Nationalism and the strategic expression of identity

‘In Belgium, there are parties and provinces, but no nation. Like a tent, pitched for a night, the new monarchy will disappear after having shielded us from the storm, without leaving any trace.’

Nothomb, 1834 (cited by Hasquin, 1996)

‘The Belgian nation, in its present limits, although it is defined neither by mountains nor by rivers, is a moral being, with its own life, constituting a compact and homogeneous whole, solidly attached to its dynasty, its institutions and its independence. Although Walloons and Flemings speak different languages, they are brothers united by a common blood.’

de Liedekerke 1867 (cited by Hasquin, 1996)

Introduction

These quotations by historians illustrate the ambiguity of the concept of nation: how can two scholars make such contradictory statements? Different approaches may be used for answering these questions. A historian could attribute these differences to the thirty years that separate the two statements. A social cognitivist, on the other hand, may attempt to elucidate the cognitive mechanisms underlying the perception of one’s country. A social identity theorist might interpret this discrepancy in terms of the contribution of Belgian identification to the self. In this paper, we shall adopt yet another approach. We will assume that statements on the nature of one’s national group are behaviors directed at specific others. We shall try to assess the motivations that may underlie these behaviors. What makes people describe their national group as they do? What makes them decide to stress an aspect of it rather than another? These are the questions we want to address. In line with earlier work (e.g., Billig, 1995, Reicher, Hopkins, & Condor, 1997) we will propose that these descriptions are rhetorical tools, used to mobilize audiences and that these tools are used as a function of their capacity to respond to motives related to social identity.

The definition of the Nation

In order to unfold our argument, we need to define the concept of Nation and to sketch its role in nationalism.
First, it is crucial to differentiate *States* from *Nations*. States are political entities (Connor, 1978). Nations just refer to groups of people. As a consequence, there can be states without nations and nations without states. The problem facing the theorist who wishes to define the concept lies in specifying the features of a group that are necessary for it to form a nation:

‘There is no way of telling the observer how to distinguish a nation from other entities *a priori*, as we can tell him or her how to recognize a bird or to distinguish a bird from a lizard.’ (Hobsbawm, 1992, p. 5)

Finding an Aristotelian definition of the nation appears to be a vain quest. Therefore it may be more fruitful to use a prototypical definition of the concept (Rosch, 1978; E.E. Smith, 1981). In essence, this would suggest that no single criterion is necessary or sufficient for a group to form a nation: the extent to which the group qualifies for this label is proportional to the number of criteria that are fulfilled. Below are the criteria that are cited most often in the literature on nationalism:

1. The common ancestry/history of the members of the group (Renan, 1882; Smith, 1986; Stalin, 1973; Weber, 1948)
2. The common ideology/values of the members of the group (Deutsch, 1966; Geertz, 1963; Gellner, 1983)
3. The interdependence between the members of the groups (common duties, rights, economy) (Stalin, 1973; Weber, 1948)
4. The presence of a territory every member of the group belongs to (Geertz, 1963; Smith, 1986; Stalin, 1973)
6. A common psychological make-up (Stalin, 1973)
7. The existence of psychological bonds, of a possibility to communicate with other group members (Anderson, 1983; Deutsch, 1966; Thiesse, 1999)

Although these elements seem very disparate, they share a common feature: they contribute to making the group appear as an entity rather than just as an aggregate of persons who bear no relationship to each other. In psychological terms, the construction of a nation requires the creation of a perceptual unit from a set of people:

‘Nationalism involves a social construction process whereby existing differences between social categories are endowed with psychological significance such that the categories become part of a collective cognitive representation in which the group now appears to be a perceptual unit differentiated from other units.’ (Azzi, 1998, p. 75)

The rhetorical value of Nationhood

A social psychologist interested in nationalism can approach this phenomenon in at least two different manners. One strategy involves considering nationalism as primarily a set of representations and attitudes. Questions that she might seek an answer to are: what makes people consider that their group is a nation and what are the effects of this perception? What makes people define themselves in national terms?

One can also consider nationalism as a form of discourse, regardless of its psychological representation. We shall adopt this perspective here. This approach
emphasizes the rhetorical value of nationalism (Billig, 1987; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). This discursive perspective is very suitable in the present case: according to most theorists of nationalism, describing one’s group as a nation is an argument justifying the existence of a state for the Nation. This link constitutes the very essence of nationalism:

‘Nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent’ (Gellner, 1983, p. 10)

‘Nationalism involves the construction of the sense of national identity for those who are said to inhabit their own nation-state (...) It involves the general principle: it is right that ‘we’ possess ‘our’ own state, because peoples (nations) should have their states (nations’) (Billig, 1995, p. 25)

‘The term ‘nationalism’ is used to refer to political movements seeking or exercising state power and justifying such action with nationalist arguments.

