



# Social Reform in Times of Transition

Reflections on Martin Conway's *The Sorrows of Belgium*

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In his book *The Sorrows of Belgium* Martin Conway uses the Belgian case to look at the restoration of liberal parliamentary states in Europe between 1945 and 1947. Nico Wouters' contribution focuses on three elements brought to the fore by Conway: 1) the essential yet ambivalent role played by local government (cities and municipalities), 2) the inability to institutionalise Belgian patriotism as binder for the nation-state and finally, 3) the rift between shifts in class relations and political-institutional renewal. His contribution comments on each of these elements, by means of superficial comparisons with the Netherlands.

As Conway shows, Belgium's larger cities were laboratories for new political currents that in the end strengthened centrifugal, regionalist tendencies. On the other hand, the local level as an institutional part of state organisation had a reverse effect in the shorter term. The restoration after the liberation can only be understood when one takes into account how 'local states' imposed a compelling framework that limited the opportunities for political renewal. As such, Wouters hypothesises that these local states help to explain in part the institutional conservatism of Belgian elites, a core-element in Conway's book. On this point Wouters sees mostly similarities with the Netherlands. A Belgian-Dutch difference on the other hand, is that the Dutch did succeed in seamlessly combining an equally conservative post-war restoration with restarting a revitalised collective national identity. Belgium's failure in this regard was quite evident. Although it is obvious that by 1950 such a renewal had become impossible because of the Royal Question, it is still a question of the extent to which the Belgian state still had some leeway in 1945.

The third and most important point is connected to the shifts in social class relations. This concerns mutual power relations, group identities, attitudes and political strategies. The genesis of post-war social reform is merely the tip of the iceberg in this regard. It is clear that there is still a lot of room for research, certainly in a comparative perspective with the Netherlands. This concerns topics such as social class-studies from below, but also their agency vis-à-vis the national state during these crucial years of transition. As such, this contribution primarily underscores the importance of a true social history of Belgium for the 1930s-1940s, a history that would be highly relevant in a comparative framework with the Netherlands, most notably when also analysing the interaction between these social evolutions and political reform in 1945-1947.

*Sociale hervormingen tijdens transitiejaren. Overwegingen bij Martin Conway's The Sorrows of Belgium*

In zijn boek *The Sorrows of Belgium* gebruikt Martin Conway de Belgische casus om te kijken naar het herstel van de liberaal-parlementaire staten in Europa tussen 1945 en 1947. Nico Wouters' bijdrage richt zich op drie elementen die Conway zelf aanhaalt: 1) de belangrijke maar ambivalente rol van het lokale bestuur (steden en gemeenten), 2) het onvermogen om het Belgische patriottisme als bindmiddel voor de natiestaat institutioneel te verankeren en tot slot 3) de kloof tussen verschuivingen in klassenrelaties en politiek-institutionele vernieuwing. Via een oppervlakkige vergelijking met Nederland plaatst zijn bijdrage kanttekeningen bij elk van deze elementen.

Zoals Conway aantoont, waren de grotere steden in België laboratoria voor nieuwe politieke stromingen die uiteindelijk de middelpuntvliedende, regionalistische tendensen versterkten. Anderzijds echter, had volgens Wouters het lokale niveau als administratief en institutioneel onderdeel van de staatsorganisatie op korte termijn een omgekeerd effect. De restauratie na de bevrijding kan enkel worden begrepen door in rekening te brengen dat 'lokale staten' een dwingend institutioneel raamwerk oplegden en zo de ruimte voor politieke vernieuwing verengden. Hij werpt dus de hypothese op dat deze lokale staten deels het institutionele conservatisme van de Belgische elites – een kernpunt in het boek van Conway – helpen verklaren. Hier zit zijn inziens vooral een overeenkomst met Nederland. Een Belgisch-Nederlands verschil is dan weer de manier waarop Nederland er wel in slaagde een in wezen even conservatieve naoorlogse restauratie succesvol te koppelen aan een hernieuwde doorstart van een collectieve nationale identiteit. België slaagt daar nogal manifest niet in. Hoewel duidelijk is dat dit wat België betreft tegen 1950 (de Koningskwestie) onmogelijk was geworden, blijft het een debat in hoeverre de Belgische staat hier in 1945 misschien nog wel enige speelruimte had. Het derde en meest belangrijke punt betreft de verschuivingen in sociale klassenverhoudingen. Dit betreft zowel de onderlinge machtsverhoudingen, de groepsidentiteiten, de attitudes als concrete politieke positioneringen. De genese van de naoorlogse sociale hervormingen zijn hier slechts het topje van de ijsberg. Zeker in vergelijking met Nederland wordt duidelijk

