

The political struggle for power in and for the main Belgian towns during the period 1830-1848

by E. WITTE,

Dr. Hist. ; senior assistant at the State University, Ghent.

★

In the field of Belgian economic and social history, one can point out examples of serious attempts, made to extract the science of history from its present subordinate state through scientification and closer interdisciplinary collaboration with other human sciences. Until now, the description of Belgian political history lagged behind this development. Most political historical studies ignore the attainments of political science.

Yet in the development of the discipline of history, no single barrier stands in the way of the interdisciplinary course. On the contrary, there is no reason why the description of political history should remain doomed by paying attention only to the particular and the unique, without any regard for its recurrence in human political behaviour.

In the study "Political struggle for power in and for the main Belgian towns, 1830-1848" (1), we have tried to illustrate that the political events, which took place in Belgium in the 19th century, can be described and explained from a general aspect which begins from the principle that the phenomenon of power is central in politics, not as an end in itself but as means through which political movements could achieve specific aims. Attempts have been made to demonstrate that Belgian political history offers the possibility to test forms and theories regarding the struggle for power by means of concrete factual material and in this way, is thus able to provide a certain contribution towards political science.

(1) Els WITTE, *Politieke machtsstrijd in en om de voornaamste Belgische steden, 1830-1848*, Brussels, 1973, 2 volumes, 491 pp. and 116 pp., Pro Civitate, Historical Editions, series in-8°, no. 37.

This is a starting-point which stamps the different aspects of this work. First of all, it has determined the choice of an observed period. We selected precisely that period of Belgian history which was especially interesting because of its political structural changes.

The period of 18 years, from August 1830 to August-September 1848, is indeed extremely interesting from that standpoint. One regime was overthrown and another took its place. One party, namely the Catholic Party, completely dominated the political scene during the first years until the 1840's brought a total reversal of the situation, to the advantage of the anti-clerical opposition. This turn-about went hand in hand with a growth of the minority radical-socialist movement, an advance which subsided completely within a few months, so much so that in August 1848 the radical party had completely disappeared from the political scene. Accordingly this was a fertile period of political events. In our study of these years three fundamental questions emerge, namely: 1° the dispute between the revolutionaries and the counter-revolutionaries; 2° the dispute between the clericals and the anti-clericals; 3° the dispute between the social-radicals and the social-conservatives. How and why did the change of power in 1830 come about? In what way did the Belgian revolutionaries consolidate their power and what precisely was the process which brought the downfall of the counter-revolutionaries? These questions arose in connection with the first dispute. In the second, more important questions need to be resolved: seventeen years were all the anti-clerical party, initially totally insignificant in political affairs, needed to assert itself as the majority party. How must we analyse and explain this accession to power? Finally, the third dispute lead us to investigate the significance of the subsequent decline: how did a totally minor radical movement, which attained within a few years the magnitude of a formidable structure at the heart of the anti-clerical party, subsequently fall into decline?

The object of our study is not the Belgian state but rather the towns. Why? Because from certain angles politics at town level opens up more interesting prospects than politics on a national scale. The influence of the rural areas noticeably check political evolution in the country as a whole. New elements often emerge in the towns or urban agglomerations and develop much more easily there. The spread of new ideas and the organisation of a movement are more easily accomplished there than in rural areas where more firmly entrenched conservative tendencies often constitute a handicap to any progressive action. Thus politics at town level often assume more determined forms, the processes whereby classes, factions and indeed parties are formed develop more rapidly

and reveal themselves more clearly there. This is why the town as an area of study provides extremely interesting clues when we wish to study such reversals. In addition, the study of political evolution at town level enables us to formulate theories and to make comparisons between town and state.

Bearing this principle in mind, it went without saying that we could not limit our study to just a few towns. If we wished to investigate more or less general theories, we had to increase our examples. The 20 most important towns at the time, namely those numbering more than 12,000 inhabitants, have been selected as the object of study.

What are the results of this investigation ?