A nationalist argument is a political doctrine built upon three basic assertions.’(Breuilly, 1983, p.2)

According to Breuilly, the first of these assertions is:

‘There exists a nation with an explicit and peculiar character.’ (p. 2)

There is an obvious reason why such discourse is necessary for nationalists: making a modern state exist or persist cannot be achieved by isolated individuals. It is a collaborative effort, that involves large segments of the population. In order to gain this collaboration, nationalists need to convince their fellow countrymen of the legitimacy of this State. This is the very function of discourse on nationhood: by convincing people of the existence of invisible, but powerful, bonds linking them to other inhabitants of the country, one can elicit a desire to work on behalf of the State, which is the political embodiment of the Nation. If this is the case, the rhetorical value of this discourse and the likelihood that it will be used should be a function of the perceived stability of the State. When it is firmly established, it is not crucial to convince others of its legitimacy. But when its existence is threatened, mobilizing the population into protecting it is crucial for its preservation. Various factors can threaten the existence of a state: foreign invasions, emigration, regionalisms, fusion with another state, etc. However, since World War II, threats to the existence of established states have come mainly from separatist groups, e.g., Scots in Great Britain, Corsicans in France, Tamils in Sri Lanka, Kurds in Turkey and Iraq, etc. Let us therefore concentrate on this type of situation. Separatists consider that the existing state is not a legitimate entity. They claim that a portion of the population is entitled to having a state of its own, which would be independent from the earlier state. In order to justify this claim, this portion of the population is described as a nation,

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1 Saying that people who aspire to a state for their group use discourse on ‘nationhood’ does not imply the reverse: people who perceive their country as a nation do not necessarily aspire to statehood. For example, believing in a Scottish essence or distinctiveness is not equivalent to favoring the autonomy of Scotland (Hopkins & Reicher, 1996). However, there is a strong relationship between those two aspects (cf. Breuilly, 1983).

2 Obviously, the relationship between perceived legitimacy and stability is reciprocal.
which is essentially distinct from the rest of the population. To face these threats, those who attach value to the unity of the State (the ‘unitarists’) must mobilize other in-group members into defending this State. To achieve this goal, they may also justify its existence by using a discourse emphasizing the ‘nationhood’ of the group. We tried to examine this dynamic in the context of a state whose existence is threatened with partition: Belgium.

**Separatism in Belgium: an overview**

Belgium is a small northwestern European country (pop: 10,200,000). The northern part of the country has a predominantly Dutch speaking (Flemish) population (57% of the total population). In the southern region, known as Wallonia, the principal language is French. Brussels, the capital city (pop: 952,000), is officially bilingual but the population is mainly French speaking (circa 80%). Overall, 42% of the Belgian population speaks French. The Belgian constitution is based on a federal political system composed of three regions (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels).

The political birth of Belgium occurred in 1830, when the Belgian bourgeoisie demanded independence from William of Orange, the king of the Netherlands, who mistreated them (Wils, 1996). This social class, whose language was French, dominated the Belgian society during most of the XIXth century. French was the only official language and it was necessary for accessing any position in society. The creation of the State, although it was not the product of national consciousness, led to attempts at developing one in the population (Hasquin, 1996; Pil, 1998). In the 1850’s, a Flemish movement headed by the lower Middle Class fought for the recognition of the vernacular Flemish language and eventually obtained it. This movement was globally favorable to the maintenance of the Belgian State. But since the mid-xxth century, a growing fraction of it has demanded autonomy, claiming that their region was a nation in itself. This movement led to the linguistic homogeneity of the northern part of the country, which was originally bilingual and became monolingual. The power of this movement also resulted in various reforms: Belgium is now a federal state. Separation would be the logical issue of these trends: it has now become a realistic prospect (see e.g., Carrozzo, 1998). Although separatists come predominantly from Flanders, it is worth noting that most Flemings are in favor of the maintenance of the State. Yet, both linguistic groups perceive the Flemings as more favorable to separatism than the French speakers (Provost, 1998). This is probably due to the fact that Flemish unitarists are less active than Flemish separatists (Maddens, Beerten, & Billiet, 1998). Thus, threats to the existence of Belgium as a nation do not derive from an aspiration to develop alternative forms of political organization than the Nation-State (e.g. Europe) but from the existence of different bases of national identification. While other divisions exist in Belgian society (religious and class-bound mainly), the only one that could lead to a division of the state is the linguistic.

