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Actualizing the past: political devolution and the symbols of the European regions. The case of Belgian federalization (1970–1998)

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Actualizing the past: political devolution and the symbols of the European regions. The case of Belgian federalization (1970–1998)

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This article analyses the negotiation of signs by the governmental bodies that resulted from Belgian federalization. Along with the conflict between past and present, the Belgian case includes a third element which forced regions to plan their future as well. Belgian political devolution evolved in parallel with the Maastricht Treaty (signed in 1992), through which regions attained prominent roles in Europe. Did the need to create competitive regions invalidate the suitability of ancient symbols for legitimizing public institutions? It does not seem to be the case. On the contrary, institutional emblems coupled the necessity for appearing established with the urge to project European regions as competitive entities. Can history do anything to unfasten regions from their invented past? Can historians do anything against the abuses of history?

Keywords: useable past; political devolution; European regions; emblems; national identity; Belgium; graphic design

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Introduction

> I even believe that all of us suffer from a consuming historical fever and should at least realize that we suffer from it. (Nietzsche 1980[1874], 8)

Political devolution results in administrative institutions that generally did not previously exist. However, these new institutions try to cover over the brevity of their existence by reusing communal symbols from the past, such as flags or coats of arms. Frequently, the use of traditional symbols carries certain connotations that are not so convenient in the present. Nevertheless, the weight of tradition can become so opportune for

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legitimating institutions that history is somehow forced to conform to the present. Properly analysing this instrumentalization of historical icons can pose quite a challenge for historians. Indeed, it is present-mindedness rather than historical perspective that drives these processes. The functional use of the past must be approached as raw material in the hands of politicians seeking to create fidelities among the citizenry and legitimate institutions.

History is not only a matter for historians – it can also be functional. In everyday life, history is actualized in ways historians might term as negligent. Take, for example, Richard Thorpe's 1953 film, *Knights of the Round Table*. In it, Ava Gardner is supposed to play a medieval lady. Her hairstyle, however, owes more to 1950s fashion than to the medieval. Does it matter to anyone? Whenever the past is actualized, interests above historical faithfulness are served. If the aim is to make Ava Gardner appear radiant on the screen in the eyes of a contemporary audience, any historical assistance would be inopportune. Actualizing the past may be historically careless yet still fulfil its greater mission. Indeed, faithful actualizing of the past may even prove inconvenient when the past performs a function, be it narrative, religious or political.

Are historians innocent bystanders to the abuse of history? In all this, historians seem to have little to say and can do little in one direction or another. Protecting historians' study-matter from intruders would be impossible since the past is not only a subject for historiography but is also at play in many different spheres of everyday life. Therefore, analysis of the role of history in everyday life offers various perspectives. The decision to remember or forget history is made in accordance with specific, historical moments. Seen in this way, history may itself be seen as a component of history or, in other words, the past is a component of the present. In extreme cases, a fictional past can even give shape to a real present. Stressing certain historical episodes while conveniently suppressing others is often a response to ideological (functional) necessities of the present. This dual process of awareness and oblivion renders vivid portraits of particular historical moments. Let us examine some of the mechanisms behind them.

Among the many functional uses of history we can cite, for example in narrative drama, is the transportation of the audience to other eras. Film directors obviously do not think like historians, but then, neither do politicians. This article will focus on history as it is used to grant legitimacy to new institutions, and will explore the extent to which symbols of the past are used to maintain power and create institutional legitimacy. In these processes, the historical relevance of symbols is submitted to the symbol's power as a political weapon. This article's central theme is that by studying inconspicuous yet pervasive elements such as institutional symbols, we can learn to see clearly the manner in which communities take

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shape. We must accept that any given national symbol has been selected from myriad different possibilities. The selection of any one symbol over another shows clearly how its relative community is 'programmed'. History can be most effective in creating communities and making people feel part of them.

This article's aim is not to distinguish between good and bad symbols but to examine how and why they appear. With one rather than another symbol, the conflicts between the public sphere and politicians are plain. The attempt of political forces to leave their stamp on public institutions is frequently the main objective of these manoeuvres.[1] A historical narrative perspective does not deal with the issue of which communal past was suitable for creating a community and which was not. Normally one learns particular facts pertaining to why and how that community came to be. However, explaining how a citizenry was persuaded to become part of and feel attached to a new community necessitates a point of view. Hence, we must scrutinize the instruments of persuasion, among them, of course, the past.

