

## **A TOUCH OF CLASS: THE ERASION OF GROUP-BASED SOCIAL INEQUALITY AS A HEGEMONIC PROCESS IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE**

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### **Abstract**

This paper describes how political discourse, as manifested in the policy statements of two Flemish political parties which assign to themselves the epithet 'social', contributes to the erasion of group-based or class-related forms of social inequality. A brief comparison with the academic defense of 'Third Way' politics (in the work of Anthony Giddens) leads to the suggestion that we are witnessing a hegemonic process.

**Keywords:** Political Discourse, Diversity, Class, Social Inequality, Hegemony.

### **1. Introduction: Diversity and the adjectivization of politics**

Let me begin by saying a few words - repetitively no doubt - about diversity. In order to make sense of plurality, it has to be thought of in terms of parameters of variability, the relative conceptual weight of those parameters, and the interactional space for difference. As we all know, *parameters of variability* are things such as race, ethnicity, language, religion, class, and gender - all of these thoroughly intertwined so that every individual can claim multiple identities. The same set of parameters - with nuances of content - may appear in different places and at different times, but their *relative conceptual weight* is not always the same. In other words, they may have a variable society-structuring impact, at a real-life as well as a discursive level (where these two do not always match). Whether high-weight or low-weight, parameters may differ in the extent to which they allow *interactional space for difference*. In the extreme case, multiple identity may be reduced to one-dimensional identity. Hegemonic social processes may result in a woman always being seen as a woman, or a black person always being seen as a black person, thus severely reducing the space for difference in which they are allowed to move. Such processes are discursively maintained, though they may also be discursively challenged. At the general level of societal functioning and structuring where it makes sense to talk of hegemony, the discourse in question is basically political. Cutting a few corners, we could say that the political system which, in principle, should allow individuals to participate in decision-making in such a way as to maximize interactional space for difference, is called 'democracy.' Democratic political discourse, therefore, should avoid one-dimensionality and distribute

conceptual weight across different parameters of variability.

In an earlier paper on “Democracy and diversity” (Verschuieren 2002), using Flemish politics as my data base, I observed an increased adjectivization of the political landscape. At the highest level of categorization, the complex abstract noun ‘democracy’ is systematically turned into a bipolar adjectival contrast set: Democratic vs. non-democratic. This happens in the world of international politics as well. The discursive consequence is, quite naturally, that defining a party, a system, a process, or a state as ‘democratic’ makes it possible to avoid asking any questions about democratic content, for instance in relation to the way in which diversity is handled. In the Flemish case, for instance, all major political parties, staking out massive chunks of the political landscape in adjectival terms, define themselves explicitly as *Vlaams*, ‘Flemish’, a significant breach of the Gricean maxim of quantity since they are Flemish by definition, Belgian parties having become obsolete. Thus a specific ethnic-linguistic identity is invoked which a significant portion of the population cannot easily identify with. It is not difficult to show that this is linked to the homogeneous reflex that was already described extensively by Blommaert & Verschuieren ten years ago (Blommaert & Verschuieren 1992, 1994, 1998).

In this paper I will focus on a different aspect of this overall discursive and political process. In addition to the definition of a political system (democratic vs. non-democratic) and the identification of a target community (Flemish - but without a non-Flemish counterpart), also aspects of the political program are adjectivized, the favorites being *sociaal* (‘social’), *progressief* (‘progressive’) and various indicators of ‘newness’. First I will concentrate on what being ‘social’ means in the context of Flemish political discourse, in particular in the traditional socialist corner of the political spectrum. Then I will try to lift the discussion out of its regional confinement and place it in a wider international context.

## 2. Being ‘social’: The Flemish case

Let me first explore what being ‘social’ means in the context of Flemish politics. To prepare for this exploration I decided to focus on two parties which have made the adjective *sociaal*, ‘social’, into part of their names. The first one is the **SP.A**, the old socialist party (SP) which is now labelled *Sociaal progressief alternatief* (‘Social progressive alternative’). The second is a recent breakaway from an earlier Flemish nationalist party (the Volksunie or ‘People’s Union’), **Spirit**, which stands for the following string of adjectives: *Sociaal, progressief, internationaal, regionalistisch, integraal-democratisch, toekomstgericht* (‘Social, progressive, international, regionalistic, fully democratic, future-oriented’). The data I used were 222 printed pages of policy statements, collected from the party websites (89 for Spirit, 133 for SP.A).<sup>1</sup>

When discussing diversity in society, one of the basic parameters, in addition to race, ethnicity, language, religion, and gender, is usually social class. When looking into the meaning of being ‘social’, therefore, my first question is concerned with the role, if any, of some form of class-consciousness. The first observations are as follows.

