

The Brabant Revolution, "a Revolution in Historiographical Perception"¹

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The insurrectionary politics of the smallest northern European countries bewildered travelers and diplomats alike at the end of the eighteenth century. Visitors struggled to understand the pamphlet wars that raged in advance of revolutions in Geneva, the United Provinces, the Austrian Netherlands, and Liège between 1782 and 1789. Diplomatic relations between these smaller countries and the larger powers further complicated their revolutionary politics in the view of the outsiders. The French Revolution was easier to understand because it had endured for more than a decade and asserted its will on its neighbors through military power. At the time, Genevan, Dutch, and Belgian revolutionaries were acutely aware of their status as citizens of seemingly insignificant states. The Swiss revolutionary, Peter Ochs hesitated when asked by a French friend for his political views.

"Small citizen of a small aristocratic republic populated by merchants and artisans, should I go forth from my political salon exclaiming what I think? Should I dare to deliberate in the palace of a king?"²

He declined to make political pronouncements abroad and as rebellions rumbled around him throughout Europe, he retired to his garden where he was surrounded by his birds, rabbits, and hens.

Historians have reinforced this reticence by ignoring the Brabant Revolution as they turn their attention to the French Revolution. School textbooks and general Belgian histories often skip the Brabant Revolution, focusing on France at the end of the eighteenth century. When they consider the Brabant Revolution in passing, they typically dismiss it as a short-lived regressive revolt, the misdirected last gasp of fanatical monks and aristocrats. According to these accounts, the Brabant Revolution bore no relation to the founding of a modern Belgian state in the nineteenth century.

Viewing the Belgian provinces from the outside, eighteenth-century journalists originated the view of the Brabant Revolution as a ridiculous counter-

¹ Dedicated to the memory of Jean Stengers (1922-2002).

² Peter Ochs to Muller, Basle, March 1781 (Ochs, 1927, 123).

revolution. Pierre Lebrun, editor of the *Journal général d'Europe*, typically hailed Joseph as a true revolutionary, praising the Austrian emperor for his reforms that would bring enlightenment to the prejudiced people of the backward Belgian provinces.³ One contemporary traveler declared: "Le feu de son génie a été pour tous ses sujets le flambeau de Prométhée".⁴ Journalists chronicled Joseph's visit to the Austrian Netherlands during the summer of 1781 to view the provinces for himself, the first sovereign to travel to Brussels since Philip II's journey in 1559. The emperor's Belgian subjects sensed trouble when he refused to participate in public festivities, leaving Brussels disguised beneath a heavy overcoat.

As soon as he returned to Vienna, Joseph set about to rein in the authority of the Catholic Church in the Belgian provinces by asserting his control over the religious institutions of the Austrian Netherlands, issuing a Patent of Toleration. Subsequent regulations on monasteries and the communication of priests with Rome subordinated the church to his state. The emperor declared nine religious orders "useless", conducted an inventory of "excessive" church treasures, and refused to fill church vacancies. Finally, he wrested control over the religious education of Belgian clerics from the church by opening his own General Seminary to be staffed not with ex-Jesuits, but with his hand-picked Jansenists.

Belgian clerical leaders, including the ex-Jesuit the Abbé François Xavier de Feller, editor of the *Journal historique et littéraire*, decried the proposed Austrian seminary that they feared would introduce the subversive ideas "de ce siècle pervers infecté par les crimes".⁵ They called on God to descend to earth to save the Belgians, his chosen people, from the Austrian infidels, just as he had rescued his first chosen people, the Israelites. For centuries, the Belgians had been faithful to "het Geloof en Christus zyn Wet als een getrouw Kloekmoedigen knecht".⁶ Pamphlets characterized Belgian Catholicism as "la branche du grand arbre de l'église qui est restée la plus verte", as the last stronghold of Catholicism.⁷ God would intervene to defend his chosen people from the emperor "qui ménaçoit de nous enlever notre religion, et de bouleverser de fond au comble l'état de l'Eglise dans nos provinces".⁸

³. *Journal général d'Europe*, January 3, 1786, volume 341, p. 23.

⁴. Dérival (de Gomicourt), *Le voyageur dans les Pays Bas Autrichiens ou lettres sur l'état actuel de ces Pays*, Amsterdam, 1782, volume 1, p. 6.

⁵. "Documents pour la Révolution brabançonne", Mss. RII 3255, Royal Library, Brussels.

⁶. Liasse 611, Archives de la Ville de Bruxelles, Brussels.

⁷. Abbé de Feller, 17 September 1787, Mss. 21142, Royal Library, Brussels.

⁸. *Représentation des États*, 22 October 1787, Liasse 610, Archives de la Ville de Bruxelles, Brussels.

In January 1787, Joseph II turned his attention to the judicial system and administration of the Belgian provinces, centralizing authority in Vienna. He replaced the traditional *Conseil de Justice*, the *Conseils collatéraux*, and the *Concours ecclésiastiques* with sixty-four regional courts under the direction of his *Conseil souverain*. The Council and the Estates of the central Brabant province dispatched a legalistic treatise in defense of the constitutional rights of the Belgian people to Vienna. They charged that Joseph's proposed judicial reorganization violated the centuries-old constitution, the *Joyeuse Entrée* or *Blijde Inkomst*, that expressly limited the authority of the foreign sovereign to initiate changes in Belgian institutions. Their lawyer, Henri Van der Noot reminded Joseph that these laws were as old as the inaugural pact that established the emperor's sovereignty over the provinces. Van der Noot called on the people of the Belgian provinces to rise up to resist the abrogation of their provincial privileges.

