extended their sphere of influence into the Maastricht area. The prestigious imperial city of Aachen (German) is nearby, the important religious principality of Liège (Walloon, i.e. French-speaking) likewise, and the powerful Dukes of Brabant marked the first Netherlandic claim on the area as early as in the thirteenth century². The result of all these fluctuating and competing culture-political forcefields was one of territorial fragmentation, partitioning and repartitioning. In some cases, a power vacuum resulted where local nobles could maintain a neutrality and independence of sorts. The general trend was, however, that the Maastricht region was destined to become a peripheral area: appended, now to this state, now to another, but always as a marginal, far-flung province far from the capital and the state's central concerns. In fact, the area, with its minute and unstable subdivisions of allegiances and appurtenances, reflected until the very

¹ Of course, many European institutions have been located on the great fault-line of the West-European cultural landscape: the Germanic-Romance linguistic frontier. Witness locations like Brussels, Luxemburg and Strasbourg.

² Cf. *Woeringen en de oriëntatie van het Maasland*, ed. J. Goossens (Hasselt: Vereniging voor Limburse Dialect — en Naamkunde, 1988).

end of the *ancien régime* a feudal as opposed to a territorial notion of suzerainty. By this I mean that it was not the integrity of the territory that counted, but rather the feudal lord's desire to gain possessions wherever he could and thus to increase his fiscal income. That these possessions were scattered across the map was no material disadvantage in the collection of taxes and offered a variety of possibilities for fresh acquisitions.

FEUDALISM, THE STATE AND TERRITORIALITY

The feudal accumulation of land has little reason to avoid territorial disparateness. It is only in the early modern period, and usually for reasons of military strategy, that rulers begin to cluster their dominions into serrated wholes and begin to unify their territory. The ratio of territorial surface to length of frontiers increases steadily. We can see the process documented clearly, on the large scale, in changing attitudes to territorial defensibility in seventeenth-century France. The historian Louis B. Wolf puts it as follows:

Mid-seventeenth-century statesmen did not think in terms of lineal frontiers; they saw the borders of their states occupied by provinces and dependencies, cities and fiefs with ambiguous relationships. They had no idea of "natural" or "national" frontiers, but they did think of "defensible" ones. In the 1630's and again in the 1650's foreign armies threatened to swarm on to Paris as they had done in the sixteenth century; Richelieu, and after him Mazarin, wished to gain control of the "gates" that these foreigners might use. By the Treaties of Westphalia and of the Pyreness, Mazarin had secured some control of the "gates" in Alsace (except Strasbourg), Flanders, and Artois, as well as on the Pyrenees frontier, but Lorraine and Dunkirk still remained of the foreigners, and from the flatlands of the Spanish Netherlands to the hilly frontiers of Luxembourg, there were roads and cities that might assist an assault on the French kingdom. It would be absurd to assume that preoccupation with the "gates" of his kingdom was the sole axis of Louis' policy, but it is equally false to fail to recognize his concern.

Wolf sketches how this older, "feudal" notion of national frontiers gives way to a more modern notion towards the end of the century. One of the salient facts to emerge during Louis XIV's Dutch Wars was

the importance of a defensible lineal frontier. The old frontiers made up of "provinces with their dependencies", and thereby complicated by irrational enclaves and feudal overlappings, had been satisfactory enough before the rise of the new armies and the new conceptions of political military power. A "province with its capital city" could be a satisfactory "gate" in Richelieu's parlance, but what was now needed was a frontier that could be defined and more easily defended by "lines" to prevent marauding enemy detachments from collecting "contributions" by invading the kingdom. Vauban had seen this in 1673 when he urged "by treaty or by a good war" that the irrational "*pêle mêlée*" of French and Spanish fortresses scattered here and there on the frontier should be made into a *pré carré*, a rational "dueling field", that could be defended without excessive costs. The Treaty of Nymwegen did away with much of the irrationality on the frontier with the Spanish Netherlands [...]³

Thus, the early modern period witnesses a change in the concept of the state: from what used to be a collection of disparate and far-flung appanages linked by their shared dependence upon a single ruler (who might indeed well say "*l'état, c'est moi*"), the state begins to connote

³ Louis B. Wolf, *Louis XIV* (New York: Norton, 1968) pp. 189, 403-404.

something that occupies a specific territory. In fact, territoriality has now become one of the defining characteristics of statehood in modern international law.