dat hier nog veel ruimte ligt voor onderzoek. Het gaat dan om sociale studies van klassen van onderuit, maar ook hun agency tegenover de nationale staat tijdens de cruciale transitiejaren. Deze bijdrage onderstreept zo vooral het belang van een echte sociale geschiedenis van België voor de jaren 1930-1940. Wouters' bijdrage argumenteert dat een Belgisch-Nederlands comparatief perspectief hier erg interessant zou zijn, met name ook voor de wisselwerking tussen deze sociale verschuivingen en de politieke hervormingen na 1945.

Martin Conway's book *The Sorrows of Belgium*<sup>1</sup> combines political, socio-economic and cultural history and is innovative on several levels in the way it uses Belgian history to tackle questions about the restoration of liberal parliamentary democracy in (north-western) Europe in the immediate wake of World War II and Nazi occupation. The core of this book is a detailed analysis of the political restoration of Belgium during the first post-liberation years (1945-1947). The book's first and last chapter are almost autonomous essays. In particular the last chapter – ominously called 'The Death of Belgium' – confidently outlines the decades-long process of Belgian state disintegration that started in the 1960s. This last chapter confirms that this book aims to do two separate things: first to explain the 'failure' of the Belgian (nation-)state and second to use Belgium as an exemplary case to draw conclusions about the more general mechanisms that determined the jump from the severe systemic crisis of the 1930s and occupation to the remarkably swift restoration of European democratic states.

This book might as well have been called *The Sorrows of Achille*. The pragmatic socialist Prime Minister Achille Van Acker can rightfully be called this book's main protagonist. As if war and occupation had not created enough challenges, the obstinate Belgian King caused an uncontrollable escalation of political tensions that would result in a situation of near-civil war in 1950. Conway – who, I believe, has some sympathy for the figure of Van Acker – describes how this Belgian 'man of the hour' tried but ultimately failed to calm down the Royal Question. Successive Belgian governments struggled to restore legitimacy, while at the same time trying to find the right balance between institutional stabilisation and social reform. In the end, restoration and continuity dominated the picture.

The European questions are probably the most interesting. However, I first need to get my remark about Belgium out of the way. However much I like the book, I do not entirely agree with its point concerning the failure of the Belgian state. The question of when the Belgian nation-state reached its 'point of no return' – and was thus 'doomed' to ultimately fall apart – is

1 Martin Conway, *The Sorrows of Belgium: Liberation and Political Reconstruction, 1944-1947* (Oxford 2012).

an ongoing debate. Some historians place this point in the last decade of the nineteenth century, some in 1918, some in 1951. Conway locates this point somewhere in the pivotal years of 1945-1947. When reducing Conway's point to its bare essentials, it comes down to the fact that the Belgian state failed to properly modernise its political-institutional framework during these years. Conway labels Belgian elites as inherently 'conservative' (80), in the sense that they lacked the vision, willpower or overall capacity to undertake truly fundamental reform when the window of opportunity presented itself. Belgian state modernisation was necessary in 1945 because, according to Conway, occupation had caused a fundamental shift in social power relations. Post-war social reform was not enough because the old (nineteenth-century) institutional fabric was kept in place. Conway suggests this was Belgium's last opportunity to save itself. Belgium could still be saved in 1945, but not by 1948. The impression I get from Conway's entire analysis however, seems to be the lack of any available alternatives in the years 1945-1947. The Belgian system was already stretched to its utmost limits as it was. The threat of some authoritarian, military coup continued to loom over Belgium. Worried Allied forces kept a close watch on Belgian governments. What could this 'fundamental institutional reform', which could have saved Belgium in 1945, have been? I realise Conway is a firm advocate of explaining the actual outcome of things and not wasting time with 'what might have happened', and I give him credit for that. Nevertheless, his own analysis does push a reader towards this question. When reading Conway, I have to conclude the only real alternative in 1945-1947 that might have saved Belgium in the long run would have been the abolition of the monarchy and the installation of a Belgian republic. Clearly, this was never a remotely viable option: and perhaps herein lies an inherent contradiction. If fundamental reform outside of the constitutional order was simply not politically imaginable by any major political force, does this not automatically imply that the cracks in the Belgian nation were already irreparable before 1945? Perhaps a detailed analysis of these years actually reveals that the window of opportunity had already been closed; I would say that this had happened in 1918-1919.