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<sup>1</sup> Collected in March 2002 from the parties’ official websites: <http://www.sp.be> and <http://www.meerspirit.be>.

The notion of ‘class’ (*klasse*) occurs exactly once in the Spirit texts. Moreover, it is not used in a straightforward piece of policy formulation, but in a quote from a party member talking about a variety of urban problems:

- (1) “Een stad moet een mengeling zijn van alle leeftijden, culturen en *klassen*.”  
(italics added)

[A city has to be a mixture of all ages, cultures and classes.]

Thus the notion is still accessible as part of a string that can be produced when parameters of diversity have to be enumerated. But it is not a topic to be discussed in its own right.

The SP.A documents are not too different in that respect. However, a topicalization of the notion of ‘class’ cannot be avoided altogether for the simple reason that it used to be at the core of socialist thought and rhetoric. Its present avoidance, therefore, requires some justification. This is provided in a semi-historical piece, which is the only place where the notion is still used in the complete 133-page corpus. This text fragment (two pages entitled *Optornen tegen uitsluiting en onzekerheid*, ‘Countering exclusion and insecurity’, which is a section of a so-called *koepeltekst* or ‘umbrella text’ describing the general political positioning of the party) is simply aimed at showing - without drawing this conclusion explicitly - that the notion of ‘class’ is no longer useful to describe present-day social processes. Outside of this argument, there isn’t a single occurrence, in spite of lengthy treatments of socio-economic processes and relations. The argument itself, however, is an interesting one. The fragment in question starts with the observation that ‘exploitation’ (*uitbuiting*) and ‘exclusion’ (*uitsluiting*) are completely incompatible with the party’s principles. The key components of the argument, then, containing the only occurrences of ‘class’ (*klasse*), are the following:

- (2) “Arbeiders werden jarenlang brutaal *uitgebuit*. Vandaar hun verzet: als groep, als *klasse*.” (italics added)

[Workers were brutally exploited for many years. Hence their resistance: as a group, as a class.]

- (3) “*Uitsluiting* werkt anders dan de klassieke *uitbuiting* van de arbeiders*klasse*.” (italics added)

[Exclusion is a process different from the classical exploitation of the working class.]

Sentence (2) is followed by the observation that the resistance was successful in this part of the world, though the battle still has to be fought elsewhere (as in the South and in Eastern Europe). New problems, however, are said to arise, in particular a division of society into three parts, a prosperous top third (including those who control the economy), an insecure bottom third (including 6% poor people), and a third in the middle with the ambition to move up but the fear of moving down. While collective action was an effective way of countering the old exploitation, the new problems, amounting to processes of exclusion, cannot be dealt with in that way. The difference between exclusion and

exploitation, first observed in (3), is then explained as follows:

- (4) “Uitsluiting [...] heeft meer met eenzaamheid dan met collectieve strijd te maken. De oorzaken zijn veel diverser: het gaat om scholing, met wie je gaat samenleven, of je een sterke of zwakke gezondheid hebt, of je blank of gekleurd bent. [...]

[...] Uitsluiting is trouwens niet alleen een zaak van de onderkant van de samenleving. Door de onvoorspelbaarheid van het leven kan iedereen erdoor getroffen worden: kwetsbare kinderen, alleenstaanden, weduwen, hoogbejaarden, gescheiden vrouwen, fabrieksarbeiders met veel ervaring waarmee ze elders niet terecht kunnen, oudere bedienden die uitgerangeerd worden, kaderleden die na een overname overbodig worden, kleine zelfstandigen die failliet gaan. Nieuwe risico's - van gekke koeienziekte tot dodelijke kettingbotsingen - maken van het leven soms een loterij. Die wisselvalligheden van het leven kunnen iedereen treffen en kennen lang niet altijd rang of stand. [...].”

[Exclusion [...] is more a matter of loneliness than of collective struggle. The causes are more diverse: they have to do with schooling, whom you share your life with, whether you have a strong or weak health, whether you are white or colored. [...]

