



Maarten Van Ginderachter. *The Everyday Nationalism of Workers: A Social History of Modern Belgium.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019. 280 pp. \$30.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-5036-0969-3.

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Nationalism offers to working-class people more than a bit part in political dramas staged by manipulative elites or a pretext for performing inherited parochialism and bigotry. The nationalism of ordinary people has, in fact, sometimes been a key ingredient in the expansion of democratic and progressive politics in the modern era. If this proposition remains unfashionable in contemporary media coverage of nationalist politics, it is well established among students of anticolonial movements in the Global South, and is making inroads in the scholarship on modern Europe. Maarten Van Ginderachter's admirable monograph contributes to this discussion by examining the important case of the Belgian Workers' Party (BWP) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Over a brisk 173 pages of body text, Van Ginderachter gives a penetrating account of the attitudes of Flemish and Walloon workers toward the fragile Belgian national project and toward their respective and increasingly politicized ethnic identities.

The book's unusual structure—a short introduction followed by a lengthy framing chapter that sets the stage for two parts, each composed of a number of short chapters—reflects the author's approach to nationalism. This can be summed up as, first, an elite-driven tool aimed at state building or the consolidation of a state-focused reformist

political party (the BWP); and, second, as a set of symbols, tropes, and assumptions with which ordinary working-class people engage productively and autonomously, but might just as often choose to ignore. Chapter 1 introduces the peculiarly Belgian social-political terrain on which the BWP fought its campaigns for workers' political and economic rights after its founding in 1885. In spite of Belgium's precocious industrialization, its ruling elites' "hyperliberal ideology" (p. 29) set limits on the state's willingness to interfere in the lives of its citizens. Primary schooling, social protection legislation, and the military all remained in parlous states. Compared with France and Germany, the regime's attempt to drum up patriotism through colonial adventures was decidedly muted. Veering from the nineteenth-century western European model of homogenizing state-driven nationalization, Belgium largely accepted its internal social-political divisions—between liberals and Catholics, and between both of these and socialists—through consociationalism, or state-sponsored institutionalization of the mutually hostile societal "pillars."

This is not to say that there were no top-down efforts to turn workers into Belgians. Yet, as part 1 illustrates, Belgium's modest "trickle-down nationalism" was as likely to emanate from the BWP's leadership as it was from the reliably alternating liberal and Catholic governments. Indeed, the

main story of the five chapters that make up part 1 is the BWP's failure, despite its nearly hegemonic authority among working-class Belgians, to inculcate the "oppositional patriotism" (pp. 34, 38, 113) that it constructed as an alternative to capital-friendly liberalism and clericalism. While a workers' general strike forced a radical expansion of the franchise in 1893, thus bolstering socialist claims to leadership in a more democratic Belgium, the proportional voting system introduced in 1899 tended to highlight ethnic cleavages between industrial Francophone Wallonia and the more rural Catholic Flanders (chapter 2). The BWP's efforts to insert revolution back into commemorations of the 1830 establishment of Belgium likewise ran aground on Flemish workers' indifference and the bourgeoisie's invention of new holidays (chapter 3). Meanwhile, the antiquated Belgian army, with its lottery system and aristocratic officer corps, was poorly equipped to become a "school of the nation" (chapter 4); universal conscription was only introduced in 1913. The BWP's antimilitarism perhaps fared better than its republicanism, which faded as it became clear that workers largely accepted the monarchy, especially after the 1909 accession of the more endearing Prince Albert and the state's takeover of Leopold II's mismanaged, blood-soaked Congo Free State (chapter 5). The patriotic education promoted by antisocialist parties from the 1890s onward framed workers' worldviews more than the BWP would have liked, but it also produced heterodox and even insurrectionary understandings of Belgian history and identity (chapter 6).