This approach sheds light on the way nations behave. The study of the processes of nation-building reveals how similar the concepts of nationalism, chauvinism, region and nation-building are. In these phenomena, the role of the past is decisive. Yet, in an increasingly globalized world, experts in location branding disseminate similar concepts to the world at large and then 'dynamism', 'cosmopolitanism' and 'diversity' are seen as positive adjectives for countries, regions and cities (Julier 2005, 872). How does this fit in any newly established region's insistent search for legitimacy in the past? The study of symbols makes it easier to understand how community is projected first domestically to an internal audience and then abroad to an external public. Therefore, it is important to study globalization's influence on national consciousness. Self-conscious European regions such as Flanders, or regions that are at the same time European capitals, such as Brussels, afford rich opportunities for study. Their formations are twofold. On the one hand, these two regions developed on the same patterns of nation-building processes and, on the other hand, both seek to nurture international projection through the same symbols. These aims are not mutually exclusive.

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'Useable past' and the weight of tradition

In order to survey different approaches to the use of history, we can take as examples the visions that an architect and an architecture historian might have regarding architecture from the past. An architect will probably look for inspiration in those architectural works that are somehow related to his/her practice. Presumably, the chosen referents will be close in time and, vice versa, those works which are the most disconnected to contemporary

architecture will be disregarded. Conversely, an architecture historian would be interested not in extracting lessons from architecture but in approaching the subject in a more objective way, giving value to constructions by considering what they were, independently of their value for present architecture practice. The architect's interest would respond to the idea of a 'useable past'. Likewise, law professor Cass R. Sunstein elaborated this concept to describe the visions of a constitutional lawyer and a historian of constitution. He stated:

> The historian is trying to reimagine the past, necessarily from a present-day standpoint, but subject to the discipline provided by the sources and by the interpretative conventions in the relevant communities of historians. By contrast, the constitutional lawyer is trying to contribute to the legal culture's repertoire of arguments and political/legal narratives that place a (stylized) past and present into a trajectory leading to a desired future. On this view, the historically-minded lawyer need not to be thought to be doing a second-rate or debased version of what the professional historians do well, but is working in a quite different tradition with overlapping but distinct criteria. (Sunstein 1995, 605)

Apparently, the 'useable past' may be related to the work of practitioners and therefore historians should be located in the 'opposite' field – that is, the field of theory. Yet, the concept of a 'useable past' was originally intended to guide the work of historians. Terence Ranger coined the term in 1976 in his essay 'Towards a Usable African Past'. In it, Ranger encouraged historians to move the focus of African historiography to ordinary people and leave behind the study of princes and political parties. What Africa needed at that moment was a survey of the fundamental causes of African poverty and the attempts to overcome that poverty. Thus, in trying to provide a function to their 'theory,' a historian called for a 'useable past' to his fellow historians as 'practitioners' of history. Likewise, Friedrich Nietzsche had already encouraged the use of history *for* life a century before (Nietzsche 1980[1874]). History must be a discipline that would serve life, what he calls an unhistorical power, and therefore history should never become a pure science 'like, say, mathematics' (Nietzsche 1980[1874], 14). Unlike Ranger's 'useable past', Nietzsche points to a general, rather than a particular, application of history in life. His main concern was that history would one day prevent life from progressing. The constant presence of a historical perspective in life would value the past above the present and therefore could remove the present's autonomy to evolve freely.

The works inspired by a 'useable past' have since been expanded from African history (White 1997; Kees van Donge 1998) to explore the selective

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memories of other geographies, an example of this being Robert G. Moeller's (2001) book, *War Stories: The Search for a Useable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany*. It examines how after the Second World War, the Federal Republic of Germany suppressed all memories of the years of Nazi rule and privileged the discourses related to the Germans who did not participate in the Nazi regime and other discourses which depicted Germans as victims. So, on the one hand a 'useable past' refers to the utilization of the past by non-historians, and on the other hand it refers to historians who demand their research to have a social utility. In both cases, these accounts reflect the nature of contemporary mankind as historically conscious, and present history as an ingredient of everyday life. In this vein, the past being not relegated to historiography but being present in everyday life, it can be instrumentalized and even manipulated. Nietzsche acknowledged this 'historical fever', which in excess could injure every living thing – be it a man, a people or a culture – and finally destroy it (Nietzsche 1980[1874], 10).