In a flurry of pamphlets, Belgians condemned the Austrian emperor's reforms as the acts of an arbitrary tyrant. The Austrian reforms threatened to reduce "the Low Countries that were so rich, so animated, so flourishing... to the image of poverty and distress".⁹ Consciously imitating Dutch protests, pamphleteers compared Joseph II to Philip II, felled for his refusal to honor the rights of the Low Countries a century earlier. Joseph's advisors counseled him to be patient, reminding the angered emperor of the Belgian proverb, "Ce qu'on n'est pas sûr de faire le lundi, il faut savoir différer jusqu'au samedi" (Juste, 1884, 65).

In August 1788, the Austrians arrested a number of the leaders of the Estates and chased others, including the lawyer Van der Noot into exile in London. When the first two Estates cowered in the face of Austrian reprisals, Van der Noot threatened they would incur "l'indignation publique et la colère de Dieu" for their timidity.¹⁰ Van der Noot assured his followers in Brussels that he would persevere, leading them from exile, despite the inedible English vegetables and the lack of good beer. In January 1789, the Third Estate reluctantly recognized the invincibility of the Emperor and granted the emperor his taxes. Six months later, the Austrians stationed troops in Brussels around the Hotel de Ville, barred doors to the chambers of the Estates, and declared all provincial privileges, including the original charter, the *Joyeuse Entrée*, "abrogés, casés, et annulés".¹¹

⁹. "Les Pourquoi ou questions pour une grande Affaire pour ceux qui n'ont que trois minutes à y donner", Brussels, 1787, *Révolution belge*, volume 103, pamphlet 4, Royal Library, Brussels.

¹⁰. Henri Van der Noot to Marquis de Wemmels, London, 14 October 1788, États Belges Unis, no. 185, Royal Archives, Brussels.

¹¹. *Gazette des Pays Bas*, 20 June 1789, 217.

Van der Noot appropriated for himself the powers of plenipotentiary minister and approached the Dutch, the English, and the Prussian governments requesting military assistance, even offering to name the second son of the Prince of Orange as a Belgian *stadhouder*. The three powers scoffed, refusing to commit troops to what they viewed as a hopeless cause. Rather than losing hope, Van der Noot confidently told his followers that God would intervene to protect the Belgian people now on the verge of a decisive struggle. "Den-zelven God" who had parted the seas for the Israelites would save the Belgians

"van Dieven, Roovers, Moordenaers, Heyligschenders ende Goslastenaers die ons door Joseph als hunnen meester zyn toegezonden".¹²

The leaders of the Estates echoed Van der Noot, appealing directly to God to protect His children and to send the Austrians to burn in Hell. It was now up to Him to purge them of the infidels, to reward the faithful Belgians.¹³ Pamphleteers assured their readers that God would avenge the offenses against his constitution, the *Joyeuse Entrée*.¹⁴

When the Belgian armies drove the Austrians from the Belgian provinces. European commentators called the victories of the "army of the moon" over one of the most powerful nations of Europe miraculous. Van der Noot concurred, citing God's intervention. Belgian clerics echoed the message of divine intervention, proclaiming that Belgian troops had served as

"les instruments dont Dieu a voulu se servir pour punir l'impiété, les profanations, la persécution de notre Sainte Religion & des bonnes mœurs, les jurements, les blasphèmes & autres crimes qui étoient parvenus à leur comble... Oui! Je le répète",

the *Abbé de Tongerlo* affirmed, "C'est le Dieu des armées qui a soutenu vos bras".¹⁵ Hailed as the Belgian Washington, Van der Noot, followed by his mistress, Madame de Bellem and her daughter processed into Brussels, the capital of the independent Belgian provinces, at the end of December 1789.

¹². "Storm-Klok ofte Rechtveerdigen Roep om Hulp", *Révolution belge*, vol. 114, pamphlet 10, Royal Library, Brussels.

¹³. "Entretien de la créature avec son Créateur sur l'état actuel des affaires du temps", *Révolution belge*, vol. 54, pamphlet 8, Royal Library, Brussels; and "Collection des vers et chansons dans le temps de la Révolution des Pays-Bas", ed. A.J.D. De Braeckener, *Révolution belge*, vol. 57, pamphlet 1, Royal Library, Brussels.

¹⁴. "La Vérité à l'évidence ou coup d'œil sur les abominations commises dans l'Église Belgique, Vers libres", *Révolution belge*, vol. 88, pamphlet 3, Royal Library, Brussels.

¹⁵. "Godefroi par la grâce de Dieu, Abbé de Tongerlo, Supérieur spirituel des troupes Belges", *Varia*, volume 236, pamphlet 7, Archieven, Abdij Bornem, Bornem.

The Estates from all the Belgian provinces gathered in Brussels to restore order that they believed had guaranteed their traditional prosperity. Assuming the former emperor's powers, calling themselves the *États Belgiques Unis*. They pledged to protect the Catholic church and to preserve the medieval provincial constitutions "comme le boulevard de leurs libertés et la sauvegarde de leur bonheur".¹⁶ They reopened canals for trade and established a customs union. The English ambassador observed that the new Belgian government was preoccupied with religion and commerce to the exclusion of everything else.

