

PHD RESEARCH

A short overview of recent PhD research on Belgian modern and contemporary history

KASPAR BEELEN

Between “I” and “We”: Self-representations in parliamentary discourse

University of Antwerp, 2014. Supervisor : Marnix Beyen.

Democratisation fundamentally changed the form and function of parliamentary representation. From an assembly dominated by a class of notables, parliament evolved to an arena where socio-economic antagonisms became more and more explicitly articulated by parties and their leaders. Deliberation in these representative institutions changed from an open discussion between independent MPs, who primarily conceived of themselves as statesmen serving the general good, to a confrontation between more or less disciplined party formations. In my doctorate, through a linguistic analysis, I reveal how the discursive practices of MPs changed in times of democratisation, focusing on the Belgian and Dutch lower chambers. Methodologically speaking, the thesis investigates, from an interdisciplinary perspective, the use of the first person pronouns, such as “I” and “we”, in parliamentary discourse.

The first part of the thesis focuses on patterns of identification by analysing the use of the first-person plural possessive pronoun. I argue that Belgian MPs primarily constructed national identity around legal elements, such as “our constitution”, while phrases which anchor the “we” in “*le pays réel*”, such as “our people”, were largely absent. This sharply contrasted with the rhetoric of the Dutch *Tweede Kamer*, where identification with “people” and

“fatherland” was central to the parliamentary rhetoric.

In the second part, I investigate to what extent a shift from an “I”- to a “we”-centred, deliberative culture occurred. According to my results, the “I” remained by far the most important discursive actor. Instead of resolving into a “we, the party”, the political “ego” became more expressive. The “I” moved from a negotiating actor to an agent who expressed a fixed opinion. These findings warn against overemphasizing the emergence of party discipline and its influence on processes of identity formation.