As Eric J. Hobsbawm states, '...plenty of political institutions, ideological movements and groups – not least in nationalism – were so unprecedented that even historic continuity had to be invented, for example by creating an ancient past beyond effective historical continuity' (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992[1983], 7). This situation is most likely to occur after periods of federalization or political devolution. At such points in time, symbols for are sought to provide 'continuity' and to brand new institutions. As soon as regions acquire political powers, their institutions develop strategies of nation building. Thus, new public institutions attempt to bolster their existence by focusing upon the use of presumably ancient symbols, as though the worst thing that could happen to such an institution would be for it to be original.

Which function does the past actually perform in the creation of a community? Preference for ancient symbols over new ones must be framed within the propaganda technique of nationalism – that is, a double process of collectivization and individualization of the nation. Nation-building strategies seem to acknowledge that nations belong to all the members of the national community in general and to each member in particular. To achieve collectivization, common time and space are invoked. The common time (history) is embodied by symbols of a 'common' past. Subsequently, nationalist discourses primarily link a given common place (the territory) to that community. The nationalist argumentation might be of this kind: 'We, the people of this country, are here because our ancestors were here and therefore this land is ours.' The fact that a given community alters in time, adheres to different entities, and mixes up its ethnic roots does not seem to be of interest. What matters is that suddenly a continuity is created between present and past. The contemporary community (let's say from the 1980s) is linked to and deemed nearly the

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same as the ancient one (let's say from the fourteenth century). This process, described by Hobsbawm as the 'invention of tradition', points out that governments attempt to create new nations as though they had previously existed (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992[1983]). Similarly, Benedict Anderson acknowledges a general refusal to create nations without reference to history. He points out how paradoxical 'the objective modernity of nations to the historian's eye vs. their subjective antiquity in the eyes of nationalists' is (Anderson 1991[1983], 5). Anderson describes these processes as strategies to induce the identification of citizens with their nations and, more concretely, with their nation-states.

Along with these manoeuvres to collectivize nations – and their governmental bodies – there is the individualization of the nation. In this vein, Anderson describes how, in different languages, words related to the nations make continuous reference to kinship (motherland, *Vaterland* and *patria*) or home (*Heimat*). 'Both idioms denote something to which one is naturally tied.... [I]n every thing "natural" there is always something unchosen. In this way nation-ness is assimilated to skin-colour, gender, parentage and birth-era – all those things one can not help' (Anderson 1991[1983], 143).

Constructivist theories of nationalism define the study of symbols as the means for decoding immaterial concepts. National symbols make it easier to understand particular conceptions of nationalism and national identity. They reveal how several concepts about collective identities have been formed. Hobsbawm's account stresses the application of constructivist methodology to the discipline of History. He states that, by these means, historians may contribute to the study of 'invented traditions'. Especially, because

> [t]hey are highly relevant to that comparatively recent historical innovation, the 'nation', with its associated phenomena: nationalism, the nation-state, national symbols, histories and the rest. All these rest on exercises in social engineering which are often deliberate and always innovative, if only because historical novelty implies innovation. (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992[1983], 13)

The modern-day use of ancient symbols reveals more about the present situation than it does about the origin of those symbols. To the question 'What benefit can historians derive from the study of the invention of tradition?' Hobsbawm answers:

> [F]irst and foremost, it may be suggested that they are important and therefore indicators of problems which might not otherwise be recognized, and developments which are otherwise difficult to identify and to date ... Second, it throws a considerable light on the human relation to the past, and therefore on the historian's own subject and craft. (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992[1983], 12)

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Indeed, the study of national symbols as conscious choices rather than as givens makes it easier to understand a particular moment and, what is more, how history has been historically interpreted and mediated. As political scientist Umut Özkirimli states, 'It is true that the present cannot alter what happened in the past, but it can ignore certain elements and emphasize others, exaggerate the relevance of some, trivialize that of others, and it can certainly distort realities' (Özkirimli 2003, 348). The analysis of national symbols of all kinds can help identify how a given nation is imagined and forged. The choices of national symbols and their subsequent debates can help in discerning what a particular nationalist project consists of and the role that the past plays in it. Moreover, it is important to establish what role the political elites play in all this and how given passages of the past have been either consciously or unconsciously selected to create a particular national present.