By the middle of the summer, few outside observers expected the Belgian republic to survive its internecine struggles. Indeed, when Austrian troops invaded on November 24, 1790, they met no resistance other than disorganized bands of pitchfork-wielding peasants. The Belgians retreated when the Austrians fired the first round. Van der Noot disappeared, finding exile in the United Provinces.

Contemporary historians have rescued these Belgian revolutionaries from the disdain of nineteenth-century narratives and twentieth-century texts. Leuven historian, Jan Roegiers, has written extensively about the "Kleine revolutie" of 1787, Austrian church reforms and Belgian clerical leaders, dispelling the caricatures left from eighteenth-century pamphlets. His articles on P.S. Van Eupen, Josse Le Plat, and P.F. Neny among others, set the writings of the ultramontane theorists in the context of eighteenth-century long religious discussions that would frame nineteenth-century debates within the Catholic Church (Roegiers, 1975; 1983; 1990; 1991). In her Cambridge thesis, *Enlightened Innovation and the Ancient Constitution. The intellectual justifications of Revolution in Brabant (1787-1890)*, Geert Van den Bossche rehabilitates

"the Statist party through the analysis of its unfamiliar writing in order to understand the outcome of the Brabant Revolution as the continuation and elaboration of the pre-revolutionary political culture and as the intellectual realisation of one, but not the other component of a modern state" (Van den Bossche, 2001, 27).

She focuses on legal and constitutional writings of the *Abbé de Feller* and H.J. Van der Hoop to define "the Belgian political community".

Another group of Brabant revolutionaries, the Vonckists or democrats, have received more attention from twentieth-century Belgian historians. Suzanne Tassier published *Les démocrates belges de 1789. Étude sur le*

¹⁶. "Traité d'union et établissement du Congrès souverain des États Belgiques Unis", 18 January 1790 in: P. Gachard, *Documents politiques et diplomatiques sur la Révolution belge de 1790*, Brussels, 1834, p. 13.

Vonckisme et la révolution brabançonne in 1930 based in the archival collections of the Royal Archives and the Royal Library in Brussels. Her narrative of the Brabant Revolution focuses on the ideas of the lawyers, entrepreneurs, and bankers such as Jean François Vonck, Jan Baptiste Verlooy, and Edouard Walckers who organized the secret revolutionary committee, *Pro Aris et Focis*. Biographies of individual revolutionaries include J. van den Broeck's study of Verlooy, *J.B.C. Verlooy, vooruitstrevend Jurist en Politicus uit de 18de Eeuw, 1746-1797* (Van den Broeck, 1980) and Jan C.A. De Clerck's biography of Vonck (De Clerck, 1992). An edited volume drawn from a conference on the life of Jean François Vonck includes articles by Bruno Bernard on the historiography of the democratic movement, a psychological study of Vonck by Jérôme Vercruysse, and a study of the Liégeois revolutionaries by Philippe Raxhon among others (Hasquin & Mortier, 1996).

The democrats organized their secret revolutionary committee in the spring of 1789. Although many of the lawyers, financiers, and nobles in *Pro Aris et Focis* had been working with the leaders of the resistance in the Estates since 1787, they had been frustrated by the ineffectiveness of the Estates' petitioning. Rather than relying on foreign armies to come to the aid of the provinces, they called on the Belgian people themselves to arm and reclaim their sovereignty. In the summer of 1789, *Pro Aris et Focis* began to train young men for military service near Hasselt.

Few of the democrats questioned Joseph's reforming intent. Instead, they challenged his authority to impose his will against the wishes of the Belgian people in violation of their constitution. Once they had driven the Austrian despot from their lands, the leaders of *Pro Aris et Focis* expected to reform the old order, calling on the first two estates to renounce their privileges. In their pamphlets, rather than continuing to harken back to the medieval constitutional foundation, as the Estates had done, Vonck and Verlooy argued that the revolutionary Belgians should write a new set of laws to guarantee their natural rights. In the new revolutionary society, all Belgians would be equally honored "du titre de citoyen, mot qui exprime l'idée de l'égalité qui doit régner entre tous les membres d'une cité".¹⁷ These democrats cited the French philosophes Mably, Voltaire, and Rousseau in their calls for reform and they allied with other revolutionaries on both sides of the Atlantic.

Throughout the summer of 1789, the leaders of *Pro Aris et Focis* wrote and distributed pamphlets. They appealed to village militias to rise up in support of advancing Belgian armies at the ringing of the tocsin. Vonck recruited General Jean André Van der Mersch from Dadizeele to lead the army made

¹⁷. Jan Baptiste Verlooy, "Les intrigues du despotisme démasquées", Library of the Belgian Parliament, 1789.

up of the volunteers recruited by *Pro Aris et Focis* who were training near Hasselt. When spies betrayed the revolutionaries to the Austrians, the leaders of *Pro Aris et Focis* moved across the Dutch border, joining the leaders of the Estates in Breda where they organized a single revolutionary committee and planned the Brabant Revolution. They launched the troops into action against the Austrians in October 1789 and by December had routed the Austrian army.

When the former leaders of the Estates took control of the new government, they excluded the leaders of *Pro Aris et Focis* from all positions of authority. The democrats regrouped as the *Société Patriotique* to demand the reforms for which they had fought the revolution. They charged the monks and aristocrats in the Estates with stealing the people's sovereignty. In a pamphlet written in the form of an allegory, "Relation d'un député de la lune", a fictional traveler arrives in Brussels in December 1789 to find the Belgian revolutionaries chasing away a man they called the duke wearing the sovereign crown.¹⁸ The traveler approaches, asking the revolutionaries what they intend to do with the crown of the departed duke. They declare that they will break it in pieces, giving all the newly freed people their equal shares of sovereignty. The exhausted revolutionaries then fall asleep, leaving the still intact crown on the ground. No sooner have they shut their eyes, then a band of abbots and nobles sneak up and steal the crown. They struggle in vain to squeeze their collective heads into it.