The analysis of the processes which brought a change in power, following the revolution of 1830, allowed the examination of the hypothesis according to which a seizure of power by revolutionaries is a function of the seeds of dissolution contained in the system in operation before the revolution. In other words, the accession of revolutionaries to power depends on the one hand on the degree of erosion of power (on the spot) and on the other hand, on the presence of rebel forces outside the power machine. The process was completely different in the case of towns where the authorities demonstrated proof of loyalty towards the government and where hardly any really organized opposition force existed, or, on the contrary, in the case of towns where the instrument of government was shaken and where well-organized revolutionary forces were ready to seize power. In this last case the seizure of power proper was preceded by a well-conducted preparatory stage during which the revolutionary leaders succeeded in penetrating the existing institutions of power. At this stage they had no great difficulty in undermining more effectively the powers that be : the local authorities were forced to commit acts of rebellion and the extent of their power was gradually reduced to nothing.

Consequently it is not surprising that these towns should spontaneously recognize the Provisional Government as soon as the change of power at national level was effected. Things were completely different in the towns in which the established set-up had escaped revolutionary action and had remained intact. In these towns, the preparatory stage did not materialize and no concession whatsoever was made to forces of revolution. On the contrary, the old authority tried to maintain itself until the last minute and far from being spontaneous, its adhesion to the government only came about much later, after severe external pressure. To sum up, the processes of acquiring power were essentially a

function of the extent of the breakdown of the municipal system under revolutionary action.

As far as the second problem is concerned, that is the consolidation of revolutionary power, we have concluded that it was, in reality, a long and difficult process. Quite difficult, since in 1831 it was barely complete in 4 of 20 towns. On the other hand, the counter-revolutionaries, i.e. those who were against the independence and in favour of the Dutch Orange dynasty, were keeping a majority position in 55 % of the cases and reinforced it appreciably during the 1830's.

This slowish development is partially explained by the bourgeois and semi-democratic character of the revolution: indeed, in order to strengthen their power the revolutionaries had to contest elections in which only the property-qualified bourgeoisie took part. This necessity deprived them of the support of their main followers, the socially inferior classes, and they had to seek support principally from the urban bourgeoisie, the section of the population which formed most of the personnel of the Orangist opposition. And if we add that the make-up of this counter-revolutionary opposition was quite well organized — it created electoral associations, took part in electoral coalitions when this proved opportune and could call upon various ingenious tactics — we can then understand why the consolidation of revolutionary power took so long and was so difficult.

However, the revolutionaries finished by establishing their power. The eviction of the counter-revolutionary Orangists in 1838 after the signing of the 24 Articles through which independence became an irreversible fact, played a large part in this.

But this is not the only reason which led to the fall of the Orangists. The process which ended in their being expelled also allows us to investigate certain general hypotheses. Thus, it was clearly proved that any internal division makes for an overthrow of power: the fate of Orangism was sealed from the day when in a particular town the partisans of an abstentionist policy and a group of activists opposed each other. On the other hand we have also been able to examine the argument according to which a coalition between two partners of unequal strength develops towards a merger which clearly benefits the stronger party: as their forces gradually dwindled, the anti-clerical Orangists were absorbed by the much more powerful anti-clerical revolutionary party, a process completed by the beginning of the 1840's.

The study of the second dispute, between clericals and anti-clerical liberals, offered equally interesting prospects from the political point of view. Our object was, as we have said, to see how the process of accession to power develops. This phenomenon assumed spectacular pro-

portions, for in the 17 years, the anti-clericals, with only a negligible minority at their disposal in the beginning, established an important party, holding an absolute majority in three quarters of the towns studied. An analysis of this accession-to-power process enables us to examine in a convincing manner the frustration-aggression theory according to which a constitution of power only appears in circumstances of conflict. A certain group of persons feels itself at a disadvantage within the existing structures and the consensus of opinion towards the established system deteriorates more and more until the appearance of an open conflict. At the heart of this group there emerge forces which seek to practice an organized opposition. During this process the appearance of leaders plays a determining rôle. This organized opposition involves conflicts and finally the struggle for power is enacted until the eviction of the opponents. The fact that in a parliamentary democracy this political struggle takes place essentially at election and campaign time, which are so many determining stages in any constitution of power, is well in line with this theory. Indeed, we can distinguish during the period under study, a dominant class and a group for whom this domination was vexations. Thanks to the revolution, the clericals had gained power and had succeeded in keeping the anti-clerics in the background. With the co-operation of the church as a party machine, with the help of the King and of a favourable electoral law they succeeded in holding the reins of government during the whole of this period.