CULTURE AND TERRITORY

More importantly, the territorial homogenization process paves the way for what was later to be called nationalism: for attachment to one's country frequently means attachment to the territory occupied by one's home nation, and nationalism as an ideology can even be defined as the equation between ethnicity and territory. Thus, in Ernest Gellner's authoritative book *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), the ideology of nationalism is defined as the desire to achieve congruence between cultural and political borders. As such, nationalism is a form of romantic idealism: the material and territorial existence of the state is based on (indeed legitimized by) the ideal of a cultural identity, shared by its citizens. Hence, if, as Herder argued, each nation (*Volk*) has its own individual culture and character (the most salient of which is its linguistic individuality), then this individuality justifies its claim to autonomy in a sovereign state. Each state, therefore, should ideally comprise one nation and one nation only, and ideally each nation should be united under the aegis of its own state. The cultural differences that separate nations should, in the nationalist view, find a territorial expression as the political borders that separate states.

This nationalist view on human political organization was in force from the romantic period into the twentieth century; it is still present in the Wilsonian notion, so important at the Versailles Peace negotiations, of "self-determination". The only problem was, of course, that cultural differences cannot be expressed in the sharp linear demarcations which are political frontiers: as Gellner's book allows us to perceive, cultural differences are not neat or abrupt, and any attempt to demarcate them on the map by sharp lines will create minorities on either side. For that reason, problems of irredentism, border dispute and borderline minorities are pre-inscribed from the very outset in any nationalist political agenda⁴.

THE RISE OF NATIONALISM

Gellner argues that the rise of nationalism can be explained from specific circumstances in a given country's development: he adduces factors such as incipient industrialization and the rise of the middle classes to political power, and thus fixes the *terminus a quo* for nationalist thought around 1800.

Here, Gellner's socio-economic explanation leaves a few questions unanswered. Few scholars will argue with the actual date: Isaiah Berlin already defined nationalism as "political romanticism"; the French Revolution offers a well-marked transition from the federative ideals of

⁴ I have argued the incommensurability of cultural and political "borders" in my "Europe as a Set of Borders", *Yearbook of European Studies*, 6 (1993): 1-17.

the Girondins to the unitary ideals of the Jacobins (with their *république une et indivisible*, their centralization campaign and their crusade against regional dialects); the theorists of German nationalism, Fichte foremost, were working under the dual influence of Romantic thought and French hegemony, and the various national movements of early nineteenth-century Europe (Young Italy, Young Germany, Young Ireland, etc.) all united the democratic and revolutionary ideals of 1789 with a romantic literary agenda.

But, by the same example, one sees that the spread of this combined romantic-cum-revolutionary ideal could reach countries which, like Ireland, were far removed from the socio-economic stage of development outlined by Gellner as a prerequisite for incipient nationalism⁵. Obviously, then, there is no rigid determinist relationship between the socio-economic conditions and the rise of the ideology. The rise of nationalism in certain countries, since it cannot be explained from socio-economic factors, appears to reflect a culture-historical development, a "change in discourse", if one likes, which can spread in relative independence from socio-economic preconditions. That change in discourse concerns *the idea of the state*; nationalism is based on an idealist notion of the state, rather than a materialist, rationalist or pragmatic one.

We can gather as much by comparing the nineteenth-century notion of nationalism to the eighteenth-century notion of patriotism⁶. The loyalty of an Enlightenment patriot is directed towards his fellowcitizens and to the political community of interests which those citizens share and have contracted on a Lockean or Rousseauesque bases. The "fatherland" which is the object of patriotic loyalty, in this Enlightenment sense, is a purely socio-economic community, a polity which regulates the societal relations between its citizens; in short, the state is a political contrivance which is based on material and pragmatic expediency. In contrast, the fatherland as sung by romantic nationalists (a German like Körner, or an Irishman like Thomas Davis) is based, not on material or pragmatic considerations, but on cultural ideals: the fatherland is a locus of cultural inheritance, of language, literature, history, a temperament even, and a shared sense of identity. It is obvious that such an idealist, culture-based concept of nationality and statehood can only function in a philosophical climate that, after Schelling, Fichte and Hegel has reinstated idealism;⁷ that is to say, in a "romantic" climate.