The *Société Patriotique* argued that the deposed emperor had exercised sovereignty in the name of the people. In their revolution, the Belgian people who had won back the right to exercise their sovereignty, had not delegated it to the Estates. The representational system of the estates survived as a relic of medieval feudalism and much had changed since the fourteenth century, they explained. Contrary to the Estates' corporate argument, the democrats contended that the nobility and the clergy no longer represented the interests of the common people.

"N'étoit-il pas ridicule de voir les Paysans, cette classe si nécessaire à la Société, représentée par des Moines, avec qui ils n'ont rien de commun, et dont les intérêts sont différents?"

¹⁸. "Relation d'un député de la lune qui avoit été envoyé dans la Belgique pour y prendre des informations relatives à la Révolution qui s'y opéroit & aux effets qu'y avoient produits les troupes Lunaires qui y étoient descendues" Brussels, 1790, *Révolution belge*, vol. 51, pamphlet 23, Royal Library, Brussels.

one pamphleteer asked.¹⁹ Some of the more radical leaders of the *Société Patriotique* suggested that in their revolution, the Belgian people "a reconquis sa liberté primitive", and should start fresh writing a new constitution.²⁰ They demanded that the Belgians call a constitutional convention, as the Americans had done in 1776.

The *Abbé de Feller* warned readers of his *Journal historique* that the Belgian democrats were allied with other eighteenth century revolutionaries and threatened to introduce

"ce détestable esprit d'innovation, qui après avoir ravagé l'Europe chrétienne & politique, se déploie déjà parmi nous de la manière la plus extravagante".²¹

His alarm was picked up by other pamphleteers who rallied crowds in the cities and throughout the countryside to protect the Belgian provinces. Stirred up by the Estates, reinforced by peasants from rural villages, crowds in Brussels strung up the democrats in effigy from lamp posts "to enlighten them" and pillaged their homes. The Belgian democrats were forced to flee to exile in France. The Austrians returned in the fall of 1790.

A number of the historians who have focused on the Belgian democrats have looked beyond the Brabant to the province of Flanders to understand the originality and resilience of the Belgian democratic movement at the end of the eighteenth century. Y. Van den Berghe has studied Bruges through the last decades of the eighteenth century (Van den Berghe, 1972), and the late Luc Dhondt's work brings to light the more radical Flemish initiatives in the countryside as well as the city (Dhondt, 1978; 1979; 1980; 1989), while Eric Mielandts compares public opinion in progressive Flanders and conservative Brabant by analyzing pamphlets such as "Zaamenspraak tusschen eenen Engelsman, eenen Gentenaar, eenen Brusselaar ende eenen Mechelaar" (Mielandts, 1996).

Tassier set her study of the Brabant Revolution in the context of nineteenth-century economic histories that assumed the Belgian nobility still enjoyed important privileges and controlled significant wealth at the end of the eighteenth century. She accepted the reports of eighteenth-century travelers such as Dérival (De Gomicourt) and Georg Forster that the nobility invested little in industry and that commerce in the Austrian Netherlands lagged behind other more advanced European societies. The *clergé régulier*, according

¹⁹ E.J. Dinne, *Mémoire historique et pièces justificatives pour M. Van der Mersch*, Lille, 1791, vol. 1, p. 192.

²⁰ A. Balza, "Appel aux États", *Révolution belge*, vol. 29, Royal Library, Brussels.

²¹ "Lettre de M. L'Abbé de Feller au Peuple Belgique", 18 December 1789, *Révolution belge*, Royal Library, Brussels.

to these sources, also enjoyed substantial political privileges as the First Estate. Further, they had been corrupted by lives of luxury and remained out of touch with progressive ideas. Finally, the guilds that made up the Third Estate, even more than the first two privileged orders "offraient des marques de faiblesse et de décadence" (Tassier, 1930, 25).

These assumptions have been challenged by a number of studies of eighteenth-century Belgian agriculture and industry. C. Vanden Broeck draws upon extensive documentation of the rise of rural industry to discredit the age-old myth that Flanders was always poor and the peasants struggling to make ends meet (Vanden Broeck, 1984). In the tradition of the economic histories of Jan Craeybeckx, Jean Jacques Heirwegh provides an overview of the economy of the Austrian Netherlands at the end of the Ancien Regime (Heirwegh, 1987). Roger de Peuter's study details the "economische ontwikkeling" in Brussels commerce and industry based on detailed analysis of census and survey data from the end of the eighteenth century (de Peuter, 1999). C. Lis and H. Soly study entrepreneurs during this period of political transformation (Lis & Soly, 1994).

The American historian whose two volume *Age of Democratic Revolution* stands as the most comprehensive survey of the history of eighteenth-century revolutions dismisses the Brabant Revolution as the triumph of ignorant, provincial, fanatical counterrevolutionaries. According to R.R. Palmer, the "placid" Belgians revolted "against the innovations of a modernizing government" (Palmer, 1959, I, 347). Over the last four decades, Belgian historians of the late eighteenth century have worked within the parameters defined by Jan Craeybeckx who asked why a conservative revolution prospered in the most economically precocious industrial society on the European continent (Craeybeckx, 1967). That is the question that launched my work on the Brabant Revolution (Polasky, 1986).