3 Official linguistic censuses being legally forbidden, this estimation is based on the linguistic composition of the Brussels parliament.
Nationalism and separatism in a Belgian context

In order to examine how Belgians described the ‘nationhood’ of their country, we conducted an experiment with 124 students at the University of Brussels. These students were all French speaking. We introduced the study as a survey made by a newspaper. This newspaper was either presented as Flemish and based in Antwerp (Flemish city) or as French speaking and based in Liège (Walloon city).

Besides the group membership of the audience, we added an orthogonal variable, that we shall call the ‘salience of separation’: in the ‘Salient’ condition, subjects read a short paragraph describing how the Belgian state had evolved towards separatism during the last 30 years, following the different reforms of the Constitution. Separatism was therefore presented as a very likely possibility. In the ‘Not Salient’ condition, this information was absent.

Our third independent variable relied on a measure of the attitude toward separatism (α = .67). On the basis of responses to this scale, participants were divided into two groups: members of the first group, that we shall call the ‘High Unitarists’ were highly favorable to the persistence of the Belgian State. They were firmly opposed to separatism. Members of the other group, the ‘Low Unitarists’ were not favorable to separatism but they were not strongly committed to the unity of the country either. The absence of separatists is hardly surprising considering the linguistic composition of the sample. These variables yielded a 2 (Salience of separation: salient, not salient) × 2 (Audience’s group membership: French speaking, Dutch speaking) × 2 (Unitarism: High, Low).

We measured the perceived ‘nationhood’ of Belgium by asking the students to rate on 7-point scales the extent to which they agreed with 18 statements regarding their country. These statements were chosen in order to reflect the dimensions of ‘nationhood’ that theorists of nationalism have used (see above): similarity (e.g., ‘Generally, most French Speaking and Dutch speaking Belgians behave the same way’), interdependence (e.g., ‘The well-being of each Belgian demands the well-being of the other Belgians’), ethnicity (e.g., ‘Generally, Belgians have common ancestors’), psychological proximity (e.g., ‘Generally, Belgians feel close to each other’), common territory (e.g., ‘Belgians are at home everywhere in the country’), and common psychological makeup (e.g., ‘There is a Belgian soul’). Answers to these questions were combined into a single scale, that we shall call ‘nationhood’ (α = .85).

If, as we suggest, ‘nationhood’ is used to justify ‘statehood’, High Unitarists should describe Belgium more as a nation than Low Unitarists. This is indeed what we found (High Unitarists, M = 3.90, SD = .85 and Low Unitarists, M = 3.08, SD = .78). However, this does not imply that our participants were using nationhood as rhetorical tool.

4 The items were: 1. ‘Separatism is a perspective that I view with apprehension.’ (does not apply to me at all/applies totally to me).
2. It would suit me perfectly that Belgium remains united (does not apply to me at all/applies totally to me).
3. It would suit me perfectly that Belgium be separated in two nations (does not apply to me at all/applies totally to me).
4 The ‘territory’ item was removed because its distribution was too skewed.
5 Scale scores vary between 0 and 6.
In order to demonstrate that discourse on the Nation has a persuasive function, we must show that those who express it modify the content of their statements according to the attitude they attribute to their audience on the issue. Presumably, if nationhood serves to mobilize audiences towards defending the state, it is crucial to use such a discourse to convince those who want the State to be divided of its legitimacy. On the other hand, Unitarists need not be mobilized since they are already committed to the maintenance of the State.

According to this logic, the degree of reported nationhood of Belgium should depend on the linguistic membership of the audience because, presumably, Walloons and Flemings are perceived as having divergent points of view on the issue of separatism. We assessed the validity of this assumption by asking our participants to provide an estimation of the proportion of members of each linguistic group who were favorable to separatism. Although the estimations were largely inflated, the percentage of Flemings perceived as favorable to this prospect was considerably higher than the percentage of Walloons (\(M = 45.67, \ SD = 23.47\) for Flemings and \(M = 27.42, \ SD = 16.47\) for Walloons).