[...] Exclusion, by the way, is not only a matter of the bottom of society. As a result of the unpredictability of life everyone can be touched by it: vulnerable children, single people, widows, old people, divorced women, factory workers with a lot of experience which they cannot put to use anywhere else, older employees who are dismissed, executives who have become redundant in a merger, small businessmen going bankrupt. New risks - from mad cow disease to deadly multiple collisions - sometimes turn life into a lottery. The uncertainties of life can hit everyone and do not generally recognize rank or class.[...].”<sup>2</sup>

In other words, ‘exclusion’ means ‘being out of luck’. An urgent question arises, namely: Who does the excluding then? To this, the SP.A texts do not give an answer, though there is a reference to *nefaste maatschappelijke mechanismen* (‘detrimental social mechanisms’) such as the search for immediate profit, uncontrolled competition, pressure on collective services. Thus mechanisms are to blame which can touch people at random, and no one seems to be responsible. Whereas exploitation is a conscious act that can be attributed to specific agents, exclusion is not. This does not mean, still following the SP.A text, that exploitation has disappeared altogether:

- (5) “Uitsluiting betekent niet dat alle uitbuiting verdwenen is. Als we naar het gros van de ontwikkelingslanden, Oost-Europa, de illegale confectieateliers in Brussel of the vrouwenhandel kijken, dan zijn 19de-eeuwse toestanden

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<sup>2</sup> This quotation ends in *rang en stand* which we translate as ‘rank and class’. Though originally based on the classical notion of ‘class’ (Dutch *stand* is a synonym of *klasse*), this is now a collocation that simply refers to social differences of any kind.

nog altijd schering en inslag.”

[Exclusion does not mean that all exploitation has disappeared. If we look at most developing countries, Eastern Europe, the illegal sweatshops in Brussels or trade in women, then 19<sup>th</sup>-century situations are still the order of the day.]

This overt denial of the disappearance of exploitation (with identifiable culprits, though only in two of the examples given) underscores it as an implicit message: Exploitation is located elsewhere, or, if in our midst, in marginal sectors. In other words, a mainstream western society such as ours does not exploit. If people get excluded from wealth, it is their bad luck, though some ‘mechanisms’ can be observed the effects of which we should try to correct.

Given this diagnosis, it is not surprising that ‘socialism’ is out. The term is used only once in the SP.A documents, not in its pure form, but qualified as follows:

- (6) “Zo werkt *een modern en democratisch socialisme*. De harde wetten van de economie moeten gecorrigeerd en bijgestuurd worden.” (italics added)

[This is how a modern and democratic socialism works. The hard laws of the economy have to be corrected and adjusted.]

Though socialism is out, the self-description as ‘socialist’ still occurs at regular intervals, but *only* in the phrase “We, as socialists, ...” or “As socialists, we ...”, where the group label, bared of the associations of the abstract noun it is based on, serves as a useful indicator of difference - whatever its content - in relation to other political formations.

Going back to the original question, what are the social concerns that Spirit and SP.A base their appropriation of the label ‘social’ on? First of all, the term *sociaal* (‘social’) itself is used predominantly in a purely descriptive way. Here are some examples:

- (7) **a. Spirit**  
*sociaal beleid* (‘social policy’), *sociale herverdeling* (‘social redistribution’), *sociale hulp* (‘social help’), *sociaal huis* (‘social house’; reference is to one of the party’s pet projects to get social services coordinated at the municipal level), *sociaal leven* (‘social life’), *sociaal netwerk* (‘social network’), *sociale realiteit* (‘social reality’), *sociale uitkering* (‘social support’), *sociale uitsluiting* (‘social exclusion’), *sociaal weefsel* (‘social tissue’)

**b. SP.A**  
*sociale basis* (‘social basis’), *sociaal erfgoed* (‘social heritage’), *sociaal model* (‘social model’), *sociale organisaties en bewegingen* (‘social organizations and movements’), *sociaal overleg* (‘social deliberation’), *sociale partij* (‘social party’), *sociale prijs* (‘social cost’), *sociale problemen* (‘social problems’), *sociaal risico* (‘social risk’), *sociale sector* (‘social sector’), *sociaal systeem* (‘social system’), *sociale uitdaging* (‘social challenge’), *sociale vooruitgang* (‘social progress’), *sociale winst* (‘social gains’), *sociale woonwijken* (‘social housing’)