The following two sections examine the case of Belgian federalization, in particular the manipulation of history in order to make institutions legitimate. Before going further, however, the administrative division of Belgium must be sketched out. Belgium underwent a transition from a centralized state to a federal state in the last quarter of the twentieth century. In 1962–63, the Belgian language border divided the country into three zones: Dutch-speaking, French-speaking and German-speaking. These divisions implied that in those areas, institutions would communicate with its citizenry in one language only. This measure was the first step in the subsequent federalization of the 1970s and 1980s (Reynebeau 2005[2003], 200). The resulting complex federal organisation was carried out on two overlapping levels: in cultural communities and in economic-administrative regions. As far as the cultural communities are concerned, three were set apart: the Dutch-speaking, the French-speaking, and the German-speaking regions. As far as the administrative was concerned, three regions whose borders did not always coincide exactly with those of the cultural communities came about: Flanders (Dutch-speaking), Brussels (Dutch- and French-speaking), and Wallonia (French- and German-speaking). In 1970–71, the first of what has now come to be a total of five state reforms was carried out, reforms that by 1993 would convert Belgium into a federal state (Craeybeckx, Meynen, and Witte 1997, 371–83). In 1970, three Cultural Communities were established and the foundations for the three administrative regions were laid out. Ten years later, in 1980, a second state reform took place in which both a government and a parliament were constituted for the two largest administrative regions: Flanders and Wallonia. In 1988–89, the third state reform began. In it, Brussels took shape as an administrative region (see Figure 1). Regional powers were simultaneously decentralized: first, communities acquired powers pertaining to education, and then those pertaining to the administration of transport and public works (Goossens 1996).

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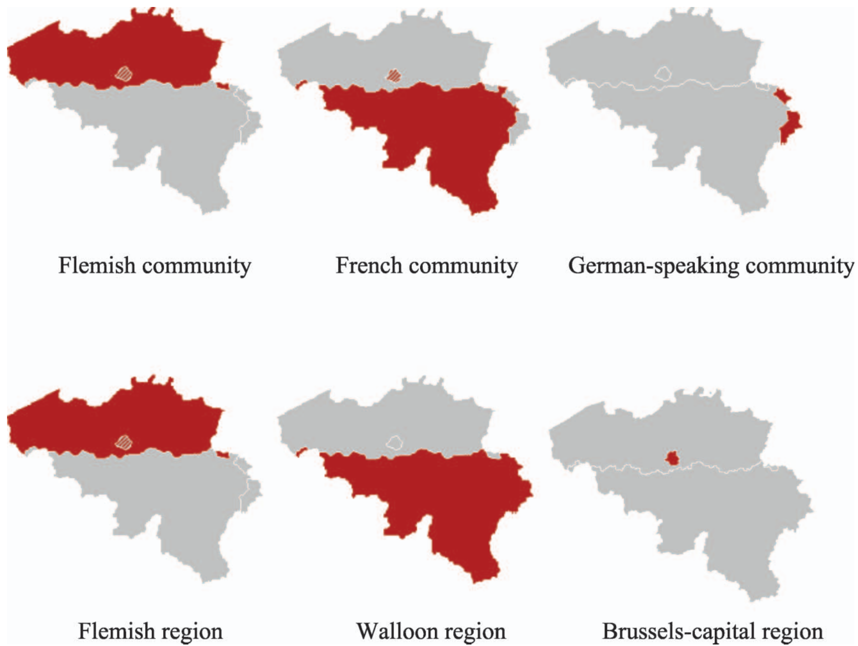

Figure 1. Top: Division of Belgium in Cultural Communities: Flemish community (*Vlaamse Gemeenschap*), French community (*Communauté Française de Belgique*) and German-speaking community (*Deutschsprachige Gemeinschaft Belgiens*). Bottom: Administrative division of Belgium: Flemish region (*Vlaams Gewest*), Walloon region (*Région Wallonne*) and Brussels-capital region (*Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest/Région de Bruxelles Capitale*).