At town-level the same initial situation is to be found: in the towns where the change of regime took place after 1830, the catholics found themselves in a majority in the municipal council immediately after the revolution; on the other hand where the change in regime was progressive, the extension of their strength coincided with the dismantling of the counter-revolutionary forces. In other words, during the period followed 1830, the liberals were entirely in a minority. This supremacy of the clericals obviously severely hampered the anti-clericals in achieving their objectives. Moreover there is no lack of proof that the clericals exercised power with considerable vigour. Numerous political facts likewise demonstrate that they hardly showed any tactical moderation and thus exacerbated the anti-clericals' feeling of frustration. The undisguised attack on the liberal commune administration by means of the bias of the communal "reactionary" laws of 1842 is a typical example.

But the second premise also seems to have been proved: having acquired the conviction that they were being relegated to the second rank, the anti-clericals began to organize themselves. A party machine, functioning in a well-ordered way was successfully established from 1838 onwards. Its organisation was done astonishingly quickly. Transforming

a political movement without any organization into a modern and permanent party, within the space of 10 years or so was a considerable task, at a time when there was a general growth in the size of parties. The explanation of this phenomenon must be sought from two sides at once. Firstly, the presence of leaders possessing organizing skills who were not afraid of joining battle. And in this context mention must be made of the exceptional rôle played by Verhaegen. This man embodied all the talents of the dynamic leader and became a model for all the leaders of the party, who in the course of the 1830's and 40's were able to shake the inertia of the liberal electorate and herd the liberal forces in their towns into a local party.

In the second place, this phenomenon is explained by the presence of an already existing organization which served as the foundation of the anti-clerical party machine, namely Freemasonry. Without fear of exaggeration, we can claim that the organization of the liberal party would not have been what it was in 1847 without action from the Lodges and it is more than probable that it would not at that moment have developed beyond the initial stage. The conclusions we have been able to draw leave no doubt on this score : the towns in which masonic Lodges existed were clearly better organized — they had the first electoral committees and the first electoral associations and it was in these towns that the first local branches of the party were created.

This was in fact a perfectly normal development since, thanks to the external action of their members, the Lodges were at the basis of these forms of organization. It is thus logical that we have been able to discern, in the towns where no Lodges existed, quite a lag which was only made up in 1846 following the Liberal Congress. However, even in these towns, such an evolution can only be explained by the influence of Freemasonry. Here also the Masons indirectly laid the foundations of the local parties ; among others the impulse given on several occasions by the "Alliance", founded by the Lodges of Brussels. To sum up, thanks to the assumption of a political aspect by the Freemasons, the Liberal Party was able to rely on a already existing organization and to establish within a relatively short time the party machine.

This analysis has also strikingly demonstrated that the organizing capacity of a political movement was well and truly the indispensable condition for the establishing of power. Succeeding elections proved this : when the anti-clericals were busy organizing themselves the result was a certain victory ; but in a town where they failed to get organized, success at the polls eluded them automatically. The final result of 1847 was convincing : in all towns

where gains were recorded there was an organized liberal party, whereas the three towns not yet at this stage maintained the status quo.

The fact that the Catholics had to give way on the question of organization clearly proves that the liberal organizations were perfectly adapted to the urban electorate. Strictly speaking there was no fundamental difference between the two organizations; similarly among the anti-clericals there was inevitably a concentration of power into the hands of small independent groups, powerful leaders who imposed their will on the electors and relegated them to a passive rôle. But their method of procedure was much better adapted to the mentality of the townspeople than the clericals' method. The catholic leaders employed methods which caused the electors to feel only too clearly that they were regarded as still under tutelage. Religious pressures and episcopal authority held a grip on the catholic electors in the rural areas but had much less influence over the more independent town dwellers. Moreover, the liberals were always fully conscious of this. That is why, when their party was formed, they adopted a democratic façade and gave the elector the impression that he had a say in things. Taking all these factors into consideration, it is not surprising that the political constellation suffered a complete upset during these few years.