Van Ginderachter argues that the "bells and whistles of nationalism" (p. 106) explored in part 1 can only get us so far in understanding what the nation and ethnicity meant to workers. He is surely right, but some readers might wonder why they had to endure the anticlimax of part 1 in order to arrive at the essence of the book in part 2. Chapters 7-9, addressing ordinary socialist workers' interactions with, and performance of, nation and ethnicity crackle with insight and revealing detail. Chap-

ter 7 discusses the socialist workers' idiosyncratic relationship with the Belgian flag and national anthem. Van Ginderachter interprets instances of Walloon workers demonstratively rejecting the national flag as attacks on clericalism and the bourgeoisie, not as evidence of hostility to nationhood itself. This explains why the Hainaut region's short-lived splinter party Parti socialiste republicain (1887-89) flew the French republican flag, and why workers boisterously torched the Belgian tricolor at Charleroi in 1898. As the BWP promoted its oppositional patriotism, the rank and file's willful *Eigen-Sinn*—Alf Lütke's term for "a kind of stubborn self-reliance directed against bourgeois norms" (p. 59) in the author's gloss—brought forth iconoclastic behavior.

So what did the everyday nationalism of workers in Belgium look like? Chapters 8-9 answer this question by exploiting a highly original source: "propaganda pence," the short messages that workers wrote for publication in a special section of the Ghent socialist newspaper *Vooruit* for a nominal fee in support of the party. These "proletarian tweets" dealt with any subject the writer felt like talking about, from politics to relationships to vulgar jokes. The author has analyzed a sample of almost thirty thousand of them written between 1887 and 1900. A paltry "305 tweets referred in some way to nation, language, or ethnicity" (p. 141), yet Van Ginderachter does not see this as a reflection of widespread "national indifference"—a term that scholars of the Habsburg Monarchy have recently found useful to describe the attitudes of ordinary people to nationalism. Rather, he shows that for Ghent's Flemish working class, Flemish language and history figured as almost uniformly positive but usually taken-for-granted signifiers of a "banal nationalism" (Michael Billig's term); Belgian nationhood appeared in far fewer tweets, and usually as the object of scorn or ridicule. The rise in the early twentieth century of an outspokenly Catholic Flamingant movement sapped some of the workers' enthusiasm for Flemish symbols that they had previously associated

with labor militancy, such as the “Flemish Lion” song. Yet Flemishness remained “available to workers and could indeed be activated in certain circumstances” (p. 161).

Van Ginderachter’s analysis of working-class nationalism is perhaps unmatched in its subtlety and nuance. This book is the fruit of many years of painstaking research and deep reflection. But it is sometimes unclear what problem is being explained. While fin-de-siècle Belgian nationalism had minimal purchase among the working classes, ethnic separatism did not tear the BWP asunder or pose much of a problem at the state level until after the First World War. As the author relates, consociationalism and a preponderance of monolingual administrative units conspired to keep a lid on the ethnic-national antagonisms that contemporaneously boiled over in Habsburg Austria. For all its theoretical sophistication, *The Everyday Nationalism of Workers* could perhaps have benefited from employing the useful (and to this reviewer’s mind, critical) conceptual distinction that Rogers Brubaker draws between “everyday ethnicity” and “nationalist politics.” By conflating the two, Van Ginderachter’s quarry is difficult to discern, let alone pursue.

What did *not* transpire among the BWP’s rank and file is ultimately as important as what did. Flemish and Walloon workers snubbed bourgeois nationalist projects, but they did not embrace the internationalism trumpeted by their party’s program and the Second Socialist International. Their invocation of French revolutionary or Flemish symbols was couched in a robust “‘inter-nationalism’ that took the existence of separate nations and distinct ethnolinguistic identities for granted” (p. 145). And more often than not, their performances of the nation in daily life implicitly challenged their social betters through mockery, symbolic inversion, and appropriation. Van Ginderachter summons the concepts of *Eigen-Sinn* as well as James C. Scott’s “hidden transcripts” to capture this dynamic, which was at the core of the BWP’s

subculture. Showing that nationalism has been instrumental in the democratic critique of power, and not only in the exercise of exclusivist and antidemocratic power, is among this book’s significant accomplishments. In this way, as in others, the history of fin-de-siècle Europe offers lessons for the present.

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