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The complex federal structure of Belgium into communities and regions objectively sought to reflect the complex nature of Belgian society. However, this complexity was not translated into a diversity of symbols. On the contrary, attempts were made to minimize complexity through reproducing traditional institutions. The first example below explores the adoption of the ancient herald of the historical County of Flanders by the Cultural Council for the Dutch-Speaking Cultural Community (Cultuurraad voor de Nederlandse Cultuurgemeenschap) in 1973. The second example studies the reuse of the Walloon rooster for the Cultural Council for the French-speaking Cultural Community of Belgium (Conseil culturel de la Communauté culturelle française) in 1975.

Flanders: a red-clawed lion

On 6 June 1972, Volksunie party member Evrard Raskin submitted a decree proposal to the Cultural Council for the Dutch-Speaking Cultural

Community concerning the 'national symbols' of the Dutch-Speaking Cultural Community of Belgium – namely, the flag, the anthem, and the national day. In his proposal, the flag depicted a black lion on a yellow background, the anthem was the popular song 'The Flemish Lion' and the national day was 11 July. According to Raskin, the three symbols were not new; on the contrary, the population was already using them. His proposition just attempted to 'confer an official status to something that already exist[ed]' (Cultuurraad voor de Nederlandse Cultuurgemeenschap 1972, 174).

The most controversial proposition was the flag, which Raskin depicted as a 'clawing black lion on yellow background' (Cultuurraad voor de Nederlandse Cultuurgemeenschap 1972, 174). When Raskin tried to justify why the 1970s institution should adopt an old heraldic emblem, he argued that just as Belgium had adopted the emblems of the former County of Brabant, in the same way Flanders could adopt the herald of the historical County of Flanders. Apart from the identical name, the current region of Flanders and the historical County of Flanders have little in common. The most noticeable difference between them is their difference in geographical area. To be precise, the historical County of Flanders was much smaller. It included only two (West Flanders and East Flanders) of the five current Flemish provinces and from 862 to 1191 the present-day French department of Nord as well. Moreover, the County of Flanders was an administrative division pertaining to a feudal order and the region of Flanders was embedded in a democratic system.

Some parliamentarians immediately contested Raskin's proposal regarding the flag. According to the Socialists, the correct heraldic description of the Flemish County's flag was a 'clawing black lion on golden field, red tongued and clawed', which meant that the lion could not be completely black – as Raskin proposed – but should display a red tongue and claws. This nuance was of great importance as the completely black lion (without red tongue and claws) had been the symbol of the Flemish Movement, a forerunner of the Volksunie from which the party adopted its flag. Therefore, Socialist parliamentarians saw in Raskin's proposal an attempt to impose the symbols of his party onto the institution as a whole. Although Raskin argued that the black lion belonged to the historical County of Flanders, conversely the Socialists proved that the original symbol had changed in meaning after being used by the Flemish Movement (see Figure 2). Only by reverting the symbol to its original state could the lion regain its original significance. Consequently, the Flemish lion symbolizing the Dutch-speaking Cultural Community boasts red tongue and claws (Cultuurraad voor de Nederlandse Cultuurgemeenschap 1973, 271–7).[2] 'History' delivered the necessary material for creation of the Flemish symbol. But which moment 'in history' was the most convenient? Contemporary issues and power tensions ultimately moulded the discourse

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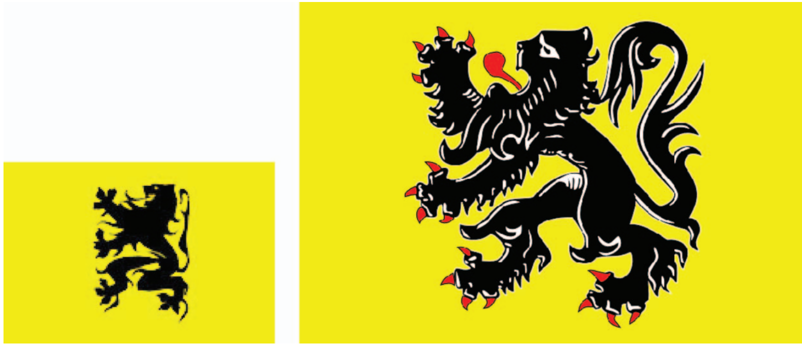

Figure 2. Flag of the Flemish Movement (left) and flag of Flanders.

of history at their convenience. In this vein, the past was submitted to political power when the institutional present was at issue.