**c. Spirit & SP.A**

*sociale dienstverlening* ('social service'), *sociale zekerheid* ('social security')

Except for 'social exclusion' and 'social security', these are used only once or twice. Further, there are a few occurrences of adjectival combinations (in both the Spirit and SP.A texts) such as *sociaal-economisch* ('socio-economic') and *sociaal-cultureel* ('socio-cultural'). But more evaluative uses that invoke normativity are far less numerous and less frequent:

- (8) *sociale rechtvaardigheid* ('social justice'; SP.A), *sociale verantwoordelijkheid* ('social responsibility'; both Spirit and SP.A)

Thus we have to look elsewhere to discover more about the 'social' content of the party profiles.

Looking into the traditional social (and socialist) themes of poverty, difference and equality, proves to be extremely revealing. In line with the disappearance of 'class', the notion of 'difference' (Dutch *verschil*) does not refer to socio-economic class-like differences: Its usage gets restricted to *cultural* differences. However, the other two notions, poverty and equality, abundantly permeate the discourse. They do so, however, in a very special way. Turning to poverty first, both in Spirit and SP.A documents there is a lot of talk about the abstract notion *armoede* ('poverty') and an equally abstract program of *armoedebestrijding* ('poverty control'), while being *arm* ('poor') is ascribed mainly as a quality to impersonal entities: *Arme gemeenten* ('poor municipalities'), *arme landen* ('poor countries'), *arme scholen* ('poor schools'); only the SP.A also ascribes poverty directly to people. What all documents share, however, is a move away from poverty *per se*. The dominant discourse is clearly about *kansarmoede* ('poverty of opportunity') and *kansarmen* ('those poor in opportunities').

What happens with the second notion, *gelijkheid* ('equality') or *ongelijkheid* ('inequality'), is entirely in line with this observation. The theme is present, though less prominently so, in the Spirit data. It is, however, strongly foregrounded in the SP.A materials, though with an orientation that is unmistakably different from a mere focus on (in)equality as such. Of 67 occurrences of equality- or inequality-related concepts, no less than 38 refer to *(on)gelijke kansen*, i.e. '(un)equal opportunities'. Of the remaining cases, 13 refer to *gelijkwaardigheid*, i.e. 'being of equal value', a notion that often cooccurs with a reference to solidarity.

The general conclusions for policy are clear: What we need is a *gelijkekansenbeleid* ('policy aimed at equal opportunities'). Moreover, when details are called for, the 'poverty of opportunity' to be corrected by policy makers seems to be located with very specific groups: Women, migrants, homosexuals, and older people. Though this seems to be an admission of certain forms of systematic discrimination, it diverts the attention from fundamental forms of economically based disadvantage. Attention is also diverted from the fact that, while full equality is an unachievable utopian goal, equality of opportunity is a mere fiction.

### 3. Social class's great vanishing act

The disappearance of social class from the scene of political discourse is not an isolated Flemish case. It is part of social class's great vanishing act which is a widespread, if not hegemonic, international phenomenon. It links up with so-called 'third way' politics which finds one of its most eloquent advocates in Anthony Giddens. Looking at the following quote, one could assume - and probably this is even true - that Flemish socialists must have studied Giddens carefully before formulating their own policy papers:

- (9) "Social democrats must revise not only their approach to, but also their concept of, equality in the wake of the decline of socialism. [...] There is no future for the 'egalitarianism at all costs' that absorbed leftists for so long. [...]"

The contemporary left needs to develop a dynamic, life-chances approach to equality, placing the prime stress upon *equality of opportunity*. [...] Equality of opportunity, of course, has long been a theme of the left and has been widely enshrined in policy, especially in the field of education. Yet many on the left have found it difficult to accept its correlates - that incentives are necessary to encourage those of talent to progress and that equality of opportunity typically creates higher rather than lower inequalities of outcome. Equality of opportunity also tends to produce high levels of social and cultural diversity, since individuals and groups have the chance to develop their lives as they see fit." (Giddens 2000: 85-86; italics added)

With Giddens, Flemish socialists assume that they are merely responding to an inevitable economic reality:

- (10) "It [third way politics] is concerned with restructuring social democratic doctrines to respond to the twin revolutions of globalization and the knowledge economy." (Giddens 2000: 163)