Few contemporary Belgian historians would accept the French revolutionary journalist Camille Desmoulins' dismissal of the revolutionary Belgians as

"une sorte absurde de peuple oriental dont la raison sommeillante ne progresse jamais et dont l'esprit comme la bière restaient exactement les mêmes d'année en année".²²

Historians of the statist explore ideological ties to Edmund Burke or roots in Jesuit ideas to validate the significance of Henri Van der Noot and P.S. Van Eupen's plans for the *États Beligiques Unis*. Historians of the democrats study

²² Camille Desmoulins, *Révolutions de France et de Brabant*, volume I, November 1789, Paris, pp. 163, 364, 417, volume III, Paris, p. 28.

the pamphlets of Vonck, Verlooy, Poringo, and d'Outrepoint to situate the Brabant Revolution within the current of progressive Atlantic reform. They explain that the reformers were crushed by the conservative forces in the Estates.

Typically Belgian historians describe the two revolutionary parties, the statistes led by Van der Noot and the democrats led by Vonck as diametrically opposed forces, the first working to restore the old order while the latter struggled to introduce reform.

"Aux statistes qui entendent restaurer tout ce que le pouvoir impérial a aboli, les 'vonckistes' opposent une politique réformiste, démocratique, largement inspirée des Lumières"

Jérôme Vercruysse writes.

"Deux tendances donc, forcément opposées, se dressent contre un souverain, jadis adulé, et que l'opinion qualifie désormais volontiers de 'despote' et de 'tyran'" (Pirenne & Vercruysse, 1992, 16).

As in the French Revolution, the Brabant Revolution is portrayed as a pitched battle between these two revolutionary parties, albeit within a guillotine.

From my perspective outside of Belgian politics, I would counter this view, arguing that it was in this so-called "pays de brochures" that opposing ideas mingled together. That is what makes this short-lived revolution unique in the "Age of Democratic Revolution". The interchange and blending of ideas that distinguished the Brabant Revolution served as a foundation for modern Belgian politics, in particular for the Belgian Revolution of 1830.

The first Belgian revolutionaries revolted against the Austrian Emperor, Joseph II, to preserve their time-honored traditions and their liberty. They argued that they were working to conserve "la patrie". To them, "la patrie" meant the Catholic Church, the provincial constitutions, and fundamental provincial laws. In 1787, lawyers and clerics protested the reforms introduced by Austrian emperor Joseph II as a violation of their privileges and their rights. Those terms – traditions/liberty and privileges/rights – are usually contrasted by French and Anglo-American political theorists as deriving from opposing ideologies. The first Brabant revolutionaries, the pamphleteers of 1787 and 1788, blended these two ideological strands into one revolutionary protest.

It is significant that the democrats and statistes coalesced in Breda as the "Comité des Insurgents". On October 24, 1789, the feast day of the Archan-

gel Raphael, they issued the "Manifeste du peuple brabançon".²³ While questioning the divine right of kings to rule against the interests of the people, the Breda Committee argued that if the authority of a ruler derived from a good and just God, then the king would rule according to the best interests of the people. They listed every violated provincial Belgian privilege and detailed Austrian oppression. After pages detailing every violated agreement between the emperor and the Belgian people, the "Manifeste" concluded: "Il n'est pas possible de rapporter toutes les injustices, les atrocités, & les horreurs commises envers les citoyens & la nation entière".²⁴ The Brabant revolutionaries declared themselves a free people.

The revolutionary justification of the "Manifeste" drew from democratic and statist rhetoric. The Breda Committee borrowed elements from the American Declaration of Independence, for example asserting that the right of the sovereign to rule derived from his duty to serve the best interests of the citizens. They asserted the rights of the nation, the inalienable rights, that preexisted the claims of any ruler and they extensively echoed the Baron d'Holbach's *La Politique naturelle* in their preamble. As Jérôme Vercruysse has demonstrated, it was not just the democrats, but Henri Van der Noot who was well steeped in Holbach's texts, although the lawyer for the Estates undoubtedly did not know the identity of the author of the texts (Vercruysse, 1968).

The statist, like the democrats, were not unaware of the philosophes or of natural rights theory. As Van Eupen informed the editor of the *Journal général d'Europe*, "Notre peuple se rit chrétiennement de la folie philosophique du jour". They just considered it ridiculous to expect that after the revolution the people should sever all ties with each other as if cast on a desert island, as if at the moment they had left the hands of the creator without centuries of relations.²⁵ Statist pamphlets debated Rousseau's philosophical return to the state of nature and rejected it.²⁶ The author of "Catéchisme Constitutionnel à l'usage de la nation belge", for example, appropriated the terminology of the enlightenment to defend privilege and hierarchy.²⁷ He called natural laws the laws of self preservation. They were what taught the peasant in the dialogue to respect his parents and to find a wife to bring children into the

²³. Mss. 19648, pp. 137 and 149, Royal Archives, Brussels.

²⁴. Mss. 19648, pp. 137 and 149, Royal Archives, Brussels.

²⁵. Gachard, *Documens*, pp. 14 and 18, cited by Roegiers (1991, 3, 7); and "Si leurs intérêts sont bons, ils ne savent ce qu'ils demandent; si ils ne le sont pas c'est autre chose", *Révolution belge*, vol. 3, pamphlet 26, Royal Library, Brussels.