The third and last dispute finally brought us face to face with a totally specific process of the establishment of power: indeed a minority political group with a precisely defined programme successfully seized power from within the heart of a much more powerful party which was still in its infancy. There was on the one hand a very small group of radicals, who, dissatisfied with the existing regime in which different categories of citizens were discriminated against, wished to see a more democratic and social conception of society recognized. Conscious of the fact that they were in an inferior position and could not enlarge their party sufficiently, they sought to ally themselves to a much more important political body: the anti-clericals. On the other hand there was the fast-rising liberal party whose members paraded social-conservative opinions but which, still in its infancy, consented to an alliance with anti-clericals of diverging ideas. Anti-clericalism was the only common denominator in these two political bodies, who elsewhere were in opposition on social questions.

How can this radicals' accession to power be explained? Their strategy was based on three principles: first the need to get organized felt by an up-and-coming political movement. Indeed the anti-clericals urgently needed experienced organizers and were fully aware of the rôle played by the fighting wing in a party in the making. The radicals were able to satisfy these two needs: they thus made their leaders available

to the anti-clericals and provided the indispensable militants. Thereby did they become quite quickly an essential nucleus at the heart of the liberal party. A minority within a group is in a position, however, to influence the group as a whole and even able to dominate it if willing to exert itself. Therein lies the second principle which guided the radicals in strengthening their power. They set about quickly becoming an indispensable nucleus, capable of imposing its point of view. By recruiting their followers from among the activists and by forming a powerful wing within the party, the radicals succeeded in hoisting themselves to its higher reaches and thus directly participating in decision-making. Finally, they became aware of the fact that there was no great danger in allowing a latent conflict to develop into an open one when the opponent was in an inferior position. In three towns, a group of conservative liberals, aware of which turn events were taking, decided to break the coalition. This break did not prove a serious disadvantage to the radicals for they were able to continue their work by relying on what had been achieved during the years before. As an autonomous body they thus continued to extend their power.

But a part whose internal cohesion was not great and which could not count upon a large following was in the precarious situation whereby the so skilfully erected edifice was to collapse at the first push, however slight. The revolutionary events of February 1848 gave the "coup de grâce" to the radical party. The extremely skilful tactical attitude of the conservative-liberal government at this time of crisis, and the coalition concluded between the clericals and the anti-clericals were fatal blows to the radicals. The position of strength they had managed to attain proved to be short lasting. Moreover, how could it be otherwise since the basic conditions necessary to any accession to power had disappeared?

There lie the main outlines of the results of the verification of hypotheses about the processes of acquisition of power. The collected materials also enabled us to provide concrete picture of other theses. A first thesis could be formulated as follows: a democracy, based on the principle of elected representation, is not able to act without party organisation, not even when this régime is still in its initial phase.

We definitely do not wish to assert that this study has proved that already in the period 1830-1848, organized and mature parties existed nationally. But what we wish to stress is that, those who could describe the period 1830-1846 as a partyless period are wrong and that, on the contrary, as soon as the régime began to function and elections took place, the local formation of parties commenced. Of course, it was

still a period of party-growth and one did not speak about institutionalization; but that did not alter the fact that these first organisations already showed a similarity with real, modern party formations in essential points.

By way of illustration, let us look closely at the different aspects of all those parties: revolutionary, Orangist, clerical and anti-clerical electoral organisations. How do they appear? All these organisations accomplished those tasks, which face any political party. At that time they were the promoters and the channels of political action, because, first of all, they were engaged in recruiting candidates by means of polls. It is of less importance that these preparatory meetings had not always a broad basis — participation in the modern poll is not always important. Of importance was the fact that these committees and associations were actively involved in listing. A second task, accomplished by the organisations and through which they may be entitled party formations, is that they channelled the votes of the electors in the direction of their candidates. This took place not only by the introduction of influential militants acting as agents in the campaigns, but also by the organizational use of the party press. The very close financial and personal ties existing between editors and party formations, surely justifies the use of the word "party press". We do not wish to assert however that all newspapers, published during the period 1830-1848, were tied to parties. What we wish to stress is that each political organisation already had at its disposal one or more organs of the press. Beyond dispute, these party papers played their designed rôle during propaganda campaigns. Though this propaganda underwent an important evolution during the period of party growth, the sober-minded and the rather calm campaigns of the initial years had to yield to sterner measures and focused on personal struggle in the years 1845-1847. Yet, one aspect remained still the same: the main purpose of the party organs was to bring the will of the electors into line with that of the party leaders.