Perhaps more interesting for the non-Belgian world are the ways in which Conway uses this history to tackle European issues. I want to pick three topics from Conway's book that I consider essential and discuss them in greater depth and with special comparison to the situation in the Netherlands: 1) the role of local government, 2) the failure of the Belgian nation (and politics of memory) and 3) the reconfiguration of social power relations.

### **The role of local states**

Conway rightly points to the importance of the local level in Belgian political culture (especially on 261). Local autonomy was clearly a characteristic element



▲ Crowds gather around a convoy of vehicles, probably somewhere in Brussels. This is a scene of the first official postwar return to Belgian soil in late 1949 of Princess Joséphine-Charlotte. She was the eldest daughter of the controversial King Leopold III. With this visit she intended to pave the way for the return of her father. Leopold III would finally return from his exile to Belgium in late July 1950, shortly before being forced to abdicate. This picture belongs to a series taken during this visit by an anonymous photographer. They were donated to CEGESOMA by Jean-Pierre De Craeyencour, secretary-general of the *Mouvement Léopold*. Image nr. 190642. CEGESOMA, Brussels.

of Belgian political culture. The importance of the local level was reinforced in 1943-1945 when the occupation caused a process of ‘destatification’: when the political state (governments and parliaments, and central administrations) evaporated in 1943-1944, cities, villages, communities and families became the true groundwork for social solidarity and organisation (50-51, 53-54 and again on 60-61).

Conway stresses how these local cultures worked towards pulling Belgium apart. I think perhaps a distinction is necessary between local government authorities as institutional parts of state organisation and as laboratories of new political counter-movements. Where stressing the disruptive power of the latter, Conway perhaps underestimates institutional and administrative continuities. When Conway points to the local level undermining the Belgian state (in particular in the city of Liège, where the federalisation of Belgium as a political demand reared its head) I think he is talking about the impact on Belgian nationhood in the longer term and not so much political restoration during the transitional years. In the first two years after liberation, I would argue that in terms of local governmental foundation, similarities outweigh the differences in comparison with the Netherlands (or France). ‘Destatification’ and societal disintegration also emerged in the Netherlands and France in 1944. This was especially significant for the prolonged Dutch liberation. In this context, local democracies preserved the institutional framework of liberal states. This kept the fabric of local solidarity together. In this sense, states never disappeared but were preserved in hundreds of local forms in town halls. Institutional elites – mayors, administrators and city technocrats – kept states going. An essential element of this was the *rapprochement* with a re-emerging local civil society in 1943-1944. In 1943, once local elites went into a transitory mode towards a post-war order, they were able to re-connect with these new or re-emerging local networks. Belgium and the Netherlands were similar in this regard. Both were highly advanced states for which the cathartic experience of German occupation confirmed that local institutional democracy was rooted too deeply to be dismantled anymore. I believe that the importance of these local ‘states’ partly explains the quick restoration after liberation. Perhaps it even partly explains the ‘conservative’ nature of the institutional restoration (in both countries). Local government developed a bottom up dynamic towards near immediate stabilisation and restoration which, inevitably, was in an institutional sense conservative.

