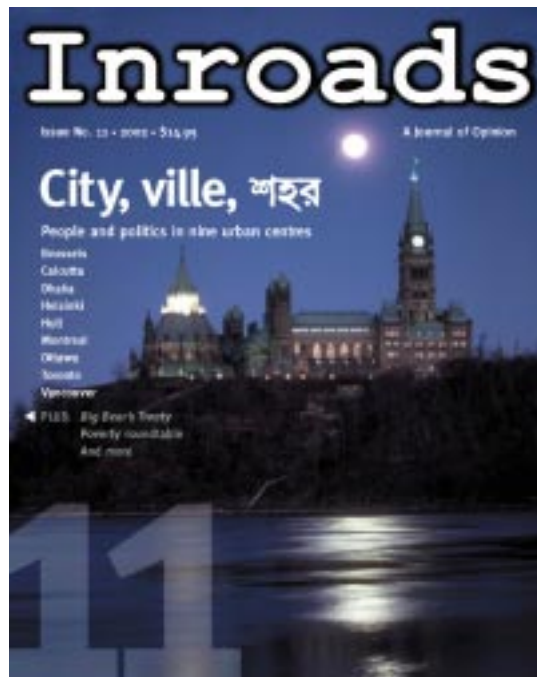


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BILINGUAL CITIES

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Philip Resnick

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Language, identity, citizenship

As THE POET HÖLDERLIN WROTE, “Language, the most dangerous of all things, was given to man so that he could testify to having inherited what he is.” Philip Resnick begins his exploration of the parallels between Belgium and Canada with this line. Language is inextricably at the core of the existential reality of multilingual, multinational states like Canada and Belgium. Speakers of the majority language must accept bilingualism as the institutional order of the day at the official level of their countries. But this does not eliminate the desire among members of the minority-language community to pursue unilateral means to defend their language.

LET ME BEGIN WITH A PASSAGE FROM HÖLDERLIN, ONE OF MY FAVOURITE POETS. In the French translation it reads: “Le langage, le plus dangereux des biens, a été donné à l’homme afin qu’il témoigne avoir hérité ce qu’il est.” (“Language, the most dangerous of all things, was given to man so that he could testify to having inherited what he is.”) This is ambiguous – like so many literary passages – since it can mean several things. It may mean that language itself, irrespective of the particular language one speaks, is a dangerous thing, carrying memories in its wake. Or, it could be taken to underline the importance played by the particular language a community speaks in the transmission of its historical memories.

Leaving Hölderlin aside, let me evoke my own personal experience when I have had occasion to visit Belgium, as was the case when I spent a month at the Université libre de Bruxelles in 2000. I find myself strangely at home, in a way that is less true of France where I have had occasion to spend years at a time. There are the visible signs of the language reality that divides the country – the meticulously bilingual street signs in Brussels, the

unilingual signs in Flanders and Wallonia. There is the large role that the language question has played in inflaming public opinion over the years – the battle over the University of Leuven/Louvain back in the 1960s springs to mind. And there are the institutional changes that have made Belgium into a federal state, with its own complex division of powers between central government, regions, and language communities.

THE HEART OF BRUSSELS:

The maisons des corporations surround the Grande Place. Like Canadians, Belgians do not have a single view of their history, be it back in medieval or Hapsburg times or since the creation of a Belgian state in the 1830s.

As a Canadian with a particular interest in the politics of Quebec, how could I not be aware of the mirror reflections between Canada and Belgium? Language underpins identities, as anyone with a sense of Canadian history knows. The Conquest, the Patriot Rebellion of 1837-8, Confederation, the hanging of Louis Riel, the Manitoba and Ontario School Questions, conscription debates in World Wars I and II – these are issues that have divided English and French, rather than bringing them together.

Like Canadians, Belgians do not have a single view of their history, be it back in medieval or Hapsburg times or since the creation of a Belgian state in the 1830s. Throughout the 19th century, French was the dominant language, with Flemish consigned to a back-seat role. In the 20th century, the assertion of Flemish in the public life of Flanders and of Belgium became a primary feature of Belgian politics. As in Canada, there are conflicting visions of what the past means. The title of a book by a leading Flemish historian, Lode Wils, speaks volumes. It is called *Histoire des nations belges*, with “nations” in the plural.



Language is not the only variable of identity. Religion played a leading part in French Canadian identity throughout the 19th and the first part of the 20th century, especially as against a more Protestant English Canada. One thinks of André Siegfried's famous account in his 1906 study, *The Race Question in Canada*. So too in Flanders, a more traditional Catholic religiosity can be contrasted with the more secular, liberal, and socialist values that came to dominate in Wallonia.

Territory may have its own importance. People's attachments are usually to a particular piece of territory historically associated with their community. This may be especially strong where minority nationali-

ties like the Québécois, a term that has replaced French Canadian in the *imaginaire* of most francophones in Quebec, is concerned. This is no less true for a nationality like the Flemish within Belgium. Even though they now form a plurality, they have maintained some of the complexes developed during their former

marginalized status, during the first century of Belgium's history as a sovereign country.

At the heart of the existential reality of multinational states like Canada and Belgium lurks the question: “One demos or many?” in other words, “One people or many peoples?” This is not the way most Americans or French look upon their identity – though the Civil War for the Americans or the recent wave of nationalist violence in Corsica for the French has occasionally brought these questions home to them as well.