To put it bluntly: romantic idealism argues from the primacy of culture and of abstract ideals over material reality — the Hegelian notion, which so provoked Marx, that *Bewusstsein* determines *Sein*. Nationalism as a political ideology, as defined by Gellner, can be firmly anchored in this philosophical paradigm since it, too, argues from the primacy of cultural identity and consecrates it into the foundation of material, political organization.

⁵ Cf. my "Nationalisme als discours", in *Het Europees Labyrint. Nationalisme en natievorming in Europa*, ed. Ton Zwaan et al. (Meppel — Amsterdam: Boom, SISWO, 1991) pp. 191 — 203.

⁶ Cf. Generally my "Anglo-Irish Patriotism and its European Context", *Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, 3 (1988), 1 — 14.

⁷ On the role of Hegelian idealism in these developments, cf. Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, vol. 2, esp. chapter 12, "Hegel and the New Tribalism".

Can we restate our Gellner-derived model of nationalism, then, in slightly wider terms and consider it as an attempt at organizing public life, and at circumscribing its territorial forum, on the basis of cultural categories? At this point it becomes interesting to look, once again, at the case of the Maastricht area.

MAASTRICHT REVISITED

As I pointed out before, the Maastricht area is not only situated at the point where various political spheres of influence overlap and compete, it also finds itself on the intersection of three linguistic borders: between Netherlandic, German and French. If we disregard the presence and degree-of-variation of local, oral dialects such as Limburgian, Rhinelandic and Walloon, we see the three languages historically entrenched in the three neighbouring cities. Maastricht itself, though its bourgeoisie was frenchified during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, is Netherlandic-speaking; Liège belongs to the French language area; while Aachen, erstwhile imperial coronation city of the Holy Roman Emperors, is German⁸.

It is interesting to note how in the Maastricht area Gellner's model is borne out by historical developments: Since the 1790s, it appears that cultural (mainly linguistic) arguments have played an increasingly important role in the establishment of political borders⁹. The most obvious recent case is that of the small area of Voeren, a small Belgian sub-region in the centre of the Maastricht-Liège-Aachen triangle, on the Belgian-Dutch border. The population is mixed, using either Netherlandic or French. For that reason, the area has since the early 1960s (when its administrative status was transferred from a francophone province to a Netherlandic-speaking one) become a flashpoint in the tensions between the two linguistic communities of Belgium. Village politics in this backwater even led to the downfall of the national government in 1978, and continue to bedevil the national political life in Belgium.

Another case in point concerns the area on the Belgian-German border. Its populations is largely German-speaking, and was annexed

⁸ Significantly, the latter two cities have names in all the three languages of the area: Liège is called *Luik* in Netherlandic and *Lüttich* in German, Aachen is called *Aix-la-Chapelle* in French and *Aken* in Netherlandic.

⁹ The examples listed in the following pages indicate the influence of cultural arguments in political decision-making; but Gellner's case might just as well be illustrated the other way around, i.e. by demonstrating the influence of political borders on cultural praxis in the last two centuries. Until 1800, the Maastricht area was both territorially and culturally diverse and amorphous. As political divisions, marriage partners are increasingly sought within the national frontiers; human cross-border traffic decreases as these borders gain in importance; whereas the region until 1914 routinely traded in all three monetary currencies, the acceptability of the national coin becomes increasingly restricted to its home country. At the linguistic level, the use of German disappears from the Netherlandic areas; French ceases to be spoken in Maastricht; the Belgian areas undergo a rapid process of frenchification, and/or a growing political incompatibility between Netherlandic and French which until then had coexisted. Even the choice of Christian names for newborns slowly begins to conform to "national" patterns instead of regional ones. Cf. *Mededelingen van de Vereniging voor Limburgse Dialect — en Naamkunde*, nos. 26 (1983), 29 (1984); 49 (1989); and *Eenheid en Scheiding van de beide Limburgers* (Leeuwarden — Maastricht: Eisma, 1989).

into Belgium after Germany's defeat in 1918. It was re-Germanized by Hitler, and since 1945 is again part of Belgium. However, the area has now been given a separate administrative status so as to conciliate the linguistic rights of its German-speakers.