### State and nationhood

In contrast, differences prevail when comparing the Belgian and Dutch attempts to repair damaged nationhoods. Although post-liberation euphoria did create a certain wave of Belgian patriotism (see 244 and further), such

sentiments clearly failed to become durably embedded in Belgian society. Attempts to create some kind of durable restart of collective Belgian identity evaporated remarkably quickly. Nevertheless, Conway presumes the existence of a strong rather than a weak perception of nationhood in 1945-1946 (he states explicitly for example that '[t]he culturally rooted definition of Belgium as a political community [...] proved too strong', 254). This is not in contradiction with everything that came before, because if I read him correctly this culturally rooted definition of 'Belgianness' existed primarily among specific parts of the nation's elites rather than in the general population. Conway suggests that it was precisely this strong attachment to a national Belgian identity among state elites that led to their political conservatism. The single most essential page in Conway's book on this topic is page 254, where he writes: 'Belgium, it seemed, had difficulty in thinking of itself as different from what it believed it had always been'. Certain Belgian elites seemed unable to think outside the institutional box. This deserves more elaboration. How exactly should we understand this merger between Belgian national identity and the political-institutional agenda of (certain) state elites? How big was the gap between Belgian (state) elites' point of view and popular memories after 1945? Here an in-depth elaboration of tensions between local memories (in Brussels, Liège and Antwerp, for example) and Belgian restoration would certainly be relevant.

For me, this raises another question. If this sense of Belgian national identity was so strong that it pushed state elites towards institutional conservatism, why then was the Belgian state so consistently weak in setting up a central politics of memory after 1945? The Belgian state quickly withdrew from memory construction, meaning that Belgian patriotism (or nationalism) was never institutionalised on a state level. Different well-organised memory communities became the producers of an impressive repertoire of distinct memories that would then be ingrained in the political and linguistic fault-lines in Belgian society during and after the Royal Question was settled in 1951, perhaps a typical Belgian neo-corporatist approach to memory construction.<sup>2</sup> The question remains why did nobody bother to lay the commemorative groundwork for a solid nation: was this due to a lack of political willpower, a lack of recognition of the potential problems, an automatic return to post-1918 memory frameworks or a lack of institutional capacity?

Clearly the Dutch were able to do things differently. As in Belgium, the Netherlands were also quickly confronted with an uncontrollable process of local and group-specific commemorative initiatives in 1945-1946. The

2 B. Benvindo and E. Peeters, *Scherven van de oorlog. De strijd om de herinnering aan de Tweede Wereldoorlog, 1945-2010* (Antwerpen 2012).

Dutch state however, responded with one uniform narrative and policy framework (including, among other things, a lack of victim recognition). The ‘successful’ Dutch restoration lay exactly in the fact that they were able to revitalise nationhood while at the same time neutralising all plans for grand national renewal and re-installing pre-war ‘pillarized’ political and religious rifts. The Dutch were able to pull this off – at least for a decade or so – through a combination of (relatively) successful purges and a strong top-down politics of memory. Admittedly, it did help that the Netherlands were a linguistically homogeneous nation and that unity between head of state and government had been maintained during and after the war. The creation on 8th May 1945 of the National Bureau for the Documentation of the History of the Netherlands in Wartime (RIOD), presents a reverse image of Belgium. It exemplifies a Dutch model of taking firm control of memory construction on a state level. The Belgians also considered a similar project in 1945, when the influential former Prime Minister, Henri Carton de Wiart of the Catholic Party, succeeded in finding a parliamentary majority for creating an ambitious national institution which was to become a museum, documentation centre and educational and research facility for both World Wars combined. Just as in the Netherlands, Carton De Wiart’s explicit ambition was to counteract the escalation of local memories that were emerging all over the place, and to create a national memory regulated by the state.<sup>3</sup> This Belgian ‘RIOD-plus’ failed to launch, apparently because of lack of political support, which is revealing for the state of Belgium even at that point.

### Shifts in social class relations and institutional reform

The third, and probably most stimulating, underlying part of Conway’s book concerns what he calls the ‘reconfiguration of social power relations’. All essential points of the book seem connected to this. His argumentation with regard to the Belgian state rests on the failure to adapt elite governance to these new social relations. His discussion of local political cultures seems connected to this point as well (in particular the social differences between Belgium’s major cities in 1945-1946): and lastly, even the issue of failed nation-building in Belgium seems to find some of its root causes in these changes of social power relations. The most important ‘reconfiguration’ that Conway indicates was that the industrial working class gradually lost power and influence, while certain middle class groups (such as food producers and small business owners) consolidated their class identities and positions of political