Wallonia: the bold rooster

The Cultural Council for the French-speaking Cultural Community of Belgium (Conseil culturel de la Communauté culturelle française) adopted its own symbol in 1975. This time the chosen emblem was an old Walloon icon 'a bold rooster', which was designed 60 years earlier by painter Pierre Paulus. This emblem from the 1910s conveyed the necessary elements to shape the Cultural Community in the 1970s. To begin with, it issued from a nationalist Walloon past. Second, it reaffirmed French cultural character. Third, it clearly differentiated the French Cultural Community from the Flemish community. In particular, after decentralization in the 1970s, an emblem was needed to relate the present moment to a previous period of self-consciousness.

The long process leading to its approval gives one an idea of the difficult negotiations between the institutional reality of the Cultural Council for the French-speaking Cultural Community of Belgium and its symbolic needs. The final decree dating from 20 July 1975 was only approved after three proposals, all coming from the same Parliament member, Fernand Massart (1918–1997), a member of the French-speaking nationalist Rassemblement Wallon party (Walloon Gathering – RW).[3] By electing the emblem of Wallonia for the whole French-speaking community, the symbol somehow superseded its limits, since Brussels was part of this community but not a part of Wallonia. Moreover, Wallonia was populated primarily by French-speaking citizens though not exclusively by them. In fact, the German-speaking community of Belgium was part of Wallonia as well but obviously not a part of the French-speaking community of Belgium. Indeed, the

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difficulties that this symbol overcame in order to become official were different from the Flemish ones. This time, the intricacies derived from the complex articulation of the southern region of Belgium. The solution was to reformulate the rooster verbally. Indeed, the rooster could not be 'Walloon' anymore, but just a 'bold rooster' in order to fit the necessity of symbols properly with the institutional reality.

Summarizing, the Walloon rooster had its origins in Walloon nationalism, and the current division of Belgium into a French-speaking Cultural Community that included Brussels appeared to be an obstacle to bringing the past into the present. The Walloon emblem did not seem to reflect properly the current situation for the French-speaking Cultural Community of Belgium, but finally its popularity and its ties with tradition made it match. Despite all the trouble in adopting the Walloon rooster for the French-speaking Cultural Community, a logical solution would have been to adopt a new symbol for a new institution. However, this possibility was not even discussed.

In 1998, the task became even more difficult. The Walloon region decided to adopt its symbols officially and the French-speaking Community of Belgium already had the most convenient one (see Figure 3). Nevertheless, the Walloon region also adopted the rooster since it was the most logical solution (*Staatsblad/Moniteur Belge* 1998, 25551). The result was that two different institutions with different powers and different territorial dimensions had the same symbols. Consequently, the president of the Council of Heraldry and Vexillology (Conseil d'héraldique et de Vexillologie), Roger Harmignies, rapidly denounced this irregularity. Apparently, the Walloon Parliament did not consult the council to adopt its symbol and consequently he stated, 'it is inadmissible that two distinct entities make use of identical official emblems' (Ghesquière 1998, 1). Further, he insisted the

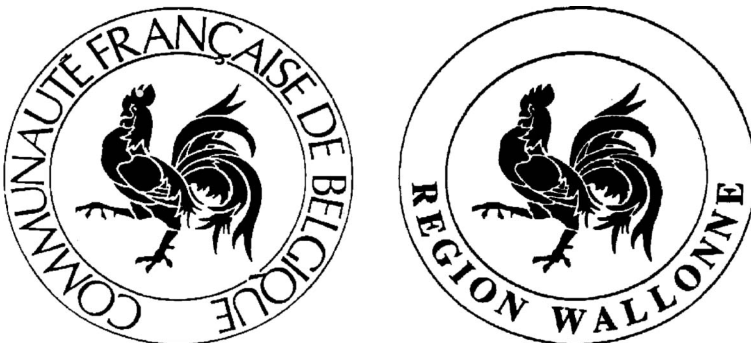

Figure 3. Left: French Community of Belgium stamp as in Decree 03/07/1991 (*Moniteur Belge* 15 November 1991). Right: Walloon Region stamp as in Decree 98/1998 (*Moniteur Belge* 8 August 1998).

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Walloon region change its emblem as the French-speaking community of Belgium had adopted the rooster first.