In addition, all political organisations sprang from the disciplinary principle and this is a third characteristic trait of the real party organisations. The efforts of the leaders all pointed in the same direction: preservation of a certain discipline among the electoral body and among the mandataris. No matter whether one looked at the work of the Orangeman Metdepenningen in Ghent, or bishop Van Bommel in Liège, Verhaegen and the radical Jottrand in Brussels, or Felix Bethune in Courtrai, they were all working for the subordination of their followers. They usually succeeded in their attempt. In a word, although in the matter of structure, these first political organisations still presented some specific variations from modern parties, nevertheless it can be said without

doubt that they operated in a similar way. Thus, nothing prevents our postulating that the formation of political parties is closely linked to and even results from the spreading of a parliamentary democracy.

Let us for a while dwell on the phenomenon "party formation", because the collected factual material had also something to say about this. It showed that the presence of existing organisations upon which party formation could still build, was of the utmost importance for the construction of a party machinery. In other words, nowhere have we found evidence that the grouping of some leading citizens in a committee was sufficient to lead to a party formation. Hence we found Duverger's thesis on the same subject invalid (2). Always and everywhere, we found that already existing organisations were the bases. This was not only in view of the patriotic electoral associations of 1830 which went straight back to the revolutionary organizations which achieved the delegation of power, but also the phenomenon was very acute where freemasonry and church were concerned. Right from the beginning, the clerical party could rely on the bureaucratized institution of the Church, with its hierarchy, its discipline and its leaders, in casu the bishops and deans, who provided the party with an immense organizational lead over their opponents. But the quick organising success of the anti-clericals was only possible because of the political orientation of the Belgian Freemasonry. Is not the foundation of new lodges with the purpose of starting party formations, prime evidence that party formation was quasi impossible without the presence of an existing organisation ?

Indeed the part played by the lodges of Ghent in the Orangist movement, does not deviate from this pattern. Neither can we overlook the rôle of public institutions, as pillars of party formation during the period in which the spoil system was rampant. We found how ministers and functionaries were made use of to the prosperity of the catholic party formation. But even when these different associations and institutions, for one reason or another, were not able to exert influence — a phenomenon which seldom if ever happened — even then there were other associations which, more or less, took on the function of party formers, no matter whether it was a debating club or one of the other associations.

In short, everywhere an existing association backed the party formation, not that these associations could always be indentified 100 % with the party, but the germs of the political organisations have to be sought in them, because the impulse originated with them. In other words, the

(2) M. DUVERGER. *Les partis politiques*. Paris, 1954, p. 2 et ss.

facts provide evidence of the thesis that the presence and action of an existing association were the conditions of a successful party formation.

Finally, Michels' theory is the last one, for which the facts produced verification material. The validity of his universally accepted "iron law of organisation" has been verified in accordance with data from this period of party growth and of a half-grown parliamentary régime. Let us call to mind his "law": "democracy means influence of the masses; the influence of the masses implies organisation; organisation necessitates leadership; leadership implies subordination, and the subordination of the masses to group leaders is called oligarchy" (3). Even when the concept "masses" used by Michels, does not mean the same in the period which we studied — (ours only concerned a limited group of electors qualified by their property assessment and not the electorate based on general suffrage) — nevertheless it may be asserted that the same tendency can be perceived. We too constantly experienced, that political leaders, by means of their organizing activities, became indispensable to their political co-religionists. By this means they captured the party seat which they consolidated through skilful meeting techniques, the art of manipulation and a demagogic oratorical talent. After a while they could rule subordinates like real dictators. It is not difficult to find examples. The image of the Orangist Metdepenningen in Ghent was very representative. His obtrusiveness and that of his close collaborators in the lodges and in the electorate of Ghent were evidence of Michels' thesis.