²⁶. "Ce qu'étoit ce qu'un Duc de Brabant"; and "Onbetwistbaere Geregtheid".

²⁷. Vander Hoop, "Catéchisme constitutionnel à l'usage de la nation Belgique", August 1787, *Révolution belge*, vol. 23, Royal Library, Brussels.

world. He argued that absolute equality would lead to disorder. The division of society into separate orders was necessary to preserve public order. Sovereignty was shared among the three Estates, assuring a more just and reflective deliberation.

Both democrats and statistes rebelled against the Austrians to protect what they defined as the rights of the Belgian people. But as Jan Van den Broeck has explained, for the statistes "rights" meant the privileges of the old regime. They derived from traditions, not natural rights theory. Pierre Van Eupen, countered that for them natural rights referred to the eternal rights of man, that is man's duties to God. They would enjoy "les droits... de citoyens du ciel", the liberty to pray to God in the Catholic Church and to perform His work on earth. Too, in contrast to the democrats, Pierre Van Eupen looked to "les privilèges..., la liberté... et la constitution dont elle a joui depuis plusieurs siècles" as the sources of Belgian prosperity.²⁸

In 1790, in founding the new revolutionary republic, both democrats and statistes justified their appeals in constitutional arguments. The statistes referred back frequently to the provincial constitutions as the basis of the rights and privileges to be enjoyed by the independent Belgians. The democrats, including Charles Lambert d'Outrepoint who had advised Joseph II in 1787 to honor the constitutions, also hailed constitutional law as the bulwark against tyranny.²⁹ In the spring of 1790, democrats responded quickly to the statist charge that they planned to bury the traditional provincial constitutions. They promised to restore the medieval *Joyeuse Entrée* to its pure form and to buttress its defense of liberty.³⁰

Statistes as well as democrats heralded liberty as the ideal of their independent republic. For the statistes it was "un des plus beaux attributs de l'Être suprême & le présent le plus précieux qu'il ait fait à l'homme".³¹ Liberty came from God. Temporal and eternal well-being depended on liberty.

²⁸. Van Eupen to De Rode, États Belges Unis, no. 189, Royal Archives, Brussels, s.d.

²⁹. Charles Lambert d'Outrepoint, "Considérations sur la constitution des duchés de Brabant et de Limbourg et des autres provinces", 23 May 1787, *Révolution belge*, vol. 35, pamphlet 13, Royal Library, Brussels; E. de Walckiers, "Lettre adressée aux états de Brabant", p. 13, 31 March 1790, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris; *Révolution belge*, pamphlet 10, Bibliothèque nationale, Paris; and J.F. Vonck, *Naedere onzeydige aenmerkingen of Vervolg van Staetkundige onderrigtingen voor het volk van Brabant*, Lille, 1792, p. 53.

³⁰. "Projet d'adresse à présenter à l'illustre assemblée des États de Brabant", KU Leuven, Centrale Bibliotheek, 1790.

³¹. "Discours sur la liberté", *Révolution belge*, vol. 100, pamphlet 6, Royal Library, Brussels.

That messianism was not unique to Belgians (Polasky, 1977). In his revolutionary pamphlet, "Aan het Volk van Nederland", Joan Derk Van der Capellen called upon the Dutch people.³²

"Arm yourself; choose your leaders, follow the example of America where not a single drop of blood would have been shed had the English not struck the first blow – and act with caution, wisdom and moderation; and then Jehovah, the God of Liberty, who guided the Israelites out of their servitude and made them a free nation, will undoubtedly support you good and just cause".³³

God would favor the Dutch with his protection just as he had the Americans, Van der Capellen assured his readers.

Many of the refugees from the Dutch Patriot Revolution sought refuge in Antwerp and Brussels after the Prussians crushed their revolt. Jan Bicker, a wealthy Dutch banker who fled the United Provinces in October 1787, ended up in the revolutionary Brabant. The Dutch Patriot who had lived in a substantial double house on the Herengracht in Amsterdam before the revolution with his wife and nine children, set up house in the Hotel Feraris in the center of Brussels. The customs of his new neighbors to the south struck the Dutch refugee as odd. For example, the Belgian bourgeoisie rarely drank wine, preferring beer that came in all colors, from dark brown to light amber, with their meals. And the Dutch refugees complained, Belgian women did not worry about the condition of their homes. Younger women in particular paid little attention to cleanliness, a real contrast to the Dutch where "voor 't overige drijft de huishouding doorgaands op Gods genade voort".³⁴

The Dutch found the Belgian politics even stranger than their housekeeping. The Austrian minister-plenipotentiary, Count Trauttmansdorff had so graciously welcomed the newly arrived Dutch revolutionary refugees, that Bicker was baffled when the Belgians protested against his reforms. The Dutch revolutionary refugees in fact found little that seemed familiar in the Belgian resistance to the Austrians. Bicker, who was barely missed by a stray bullet while he was sitting at the rear of his house, noted: "Ik vond hier een ander patriottismus, dat echter God zij gelooft, mijn zaak niet is".³⁵ Belgian

³² J.D. van der Capellen, *Aan het volk van Nederland. Het patriottisch program uit 1781*, Amsterdam, De Bataafsche Leeuw, 1987.