These examples illustrate how institutional status seeks legitimacy in symbols from the past. Of course, the historical County of Flanders had little or nothing to do with the current region of Flanders and there was nothing like a cultural French-speaking community of Belgium before the early 1970s. Although the relationship between the chosen symbols and the administrative units they came to represent is not immediately evident, these institutions appeared as inheritors of previous entities by adopting concrete institutional emblems. However, the chosen symbols cannot be accused of manipulating the past, since the lion did indeed appear in the coat of arms of the County of Flanders and the rooster had been the symbol of Wallonian nationalism since the early twentieth century. Nonetheless, these symbols contributed to a distortion of the present. In the first case a continuation was sought between two different administrative divisions – namely, first, the present region of Flanders – a governing institution installed in a democratic state and whose sovereignty stems from the citizenry – and second, the County of Flanders – a feudal power structure under the jurisdiction of a count. The example is even more evident in the second case where a symbol of Walloon nationalism was imposed onto an institution that conformed to a complex federal structure, such as late-twentieth-century Belgium. In both cases, symbols concealed the complexity of Belgian federal division in order to legitimate institutions through the easiest way. Indeed, those symbols gave rapid and recognizable symbolic form to developing types of authority and submission but did not help the citizenry to understand the existence of federalized Belgium as a new reality. Along these lines, the past is used as a simplified yet popular metaphor of the present. Metaphors may be helpful until the preceptor understands the reality and then they are disregarded; the problem comes when the citizenry is invited to perceive the reality through those metaphors permanently and somehow retard their 'coming into age'.

Nationalism proves difficult to combat. Even Communist countries offered cases of nationalisms, what Anderson called the 'uncomfortable anomaly for Marxist theory' (Anderson 1991[1983], 3). He argues that Marxist regimes did not face the phenomenon but tried to save it. But then, is globalization able to challenge nationalisms? Does globalization prove out the arbitrariness of borders? Or, on the contrary, does globalization expand the system of a world divided into nations, and increase the abuse of history and the weight of tradition?

European regions

In her account on globalization, geographer Doreen Massey offers a view from a satellite in which the communication and social relations between

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humans are mapped (Massey 1993, 63). This view renders a continuous flux of international interchanges that subverts the logic of boundaries. Remarkably, she wonders if the lack of boundaries should generate any insecurity and questions people's need for attachment of some sort. Along these lines, Massey states, '. . . what gives a place its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of particular constellations of relations, articulated together at a particular locus' (Massey 1993, 66). But still, as this article argues, there is a manifest reticence to accept that places change and evolve and that therefore the past, or better put, a selected or even invented past, tries to anchor nations and regions to perpetuity and immobility.

As soon as we leave Massey's satellite image and come closer to planet earth, we can observe that the unorganized relationships among people are boxed in concentric collective identities, like Russian dolls, and related to places that range from continental to local identities. However, boundaries are not being superseded by globalization. On the contrary, still smaller nations emerge and they reproduce schemas of nation-states. In this vein, we can affirm that both systems are superimposed, that of the global interaction and that of national divisions. Far from putting each other under threat, they rather seem to act as reciprocal stimuli.

Belgian regions, some more than others, also needed to reflect that they were prepared to enter the list of competitive European regions, and their symbols needed to embody and convey this attitude. Were then the traditional symbols inadequate? This does not seem to be the case. The communication of modern values does not seem to challenge the authority of traditional symbols. Conversely, hybrid forms that embraced tradition and modernity were created. On some occasions, this aim was achieved by adding layers of meaning to a given symbol and, on others, by creating pseudo-ancient symbols.

Both the emblems and the logos of the Belgian regions will now be considered as elements of what Michael Billig has called 'banal nationalism' (Billig 1995). This concept points to the reproduction of nationhood in numerous aspects of everyday life. As virtually unnoticeable elements of the everyday, logos may be use to remind us of our belonging to a nation with an intensity similar to one that a flag might. Their modes of dissemination in everyday life can be extremely subtle, but they nonetheless reinforce the ties that bind the citizens to both their national territory and their government. This means that they act as nationalist agents and, as such, embody the very idea of the nation/region. Emblems and logos are pervasive as they make up part of ordinary landscapes, either in the city or in the countryside. A new public work, garbage containers, a regional roadway or the entrance to a province are good occasions for displaying governmental logos. They unequivocally remind the inhabitants of either their belonging to a given nation/region or their presence in a foreign one. The following analysis of these symbols will

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show the extent to which they embody notions of tradition and modernity, or of both simultaneously.