If Flemings need more to be convinced than Walloons, High Unitarists should describe Belgium more as a nation when addressing the former than the latter. In addition, if discourse on nationhood is used by Unitarists in order to eradicate the threats that bear upon the future of the State, they should employ it more forcefully when these threats are salient. For them, separation is such a threat. Therefore we expected that, among High Unitarists, the salience of separation would amplify the impact of the group membership of the audience upon reported perceptions of nationhood.

On the other hand, there is no particular reason for Low Unitarists to use such a strategy: they have no reason to mobilize the audience into protecting the state since they do not attach much value to its persistence. In the face of threats to social identity, Low Identifiers are known to rely on interpersonal strategies (Doosje & Ellemers, 1997; Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999). In the area of communicative behavior, substantial evidence suggests that one of the most popular interpersonal strategies consists in accommodating to the audience’s point of view by converging with it (Ellemers, Barreto, & Spears, 1998; Higgins & Rholes, 1982; McCann & Higgins, 1992; Postmes, Spears, Branscombe, & Smith, 1999). Low Unitarists may therefore describe their group more as a nation when addressing French speakers, who presumably believe it, than Flemings, who do not. In addition, if the use of such a strategy is a response to a threat on their social identity posed by separatism, this trend should be stronger when the possibility of separation is salient than when it is not.

These predictions were upheld (see Table 1). In fact, the group membership of the audience had the predicted effect on reported perceptions of nationhood only when the possible separation was mentioned. When it was not, no reliable effect of this variable was observed.

7 The difference was reliable in all conditions
Table 1 Mean perception of Belgium as a nation as a function of the Group Membership of the Audience, the Salience of the possibility of separation and the level of Unitarism.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Salience</th>
<th>Low Unitarism</th>
<th>High Unitarism</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No salience</td>
<td>Salience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flemish audience</td>
<td>3.07, SD = 0.64</td>
<td>2.85, SD = 0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French speaking audience</td>
<td>2.88, SD = 0.66</td>
<td>3.46, SD = 0.96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Statements of national Identification in the face of separatism

In this study we were not only interested in descriptions of nationhood but also in statements of identification in the context of separatism. Like descriptions of nationhood, identification can be seen as a statement, as a speech act, rather than simply as a mental construct. In a recent chapter, Ellemers, Barreto and Spears (1999) suggested that statements of identification could be seen as a way of asserting how the communicator wished to be defined by the audience. Expressing one’s identification to a social category influences the audience into accepting a particular form of self-definition. This desire to influence the audience should be especially strong when there is a conflict between communicator and audience on what constitutes the appropriate categorization. This is often the case for immigrants: both their membership in the host Nation and their membership in their ancestors’ Nation can be matters of dispute (Barreto, Spears, Ellemers, & Shahinper, 1999). Such conflicts are inherent to separatism as well. Separatist groups usually assert their own regional identity and they contest the superordinate identity. Corsicans may claim that they are not French and Scots that they are not British. The Catalan leader Jordi Pujol refers to the Spanish authorities as ‘Castillans’ (Nguyen, 1998). Unitarists on the other hand wish to preserve the superordinate level because this is the level that defines, and legitimizes, the State. For them, it is therefore important to assert this level at the expense of the subordinate one. According to the logic used earlier, they should particularly do so when addressing those who are perceived as rejecting this categorization, in our case the Flemings. Therefore, among High Unitarists, identification to Belgium should be stronger and identification to the linguistic group (French speaking) weaker when addressing Flemings than Walloons. If statements of national identification are geared at protecting the State, Low Unitarists should not make them. If they use an interpersonal strategy, they may conform to their audience’s point of view by defining themselves in terms of the dimension this audience presumably considers most appropriate: the linguistic one when addressing Flemings and the national one when addressing French speakers. For reasons similar to those stated above, this pattern should be amplified when the possibility of separatism is made salient.
To test these predictions, we included two items in the questionnaire:

1. 'Being Belgian plays a role in the way I define myself.'
2. 'Being French speaking plays a role in the way I define myself.'

We computed a score measuring the preference for linguistic over national identification⁸ and examined how this score was affected by the three independent variables.

Table 2 Mean preference for self-definition as a Belgian rather than as a French speaker as a function of the Group Membership of the audience and the level of Unitarism.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unitarism</th>
<th>Low Unitarists</th>
<th>High Unitarists</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audience</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flemish</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>1.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French speaking</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>1.47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Higher scores (min.=−6, max.=6) reflect preferences for linguistic over national identification. Scores were collapsed across salience because of the absence of effect of this variable.