³³ J.D. van der Capellen, "Discours à l'adresse du peuple des Pays Bas sur la situation alarmante et périlleuse de la république de Hollande" ["Aan het volk van Nederland"] (Godechot, 1964, 59).

³⁴ *Brieven van eene gevluchten Hollander, zijne gevallen en die van veelen zijner lotgenooten verhaalende. Gevonden onder de nalatenschap van eene onlangs overledene aanzienlijke Dame*, Brussel, 1789, p. 117.

³⁵ Jan Bicker cited by M.N. Bisselink, and A. Doedens (1983, 41).

revolutionaries decried the tyranny of a foreign ruler in language that echoed the Americans, but the ruler was a reformer. But, the leading revolutionaries were aristocrats who appealed for assistance to the same powers that had just suppressed the Dutch Revolution. To further complicate their relations, the Belgian revolutionary leader Henri Van der Noot was attempting to negotiate for armed support from the Prussians and the English, the enemies of the Dutch revolutionaries. Bicker scoffed that these strange Brabant revolutionaries seemed to be searching for a new ruler, not revolting to establish an independent republic.³⁶ In April 1790, Bicker moved to what appeared to be a politically more congenial refuge, Paris, along with 150 other Dutch refugees.

The *Brabançons* and the Dutch shared the same rhetoric when they cast their revolutions in terms of the American War for Independence. Dutch and Belgian insurgents had eagerly listened to the news of the American militias' triumph over the British army in the forests of the new world. They avidly read the constitutions drafted by the American states (Vercruyssen, 1976). They inserted the terminology of liberty in their pamphlets alongside local traditions and institutions.

The Belgians, like the Americans, were oppressed. Not merely seekers of innovation, they had been forced to separate from their mother country. The Americans had subsequently demonstrated the path to independence. Like the Americans, the Belgians would reclaim their natural rights.

The democrats and statistes alike looked to the example set by the Americans in 1776. Van der Noot's mistress, Madame de Bellem called on the Belgians to imitate the American example and revolt against foreign tyrants. In a poem that she distributed around Brussels with her daughter Marianne, she appealed to her countrymen:

"Peuple Belgique
Cour tyrannique
faisons comme l'Amérique".³⁷

Statistes as well as democrats cited passages from the state constitutions and the American Declaration of Independence.

After the Brabant Revolution, the Belgian democrats added that neither the Belgians nor the Americans could reinstate an ancient constitution designed

³⁶ See also: A. Doedens, "Een Noord-Nederlandse exodus nader beschouwd: de uitwijkelingen van 1787 en hun rol tijdens de Brabantse revolutie" in: *Documentatie Werkgroep Achttiende Eeuw*, XXXIII, 1976, October, pp. 6-35.

³⁷ Madame de Bellem, *Préliminaires de la Révolution, 1787-1789*, États Belges Unis 1, Royal Archives, Brussels.

for a monarchy to fit their newly independent republic.³⁸ Their war of independence had landed them back in the state of nature. Each citizen in Belgium had earned the right to sovereignty, the right to be consulted on the social contract to which he would be committed through a national assembly. The Americans had built a new government based on the principles of democracy and Montesquieu's separation of powers.³⁹ The Belgians would follow their example, emphasizing individual freedom over equality.

They understood their revolution within the context of the other Atlantic Revolutions. The revolutionary movement was universal, according to Charles Lambert d'Outrepoint.

"On voit presque partout une lutte continuelle entre le trône appuyé par la force, & la liberté soutenue par la voix de la nature & l'autorité des lois",

he asserted.⁴⁰ Another pamphleteer exclaimed:

"Sur la moitié du globe, tous les hommes ne jettent qu'un cri, n'ont qu'un besoin, qu'une action, & l'espèce courbée si longtemps sous la tyrannie, se relève avec la fierté d'une liberté majestueuse & effrayante".⁴¹

This was the moment of their liberation. The Belgians, like the Americans, the French, and the Dutch, had emerged victorious from the shackles of tyranny to embrace a new dawn of liberty.⁴² The Genevan, Irish, Dutch, and Belgian aristocrats and democrats formed their revolutionary aspirations in Atlantic terms. These revolutions that echoed through Northern Europe exemplify the interconnections that linked the cascading series of revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century.

³⁸. "Triple parallèle de la Révolution des Sept Provinces unies en 1574", 1790, *Révolution belge*, vol. 1, pamphlet 13, Royal Library, Brussels; "Le Patriote armée", *Révolution belge*, vol. 91, pamphlet 1, Royal Library, Brussels; and *Journal général d'Europe*, February 1790.

³⁹. "Poringo, Les Représentants légitimes du peuple", *Brochures 1790*, vol. II, Université libre de Bruxelles, Brussels; "La conduite loyale des congrès de Bruxelles et de Namur ou abus de leurs pouvoirs confiés avec les preuves de trahisons faites à la Nation", *Révolution belge*, vol. 81, pamphlet 4, Royal Library, Brussels; "Triple parallèle de la Révolution...", *Révolution belge*, vol. 1, pamphlet 13, Royal Library, Brussels; and "Adresse d'un citoyen aux États de Brabant" in: *Staten Generaal 1746*, Rijksarchief, The Hague; and Verduyn (1976, 1098-1108).

⁴⁰. Charles Lambert d'Outrepoint, "Considérations sur la Constitution des Duchés de Brabant et Limbourg", May 23, 1787, *Révolution belge*, vol. 35, Royal Library, Brussels.

