BELGIUM: THE END STARTED IN 1968

Paul Goossens

Since Belgium was the birthplace of surrealism, the practice of adding texts and explanations to existing images is never unnecessary here. Belgian surrealist René Magritte understood this very well, and—to avoid any misunderstanding—he added the words “Ceci n’est pas une pipe” to his one of his paintings. In this country, nothing is what it seems, and what you see is always ambiguous.

It was no different in 1968. Belgium was the only country in Western Europe where the student protest movement brought the government to its knees. That says something about the power of the Leuven student movement, but it also reveals something of the country itself. No matter how genuine the influence from the United States, the Netherlands (Provos) and Berlin on Belgian student leaders was, the “couleur locale” was just as important.

The intensification of the linguistic conflict

On Tuesday, February 7, 1968, after weeks of uproar and tumult at Leuven University, the Catholic-blue government of Paul Vanden Boeynants came tumbling down. At that point, la contestation in Nanterre and Paris had yet to begin. We had already had two years of sit-ins, public meetings, demonstrations, and occupations of university departments, for the Leuven question had been simmering on the Belgian burner for years. Since the early 1960s, Flemish parliamentary members had been insisting that the French-speaking section of the Catholic University of Leuven be moved to Wallonia, the French-speaking, southern part of Belgium. In this way, they hoped to halt the expansion of bilingual Brussels and to preserve the linguistic homogeneity of the Flemish region. Leuven is barely 30 kilometers from Brussels, and, as the Flemish rallying cry pointed out, it was in danger of being absorbed by the Brussels “oil slick.” In this case, the French-speaking section played the role of the Trojan horse.

The Leuven controversy took place in a unitary, centralist Belgium that was divided along denominational lines. As yet there were no districts or municipalities with governments of their own, and even the political parties were still bilingual. The debate on splitting Leuven University was being carried out mainly in parliament and in the deadly dull debating clubs of what was then called the “Flemish Movement,” an
amalgam of language and culture lovers, teachers, and Flemish nationalists. Every now and then, there was a demonstration, usually in Leuven. The students were easily deployable foot soldiers and had no problem with the slogans and mottos being drummed into them.

The democratization of the universities

In 1965, this uncomplicated relationship began to cloud over, and a gap began to form between the Flemish Movement, mainly characterized by conservatism and nationalism, and the student movement, which was less and less willing to accept the patronizing stance of officials and started looking for new political horizons. Until the mid-1960s, the university recruited most of its students from the middle class. This was especially true for the Catholic University of Leuven, which always distanced itself from socialism and the social struggle and functioned as an elite breeding ground for the conservative and Catholic power structure.

With the democratization of higher education, however, a profound change began to take place in the student population. Workers’ children started appearing in the lecture halls, which disturbed the established traditions, reflexes, and political dogmas. Homogeneous thinking came under fire, and the Alma Mater found existence in her ivory towers to be increasingly oppressive. The protest actions against the Vietnam War that were taking place at American universities triggered little reaction in Leuven, other than surprise at the impact that the students could have on university policy. That admiration increased when students at Berlin’s universities began to revolt as well, and the Flemish press began to devote more and more ink to the “youth rebellion.”

The Flemish student strike

May 13, 1966, was a turning point. That was when the Belgian bishops, Leuven University’s organizing force, announced a position that was as tough as it was unambiguous: the French-speaking section would not be transferred. The content and particularly the tone of the pastoral letter did not go down well. A spontaneous strike broke out in the Flemish section, and every night the police had to set out with truncheons and water cannon to cool off the angry Flemish students. Suddenly, the Leuven question took on a decidedly anticlerical and anti-authoritarian tone, and the speeches and writings of the student leaders contained themes that had little or nothing to do with the traditional Flemish battle cries.
The democratization of universities, society, and the Belgian state was becoming an increasingly urgent point of discussion and more and more frequently resulted in conflicts with the various Flemish authorities. The 1966-67 academic year grew into an endless series of collisions between the students and the academic authorities, the police, Flemish political figureheads, and social commentators. These last were growing more concerned about Flemish students being derailed and Flemish demands going unheard ever more often. As many editorials insisted, it simply was not possible “that the Catholic character of the university was being tinkered with and that the Flemish front around Leuven was being weakened.”

The Leuven time bomb explodes

The more the Leuven student movement became linked with international protest activity and began to show interest—in word and deed—in Vietnam, the writings of critical theorist Marcuse, and the critical university, the greater the gap between the radicals and the Flemish establishment grew. Although this establishment was entangled in a power struggle with the Belgian state, it was just as allergic to the student protesters over whom it had lost control, and who—God help us—had even started reading the writings of Karl Marx.

Although the Leuven student leaders distanced themselves further and further from the Flemish national discourse, they did continue to address the problem of the transfer of the French-speaking section of the university and constantly made fresh attempts to light the fuse on the Leuven time bomb (albeit now with left-wing arguments). It eventually worked. On January 15, 1968, when the French-language section of Leuven University publicized its plans to expand over the following years with no hint of a transfer, the students rose...
up in revolt. For weeks, daily demonstrations were held, academic buildings occupied, and the protest spread to include all the institutions of higher learning in Flanders.

The end of unitary Belgium

The stalemate around Leuven had been broken for good, and, at the same time, a few important bulwarks of Belgian state and society had been shattered. On February 7, 1968, the government fell, then the Christian Democrats split into a Flemish and a French-speaking wing, and ten years later the move of the French-speaking section of the University of Leuven began. The country had undergone profound changes during those years. The state reform of 1970 put an end to Belgium as a unitary state and signaled the beginning of a federal structure. It can thus be said that the Leuven revolutionaries wrote history—Belgian history, to be sure—but most of them found this more than satisfactory.

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