But the catholic camp also gave numerous examples. We shall only mention some of the most spectacular: it is noticeable how the Van Bommel-committee at Liège disguised a sheer authoritarian action behind the façade of "democratic" meetings. The catholic top-group "Association secrète" (secret Association) of Brussels was similarly zealous.

The same features are also to be seen in the small group of Liberals of Delfosse and Frère-Orban from Liège. Manipulation of the electoral law for example, proved that the small group of leaders were out for sole power in the 1830's. This phenomenon was to become more distinct during the 1840's. Otherwise, how could the growth of the radical minority in the bosom of the anti-clerical party be interpreted, unless in the light of this same principle? Just think, for example, about the process of acquiring power displayed by radical freemasons within the lodges "Les Philadelphes" of Verviers.

(3) R. MICHELIS, *Democratie en organisatie*. Een klassieke theorie, ingeleid door J.A.A. Van Doorn (*Democracy and organisation*. A classical theory, with preface by J.A.A. Van Doorn). Rotterdam, 1969, p. 17.

Let us close this series of proofs with the most convincing one : the politicizing action of Verhaegen in the Belgian Freemasonry. He too made himself indispensable in this association, succeeded in reaching the top, surrounded himself with members who supported him. Thus reaching a majority, he indoctrinated the members, thanks to his oratorical talent, and after a few years so consolidated his position of power in the lodges, that he could realize his plans. The freemasons submitted to the will of Verhaegen and his partners. In short, there is no doubt that Michels' theory also applied to the Belgian party organisations during the period 1830-1848.

Besides these problems of organisation and power, it was also the purpose of this study to distil some hypotheses concerning the relation of town and country. What were our conclusions ? It has been confirmed that town politics provided interesting study material. From the facts it was deduced that new political movements developed via the towns. In other words, political configuration of the town was ahead of the rural one. Does it need to be stressed that this was clear in the instance of anti-clericalism during this period ? The words of the liberal leader Devaux are self-evident : "Si les 20 principales villes sont animées du même esprit, vous aurez beau faire, cet esprit finira par envahir le gouvernement" (4) ; not without truth, he predicted that in 1842. And the rise of radicalism also confirms the thesis : where the movement did not find an echo in the national representation, it became evident in the towns. With the help of material dealing with the advance of other new political movements, it is necessary, of course, to examine if this thesis generally is valid. This does not prevent us from seeking an explanation of this phenomenon which emerged in a striking manner during the period we studied. Have we not seen that political organisation was a necessary precondition for reaching political power ? And where could the power of organisation reach complete development, unless in the densely populated town agglomeration ? Hence, it is normal that towns are ahead of the countryside. And because the national political configuration is made of both components (town and countryside), the town's influence can be weakened by the vote of the rural electorate. This is a brake which is absent in mere town politics : new tendencies can have a free run and hence it is possible that political configuration of the town is ahead of the national one. This situation has, of course, direct results in the matter of the exercise of power. On the level of local management, objectives will be reached, which are not possible on a national level. Just think of the

(4) If the same spirit breathes through the 20 main towns, whatever is done, this spirit will finally obtrude on the government.

educational statemanship which was conducted by the anti-clerical councils during our period. The towns already knew the struggle for schools.

Secondly, this situation also means that a new political party, which is still isolated from the power of state, yet already in a position of authority at town level, will want to use this power on a national level. The town councils, which it dominated, will be absorbed and used as pressure groups. The period which we studied has provided adequate verification material for this. The mass actions of petition — those pro or contra the separation with the Netherlands, as well as those of the liberal councils against the policy of catholic governments — could all be considered in the light of that principle. The individual actions of the towns were also proofs. Whether we were examining the conflict between liberals and catholics in Ghent, Liège, Brussels or Louvain, during that period, the same pattern always arose. Pressure was brought to bear on the catholic government. That such tactics very often gained positive results, has been proved by the dénouement of those crises. Some mass petitionary actions seemed not at all ineffective.

To sum up, it seems to be proved in a certain way, that in this phenomenon — such as is the case of other political phenomena which we have tried to explain — there is enough material to demonstrate that it is worthwhile to use the political history of Belgium in the 19th century, as verification material for these hypotheses.