⁴¹. "Comme nous étions et ce que nous avons fait", *Écrits politiques*, XXIII, pp. 236-294, Royal Archives, Brussels.

⁴². "Le beau jour ou le Jour du peuple brabançon", 1790, *Révolution belge*, vol. 86, pamphlet 8, Royal Library, Brussels.

For the most part, democrats as well as statistes shied away from comparisons with the French Revolution. The statistes definitely saw their neighbor's example as one to be avoided. The French had not only overturned their laws, but their customs as well. Man was not made for liberty, they asserted. The example of the neighboring republics proved that. Even the democrats reasoned "que son éclat est trop puissant pour les yeux de cette nation si longtemps dans les ténèbres & gouvernée par des prêtres".⁴³ Instead the Belgians should follow the Americans who had won their liberty, conserving what was valuable of their old constitution and introducing reforms to meet changing conditions.

Historians who have set the Brabant Revolution in the context of the Atlantic Revolutions have focused on the emigrés who traveled through Antwerp and Brussels, including M.N. Bisselink, and A. Doedens' *Jan Bernd Bicker: een Patriot in Ballingschap 1787-1795* (1983) and J. Baartmans' *Hollandse wijzgeren in Brabant en Vlaanderen: Geschriften van Noord-Nederlandse patriotten in de Oostenrijkse Nederlanden, 1787-1792*. Inspired by the two volume *Age of Democratic Revolutions* of R.R. Palmer, I wrote *Revolution in Brussels, 1787-1793*.

A number of Belgian historians have looked to the Brabant Revolution as the foundation of the modern Belgian nation, citing the continuity of ideas from the eighteenth-century to the statistes and democrats to the Catholics and Liberals of nineteenth-century Belgium. The late Jean Stengers first sought the origins of "Belgian" and "Belgium" in the Brabant Revolution, suggesting that "Flanders" denoted the province at the end of the eighteenth century, not a region (Stengers, 1980). More recently, Tom Verschaffel (1998) in *De hoed en de hond: Geschiedschrijving in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden 1715-1794* re-examines the origin of terms such as "patrie" and Johannes Koll in *Die belgische Nation. Patriotismus und Nationalbewusstsein im Späten 18 Jahrhundert* and an edited volume, *Nationale Bewegungen in Belgien. Ein historischer Überblick*, looks at the formation of a national identity and of patriotism at the end of the eighteenth century, setting the Brabant Revolution in a European context of nation forming (Koll, 2003; 2005). Other historians have sought the roots of regional identity, whether Flemish, Walloon, or Liégeois, in the eighteenth-century revolution. The Brabant Revolution very much belongs to the history of contemporary Belgium.

⁴³ G. Poringo, "Les Représentants légitimes du peuple", *Brochures 1790*, volume II, Université libre de Bruxelles; and "Triple parallèle de la Révolution", *Révolution belge*, vol. I, Royal Library, Brussels.

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De Brabantse revolutie. Een revolutie in historiografische perceptie

JANET POLASKY

SAMENVATTING

Dat de 18de-eeuwse revolutionairen in de vergetelheid zijn geraakt, is mede te wijten aan historici die de opstanden weggewuifd hebben die over heel Europa keizers en hun legers uit republieken verdreven. Belgische contemporanisten hebben de Brabantse revolutionairen gered van de minachting van 19de-eeuwse verhalen en 20ste-eeuwse Franse historici. Door de ultramontaanse wortels van de religieuze discussies te bestuderen, hebben zij niet alleen de protesten van de statisten in context geplaatst, maar ook de parameters getraceerd van de 19de-eeuwse debatten in de Belgische katholieke Kerk. Historici die gefocust hebben op de democraten van de Brabantse revolutie hebben de vooroordelen aangevochten van 18de-eeuwse reizigers die een lage dunk hadden van de fanatieke, economisch stagnerende Belgische provincies. Ze hebben dit gedaan door de Brabantse revolutie in de context te plaatsen van economische voorspoed en van een sprankelende uitwisseling van Verlichtingsideeën. De opstandelingen hebben de stichting van de moderne Belgische natie bepaald via hun verdediging van de rechten van het Belgische volk.

La Révolution brabançonne. Une révolution de l'approche historiographique

JANET POLASKY

RÉSUMÉ

Les révolutionnaires du 18^e siècle sont tombés dans l'oubli, car certains historiens ont fait peu de cas de leurs insurrections. Ils ont pourtant, à l'époque chassé les empereurs et leurs armées des républiques dans toute l'Europe. Des contemporanéistes belges affranchissent aujourd'hui les révolutionnaires brabançons du mépris du 19^e siècle et du dédain de certains historiens français du vingtième siècle. Grâce à l'analyse des racines ultramontaines des débats religieux, ils mettent, non seulement, les protestations statistes en contexte, mais ils évoquent également les paramètres des discussions tenues à l'intérieur de l'Église catholique belge du 19^e siècle. S'intéressant aux démocrates de la Révolution brabançonne, ces chercheurs dénoncent "l'idée reçue" des voyageurs de l'époque. Ces derniers se font, en effet, une bien piètre idée des provinces belges, considérées comme fanatiques et économiquement stagnantes. Selon la nouvelle approche historiographique, la Révolution brabançonne doit être appréhendée dans une conjoncture économique favorable et dans le cadre d'échanges intellectuels enthousiastes dans l'esprit des Lumières. Par la défense des droits du peuple belge, les insurgés ont donc défini les principes de la nation belge moderne.