The very fact that Belgium and The Netherlands are two separate countries is a reflection of Gellner's model: Following the Congress of Vienna, the two had been amalgamated in a single kingdom. However, the francophone bourgeoisie of the South felt alienated by that kingdom's predominantly Netherlandic bias. Liège and the frenchified bourgeoisie of Maastricht¹⁰ resented to send representatives to a parliament which largely conducted its business in Netherlandic; and in 1830 this conflict led to the secession of the Southern half and the establishment of the Belgian state.

Even earlier, we see that borders are drawn up with some regard to linguistic currency. When the arrival of French troops heralded the end of the *ancien régime* in this area in 1795, new French-style *départements* were created; and it can be observed that the demarcation line between the Maastricht département (*Meuse Inférieure*) and the Liège one (*département de l'Ourthe*) was debated and adjusted with some regard to the currency of French or Netherlandic. A Maastricht dignitary pointed out that the contested town of Hasselt should not become part of the Liège area because of its language:

On ne parle à Hasselt [...] que la langue que l'on parle à Maestricht et dans toute l'étendue de l'arrondissement. [...] Les procès s'instruisent à cette langue à Hasselt et par tout son district. On y tient les registres aux délibérations [...] et on y publie les ordonnances dans le même idiome.

Pragmatic, administrative reasons all — but the same text goes on to point out as a matter of common knowledge “que les Wallons de la cidevant principauté de Liège n'ont jamais sympatisé avec les habitans de la partie flamande [i.e. Netherlandic-speaking, JL]”¹¹. Obviously, language is more than a mere instrument in the organization of economic and public life: it also provides a criterion for solidarity and cultural identification.

This, however, can also be phrased the other way around — namely, that language is not just a marker for cultural individuality, the stamp

¹⁰ The extent to which feelings in Maastricht were anti-Netherlandic during the nineteenth century is not always sufficiently appreciated; but cf. Th. Wingens, “Een Maastricht voorspel van de Belgische opstand: Het proces Hennequin (1821)”, *De Maasgouw*, 83 (1964), 85–96. Although the city was kept under Netherlandic military control and thus remained part of the Netherlands, secessionist feeling in the area ran so high that representations were made to the Frankfurt Parliament of 1848–49 to have the province (which as a Duchy formed part of the German *Bund*) made part of Germany; cf. E. Franquinet, “Limburg en zijn verhouding tot den Duitschen Bond”, *Publications de la Société Historique et Archéologique dans le Limbourg*, 49 (1933), 87–94.

¹¹ Letter from the people's commissioner. Roomers, at Maastricht, to the people's representative Briez, at Brussels, dated 30 Nivôse an III (i.e. 19 January 1795); quoted in H. Hardenberg & F. Nuyens, *Inventaris der Archieven van het Arrondissement Maastricht en van het Département van de Nederraas* ('s-Gravenhage: Ministerie van OKW, 1946), Inleiding, p. XIII–XIV. On such border disputes cf. generally Baron Von Geusau, “De politieke indeeling van Limburg, 1794–1839”, *Publications de la Société historique et archéologique dans le Limbourg*, 39 (1903), 139–271, and J. J. de Wit & A. J. A. Flament, “De vorming der heerschappijen op het grondgebied van Limburg”, *ibid.*, 47 (1911).

of a nation's temperament as it was seen by Herder and those after him, but also, very straightforwardly and pragmatically, the medium for conducting all societal transactions: legal, educational, trade. In other words, it is possible to advocate linguistic homogeneity in a given area without thereby betraying a "romantic", culture-based attitude towards political relations. The model of nineteenth-century romantic nationalism usually argues from the existence of a separate language to the existence of a separate nationality, and thence to the right of separate, autonomous nationhood in a sovereign state. But to the extent that language is also, in pragmatic and non-"cultural" terms, the medium through which legislation and the formal organization of the relations between citizens and their administration takes shape, the argument from language to political organization can be encountered in discourse antedating the rise of romantic nationalism.

This poses a challenge of some interest: to which extent does pre-industrial, pre-French-Revolution, pre-romantic political thought invoke the ideal of linguistic homogeneity for a state? To address such a question might further enhance our understanding of the historicity of national thought, by providing a corrective addendum to what has been said by Gellner.