Where multinational states like Canada or Belgium are concerned, linguistic pluralism is a fact of life. Where the speakers of the dominant language may be concerned – English in the case of Canada, French in the Belgian case down to World War II – unilingualism was for long the preferred option at the level of the central government. In the name of accommodating vigorous nationalist challenges from Quebec or Flanders, the majority-type language speakers reluctantly came to accept bilingualism as the institutional order of the day at the official level in their countries.



But bilingualism can serve the interests of stronger language communities more than that of weaker language communities. English-speakers in Canada are much less prone to learn or speak French fluently than French-speakers English. Similarly, the power of attraction of Flemish for French-

speakers in Belgium is a good deal weaker than was that of French historically for members of the Flemish bourgeois and professional classes.

The logic, therefore, of minority-type language communities is to look for unilateral defences for their languages, usually on a territorial basis. This explains the passion with which Bill 101 has come to be embraced by a large majority of Quebec francophones since its passage in 1977, a support that has not wavered over the years. In the minds of most francophone Québécois, Bill 101, with its strong affirmation of French as the official language of Quebec, is more significant than the formal bilingualism entrenched in the federal Official Languages Act or in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. In Belgium, the Flemish have fought tenaciously to ensure that not one square centimetre of what is Flanders fall prey to French linguistic colonization. Hence, crises over such tiny hamlets as Fleurons. And there are the ongoing battles about the degree of use of French as a semi-official language of instruction and public communication in some of the suburbs im-



THE CITY OF BRUGES: As long as two or more major linguistic or cultural communities continue to co-exist within the boundaries of a single state, various issues will continue to bubble to the surface.

that the role of the federal government in Belgium should evolve to that of a mere intermediary between the power

mediately surrounding Brussels located in Flemish Brabant, where French-speakers happen to be in the majority.

We know about the conflicts that language and identity can bring. What, if anything, can tie different language communities together? The most obvious tie would seem to be that of shared political citizenship. By citizenship, after all, English-speaking Canadians, Québécois, and Aboriginal peoples are all Canadians. By citizenship, Flemish, Wallons, Bruxellois, and the inhabitants of the small German enclaves in the east of the country are all Belgians.

But even here, ambiguity seems to be the name of the game. Federalist-leaning Québécois feel themselves to be Canadians in a way that is simply not true for sovereignist-leaning Québécois. Belgian-inclined Flemish speakers feel themselves to be Belgian in a way that is clearly not true for hard-line Flemish nationalists of the Vlaams Blok persuasion, or for an autonomist-minded politician like Luc Vanden Brande, Minister-President of the Flemish community and region between 1993 and 1999. He argued

of the Belgian communities and the powers vested in the European Union. These divisions internal to Quebec or to Flanders reinforce the argument I would make that there is a thicker sense of Canadian identity on the part of English-speaking Canadians, regardless of ethnic origins, than among Québécois; a thicker sense of Belgian identity among Walloons and francophone Bruxellois than among Flemish-speakers. Shared citizenship may not entail the same degree of commitment or loyalty by everyone to the underlying civic, political, or symbolic values of a country.

To further muddy the waters, there have been occasional attempts – one thinks of one of the recommendations of the Larose Commission on language in Quebec – to introduce the idea of a Quebec citizenship. This is something most of us would associate only with a sovereign Quebec state, in other words with the hard language of sovereignty and state power, not with a Quebec still part of the Canadian federation. Citizenship, I would argue, speaks to the concept of the state, while identity speaks

more to the concept of nationhood. Multinational states may contain two or more nationalities within their borders; they cannot, however, allow for two or more internationally recognized types of citizenship within their borders and yet make good their claim to continue to be a single state.

This is something we need to be clear about. Only a sovereign Quebec or a sovereign Flanders could establish a meaningful Quebec or Flemish citizenship; such a citizenship would immediately replace any Canadian or Belgian citizenship for its inhabitants.

The fact that the question of citizenship can be posed, however symbolically, reinforces my perception that the political ar-

In Belgium, the Flemish have fought tenaciously to ensure that not one square centimetre of what is Flanders fall prey to French linguistic colonization.

rangements of multinational states may always be open to challenge. Secession, after all, is a real option that minority-type nationalities may choose to pursue, if they feel their basic interests have not been addressed. And central to those basic interests are language and identity.

Can there ever be closure to questions of language and identity in multinational states? Not in my lifetime, I suspect. As long as two or more major linguistic or cultural communities continue to co-exist within the



STREET SIGN: All public postings in Brussels are in both Flemish (Dutch) and French.

boundaries of a single state, various issues will continue to bubble to the surface dividing majority-type language communities from minority-type language communities. Nor does the emergence of a European dimension in the Belgian case, or of a NAFTA dimension in the Canadian case, really alter the need for

ongoing sensitivity to such questions. As Montserrat Guibernau, a Catalan student of nationalism, has noted in one of her recent articles: “Globalization is dramatically transforming the context within which political action takes place... The post-traditional nation-state is faced with the need to accept the emergence of multiple identities expressing regional as well as supranational allegiances, which are closely connected with the rise of multi-layered forms of governance at a local, regional, national and supranational level.”

In other words, the era of globalization that marks the beginning of the 21st century does not spell an end to questions of linguistic or cultural identity. *Au contraire*, linguistic and cultural identities remain key markers, especially for the members of minority-type nationalities, in delineating their own particular space in an economically and technologically globalized world. Neither the European Union nor NAFTA will efface the linguistic boundaries that characterize countries like Belgium or Canada. Or, to recall the Hölderlin phrase with which I began: “Le langage, le plus dangereux des biens, a été donné à l’homme afin qu’il témoigne avoir hérité ce qu’il est.” ■

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