3 Benvindo and Peeters, *Scherven*, 29-30.



power. I am sure Conway is right in a general sense, but his explanation of this so-called ‘reconfiguration’ could also stand a more finely-tuned elaboration. On several occasions, Conway connects the issue of social changes to changing attitudes, norms and values (‘in Belgium, as no doubt elsewhere in Europe, there was a heightening of individualist or even selfish attitudes’ on page 313; there was an ‘emergence of a society that was more individualist and less disciplined, more middle class in tone’ on 315). I think this analysis needs more social diversification, certainly when Belgium is used to exemplify European trends. A better-defined elaboration of the agency of specific social classes is lacking in this story. What about the different sub-groups of top-level capitalist elites and their sometimes very different interests for example? Was Belgian institutional conservatism partly explained by a reaction of these capitalist elites against the growing power of the middle-class? How did certain Flemish industrial elites (in Antwerp for example) or large landowners ‘feel’ about the Belgian nation and state? Here, a comparison with the Netherlands would be particularly interesting. In earlier writings, Martin Conway and Peter Romijn offered some Belgo-Dutch comparisons.<sup>4</sup> Conway and Romijn wrote that the Dutch model of ‘pillarization’<sup>5</sup> had been able to absorb class oppositions during the 1930s better than the Belgian model. In Belgium, industrialised capitalism had created sharper class distinctions and tensions. In this sense, Belgium was a society organised much more along class lines than were the ‘pillarized’ Netherlands. Sharper class distinctions made cooperation between the major political families in Belgium more difficult than in the Netherlands (certainly when Flemish nationalism became a major political force). Conway and Romijn concluded that these class distinctions caused Belgium to ‘reinforce the conservative pattern of politics evident since the mid-1920s’.<sup>6</sup> With the exception of a two-year reign of the technocratic Prime Minister Paul Van Zeeland (1935-1937), this conservatism (a lack of capacity to organise parliamentary renewal) remained the dominant feature of Belgian democratic elites until May 1940. Obviously, it is noteworthy that the key-word ‘conservatism’ already came up here.

There is still room for more in-depth Belgo-Dutch comparison. In a general sense, conservatism seemed perfectly applicable to Dutch politics as well, with elements as the inherently conservative ‘pillarized’ structure, the successful ostracising of the Dutch national socialists (NSB) in the 1930s, and the Dutch orthodox liberal policy towards the economic crisis after 1936 (which according to both authors led to ‘social crisis’ in the Netherlands as

4 M. Conway and P. Romijn, ‘Belgium and the Netherlands’, in: Robert Gerwarth, *Twisted Paths: Europe 1914-1945* (Oxford 2007) 84-110.

5 Conway does not use the word ‘pillarization’ a lot, only when on pages 212-214 he talks about the gradual ‘re-pillarization’ of the Catholic (and Socialist) party in 1945-1946.

6 Conway and Romijn, ‘Belgium and the Netherlands’, 98.

well).<sup>7</sup> Conway and Romijn labelled Dutch reformism after 1945 a mixture of moderate socialism and corporatism, which is probably exactly the way to describe Belgian reforms after 1945.<sup>8</sup> Dutch national renewal also concealed restoration of a pre-war order. Dutch reformist elites were obviously able to implement the lessons from the 1930s more smoothly than Belgian elites because the latter were confronted with the Royal Question (and the linguistic fault-line), but overall, Dutch post-war reforms showed similar conservative tendencies. It would be interesting to systematically compare class agency in Belgium and the Netherlands more deeply, for example that of certain groups within the lower and upper middle-class. It would also be interesting to look more closely at how Dutch class relations emerged from the harrowing experience of the hunger winter of 1944-1945, and how the conservative 're-pillarization' after the liberation clashed with these new social power relations. All in all, the true nature of social power relations from the 1930s through the post-war transition remains tantalisingly vague, for both countries. My main conclusion after reading Martin Conway's book therefore is that we need to look at the reconfiguration of the Belgian class system from 1929 to 1950 more closely and with more attention to truly understand Belgian institutional conservatism as well as the failure of Belgium as a nation. His book seems to call for a much needed true social history of the Second World War from the 1930s to the 1950s. This social history would definitely benefit greatly if conducted in a Belgo-Dutch comparative perspective. ◀

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7 *Ibid.*, 102.

8 *Ibid.*, 109.