CULTURAL FACTORS IN CONSTITUTIONAL ISSUES, PRE-1800

Most Enlightenment thinkers seem to have studied the topic of "national character" with some interest¹². Montesquieu offered climatological reasons for cultural differences in his *L'esprit des Loix*, Hume countered this physical determinism in his essay "Of National Characters", and Voltaire has left us a lengthy and curious *Essai sur les mœurs*; however, the possibility that such national or otherwise cultural matters might be seen as the natural categories or criteria on which to organize political states, is not to be found in any of this. Certainly, then, the national-cultural concept had not yet been enshrined in political theory at this early date. However, a few micro-examples from historical praxis in (once again) the Maastricht area indicate that this is not all.

The small, Netherlandic seigneurie of Stein came under Prussian rule in 1740; this immediately gave rise to frictions, evidently inspired by an apprehension among the populace that the administrative language was henceforth to become German. Especially the idea that one might face judicial proceedings in a foreign language upset people, and the matter festered on until the end of the *ancien régime*¹³.

| An interesting parallel, this, to the anti-French argument in the above-quoted Maastricht letter from 1795: the citizen (or subject) should

¹² Cf. John Hayman, "Notions on National Characters in the Eighteenth Century", *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 35 (1971-72), 1-17. Also, E. J. Richards, "The Axiomatization of National Differences and National Character in the European Enlightenment: Montesquieu, Hume, D'Alembert, Helvétius and Kant", in *Komparatistik und Europaforschung. Perspektiven vergleichender Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaft*, ed. H. Dyserineck & K. U. Sydram (Boon & Berlin: Bouvier, 1992), pp. 137-156.

¹³ A. Munsters, "De strijd tegen het Hoogduits te Stein", *De Maasgouw*, 68 (1949): 94-97.

ideally address the authorities in his native language. This is not merely a matter of expediency, however, as it might be viewed by the magistrates and powers that be: in the case of the Stein confrontation, as well as in other cases, the legal recognition of the local language appears to be a moral rather than a pragmatic issue, a principle which local populations have defended against their distant rulers as a civic right and as an inalienable privilege. Examples to that effect go back a few centuries. Even in the Middle Ages, we find that local village assemblies, when recording their customs and laws, jealously mention the fact that no proceedings be imposed upon them which are not in their local, native language. Netherlandic-speaking Aubel warns the Brussels authorities that their business be conducted in Netherlandic, the local language "which everyone here may understand", and not in any other language. French-speaking Cheratte, which falls to the Dukes of Brabant in the thirteenth century, stipulates even in 1301 that they shall not agree to the use of any foreign language: when the Duke's representative appears before the local assembly, "l'edit renthier doit apporter lettres, exploits, commission scelées, écrites en Romant pour lui estre admis et receu"¹⁴.

Such arguments are part of the larger tug-of-war between aristocratic centralization and the local prerogatives of the individual communities; a struggle which looms so large over late-medieval and early-modern history in Northwest Europe, and which culminated in the Netherlandic revolt against Spain. The matter of language is, therefore, to some extent a matter of what we nowadays would call civil rights: no man should have to face the authorities in a language incomprehensible or even uncomfortable to him. But there is more. Apparently, in many cases the cultural argument of language can come to play a role in the issue of the political constitution. A similar point of interaction between culture and constitutional thought can be found in the matter of religion.

Language and religion: two powerful cultural rallying-points of longstanding prominence, with a historical presence and, possibly, a record of influence in politics transcending the periodization of nationalism offered by Gellner. Tenets such as "the freedom to use one's own language and to exercise one's own religion" are both proto-democratic and proto-nationalist. Therefore, to study their historical influence in a fractured but well-documented micro-territory like the Maastricht one may be anything but provincial and may indeed be fittingly published in a journal dedicated to the study of South-Eastern Europe: for this material may be helpful in our understanding of the curious way in which the aspiration towards liberty can unleash the spectre of nationalism. It happened in post-Napoleonic Germany and is happening again in post-Communist Europe.

¹⁴ The case of these local assemblies, their relations with the Brussels authorities, and the impact of local culture on local politics, has been studied in my article "Macht, afstand en culturele diversiteit: Bijvoorbeeld Overmaas", *Theoretische Geschiedenis*, 18 (1991): 423–433.