Not even a faint attempt is made to challenge the (liberal) premises on which the new 'realities' of the functioning of societies in response to global trends are based.<sup>3</sup> Most liberals would agree with Giddens when he says that

- (11) "An emphasis on equality of opportunity, it should be made clear, still presumes redistribution of wealth and income." (Giddens 2000: 89)

This does not yet address the ideological basis of the 'detrimental mechanisms' referred to by the Flemish socialists. In general, the issue is approached as if laws of nature were at work, as if the profit-generating mechanisms which create inequality were not agent-driven. Thus fundamental questions are not addressed: What does it mean for opportunities to be equal? Is it possible, for instance, to give a child in a ghetto-like area or growing up in a

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<sup>3</sup>As Viviane Forrester (2000) points out, it is utterly strange to see how easily globalization is equated with liberalism. While globalization is inevitable, the neo-liberal form it takes is not.

stigmatized community equal opportunities in any real sense of that word? Depending on the answer to such questions: What is the kind of redistribution of wealth that would be needed? Can we simply assume, in typical liberal fashion, so easily copied by present-day socialists, that equality of opportunity (and hence the system for redistribution), is an individual matter? Or do we have to agree with Zygmunt Bauman (2001) that collective redistribution claims are in order - thus going back to old-style socialist goals?<sup>4</sup> Do we have to reinvent 'class' somehow? What about the replacement, at a national level, of class as a society-structuring notion by ethnicity? This ethnic turn can be seen to induce easier acceptance of growing local inequality. Noticing an unprecedented growth of inequality on a global scale (with local elites everywhere participating in the wealth), a new class-like notion may be needed to deal with international developments as well and, by extension, to reinterpret social stratification on a national level.

#### 4. Conclusion

The foregoing observations all point at the discursive erasure of group-based or class-related social inequality as a hegemonic process. Inequality is not denied, but ending up at the desirable or undesirable end of the scale is ascribed to individual good or bad fortune. It is even presented as a direct outcome of a valuable asset which is equality of opportunity. Group-based processes that turn equality of opportunity into a mere fiction are ignored, and thus the new versions of democracy leave no space for or fail to take into account the related types of difference. We call this process, as revealed in powerful forms of political discourse, 'hegemonic' for three reasons. First, there is its spread: It is manifested throughout a broad sector of western societies; how broad precisely, remains an empirical question, but the link is clear with rhetoric supporting the prevailing form of globalization, as the entire free-market doctrine at an international level is no more than a translation of the equality of opportunity argument. Second, it contributes to the maintenance of existing patterns of dominance; widespread acceptance of the ideological drift of the generated meaning would effectively annihilate the social formations required for resistance. Third, the mechanisms involved rely strongly on the generation of consent, while rarely shy of coercion in the face of opposition; overt coercion being rare (as in the crackdown on antiglobalist movements) it proceeds covertly through the marginalization of alternative voices - and hence through the active creation of an illusion of consent (as when 'progressive' political parties fail to leave rhetorical space for true alternatives).

In a sense, this paper extends the applicability of what Steven Epstein (2001: 41) calls a 'paradoxical modern question', "Why is there not slavery?" And, as a working hypothesis, we can go along with what he characterizes as part of the answer, "because there is a broad spectrum of exploitation." A string of assumptions is involved in his observation: All societies incorporate patterns of exploitation; types of exploitation may disappear; this may partly be due to the fact that they become 'unacceptable'; but unacceptability affects mainly language and rhetoric; underneath, their disappearance may

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<sup>4</sup> Bauman (2001: 88): "The two developments - the collapse of collective redistribution claims (and more generally, the replacement of the criteria of social justice by those of respect for difference reduced to cultural distinction) and the growth of inequality running wild - are intimately related. There is nothing *incidental* about this *coincidence*."

simply reflect a shift to different forms of exploitation. Epstein describes in great detail how this worked in relation to 'slavery' in Italy. The near-disappearance of 'class' from present-day political rhetoric in most of Western Europe may exemplify the same process. Looking at the discourse produced and circulating among the traditional defenders of class interests, *in casu* European socialists, we observed a language of equality that redefined its object in terms of opportunities rather than realities, as well as a denial of exploitation (or at least its replacement by mechanism- rather than agent-driven forms of exclusion). On the basis of the discursive data we cannot easily avoid a sneaking suspicion that Epstein was right.

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