Support for the hypotheses was mixed (see Table 2). High Unitarists reported a preference for linguistic identification over national identification when their audience was French speaking. However, when they addressed Flemings, this preference disappeared. For them, both linguistic and national identification seem relevant, but when addressing Flemings, it is more crucial to convince them of the importance of the national rather than the linguistic level, since they are perceived as already attaching value to the linguistic level.

Low Unitarists displayed the reverse tendency but the contrast was not reliable. This may be due in part to the fact that, when pursuing an interpersonal strategy, it may be important to stress one's similarities with the audience: this implies describing oneself as a Belgian rather than as a French speaker to a Flemish audience. Contradictory strategies may therefore have cancelled the influence of the audience's group membership. In addition, no effect of the salience of separatism was observed.

Conclusion

Overall, these results lend support to the idea that descriptions of group related attitudes and perceptions can be strategically manipulated as a function of the agendas of the communicators (Ellemers, Barreto, & Spears, 1998; Klein & Azzi, 1999; Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995). This conclusion deserves a few comments:

⁸ This score was equal to the difference between the rating of statement 2 and the rating of statement 1 as applying to the Self.
First, the present study constitutes an addition to earlier work on identity management strategies. Several authors (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Doosje & Ellemers, 1997) have suggested that high identifiers are more likely to use collective strategies when their group is under threat while low identifiers are more likely to use individual strategies. This is indeed what we observe, if we assume that unitarism depends on a form of group identification. However, these authors only studied identity management strategies through their manifestations at an intra-individual levels, e.g. through group members’ perception of the group, identification, or self-stereotyping. Yet these strategies need not only consist in the modification of a representation of the group nor of oneself as a group member. They may also rely on influences on others’ representations of those objects. Such modifications are not an end in themselves: they constitute means of mobilizing the audience into protecting the group. In this respect, the communication of group norms can be seen as an identity management strategy. The role of communication in identity management should not be underestimated: often, the quest for a positive social identity is (in) vain unless group members collaborate on the improvement of the group’s status. Obviously, effective collaboration demands communication.

In addition, we would like to suggest that communication is especially important when one considers descriptions of groups and stereotypes. There is a growing literature on the perception of social groups, especially on the concept of entitativity, which has gained a renewed popularity. Yet in most cases, it is impossible to perceive a group in its totality. Descriptions of a group rarely depend on a direct perception of it. They result from social influence. Work inspired by Self-Categorization Theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) shows that people are influenced by group norms regarding the nature of the group, like targets in persuasion studies (Haslam, 1997). If there are targets, there must also be sources of influence. The present study suggests that indeed, group members also actively try to persuade others of what they regard as the adequate norm. It would be a valuable addition to consider individuals not only as targets but also as sources of influence. This would add a dynamic component to this theory, an aspect that is lacking.

Finally, we would like to highlight the convergence between the present study and the SIDE model (Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995). One of the central contentions of the model is that the expression of group norms is a function of both the salience of a particular identity (‘Cognitive SIDE’) and of the extent to which the context enables the communicator to express such norms (‘Strategic SIDE’). Our study suggests indeed that a cognitive analysis is insufficient. It is unlikely that the Belgian identity was more salient when the audience was Flemish than French speaking. Moreover, it extends the strategic analysis. This analysis had been restricted to the impact of identifiability to a powerful out-group on the expression of group norms (Reicher & Levine, 1994a, b) and on the way visibility to the in-group affected its influence (Reicher, Levine, & Gordijn, 1998). Strategic behavior was seen as depending on a desire to escape punishment by this out-group: one expresses the group norm only if

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9 The Flemings were constantly referred to in the questionnaires. Therefore, it would be very surprising if this comparison group was only salient when the audience belonged to it.
the fear of sanction can be overcome by either anonymity or support from other ingroup members. However, even if group membership is salient and if being anonymous conters the power to express group norms, one does not necessarily perform this behavior with great ardour. If it does not contribute to social identity, nor to other motives, there is no reason for group members to express group norms. To understand this expression, one needs to study the communicational context and examine how the expression of specific norms in such a context can be beneficial to the social identity of the communicator. The present contribution constitutes a step in this direction.

References

Connor, W. (1978). A Nation is a Nation, is a Nation is an Ethnic Group, is a...’. Ethnic and Racial Studies, 1, 379-388.


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