Political scientist Anthony D. Smith traces an historical sociology of nationalisms and national identity. His study includes, first, the ethnic separatism from old empires in the nineteenth century, and, second, the ethnic nationalisms emerging in the overseas territories of European colonial empires in the early to mid-twentieth century. The nationalism/regionalism of Belgium he considers to be an example of the third wave of demotic ethnic nationalism, which has been present in industrial societies since the late 1950s (Smith 1991, 125). The West European examples of this third wave are, namely, the Catalan, Basque, Breton, Scots, Welsh and Flemish movements. Smith acknowledges the possibility for these nationalisms to combine a 'vertical' sum of identities that do not exclude each other, e.g. Flemish identity with Belgian and European identity (Smith 1991, 138–40).

The formation of Europe has brought the role of the regions into deep consideration ever since the drafting of the Maastricht Treaty in 1991 (Website Committee of the Regions n.d.). There, the principle of subsidiarity was formulated. It involved a distribution of power into local, regional and communitarian organisms. More specifically, those problems that local or regional authorities would better solve would not be solved by the European bodies, in an attempt to put decision-making as close to the citizenry as possible. Accordingly, the Committee of the Regions (CoR) was created in 1994 so as to give voice to the regions within Europe.

These tensions, between the local and the international and between new institutions and the weight of the past, are reflected in the election and assimilation of symbols. The challenge of a suitable, modern European projection did not hinder the regions, however, in constructing their identity out of symbols from the past. Thus, these examples illustrate the weight of tradition in the election of symbols for new administrative units. The example of Belgian federalization is especially relevant because its complicated federal structure puts into evidence the limited suitability of those symbols from the past.

The logo of Flanders

The first 1971 state reform was followed by the second in 1980, when the Cultural Council for the Dutch-speaking Cultural Community was granted powers to create its own government. Its name was the Flemish Executive, and, since 1993, the Flemish Government.[4] However, at the third state reform of 1989, the Flemish Executive acquired more powers and therefore its public image needed a logo and an implementation manual to mark its public presence. In 1988, the Flemish Executive's third legislature began as a proportional government presided by Christian-Democrat Gaston Geens (1931–2002), who had already presided over the government during the two

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previous legislatures. His cabinet organized an open competition to design the 'Logo of Flanders', in which both professionals and amateurs could participate (*Vlaamse Raad* 1989). The competition was open from 20 January to 10 March 1989 and the main aim was to 'design a logo that can present Flanders abroad as a progressive, highly qualitative and recognizable region' (*Vlaamse Raad* 1989, 899). The organizers received 420 logos from 340 participants. Subsequently, the selection commission chose three designs, which the Flemish Executive later assessed. According to minister-president Gaston Geens, they were 'original and of outstanding quality' but failed in their main task – namely, 'the visualisation of an internationally recognisable quality label for the Flemish Community' (*Vlaamse Raad* 1989, 900).

Nationalist deputy André De Beul contested this decision to organize a public competition for such a task. First, he criticized the idea that non-professional designers should take part in such an important graphic assignment. Second, he stated that the logo should not be enough and that a 'house style' was indispensable. Third, he wondered if the minister had anything against the Flemish lion as symbol of Flanders, as he attributed to Geens the affirmation that the lion was 'less designated' to represent Flanders abroad. Geens answered that this promotional logo would never change the flag or the coat of arms of Flanders (*Vlaamse Raad* 1989, 899–900). Presumably, Geens' first idea was not a lion to promote Flanders abroad. However, according to what happened later, Geens finally accepted the lion as a symbol of Flanders for foreign audiences.

The Flemish Executive arranged a supervisory board in order to guide the design of a logo. The General Secretary of the Ministry of the Flemish Community, Willy Juwet, chaired this group, which further included representatives of different governmental departments, specifically those of Fine Arts, Press and Monuments (Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap 1989). They commissioned two designers and an artist to take on the project – namely, graphic designers Herman Lampaert and Antoon De Vijlder, and artist Mark Verstockt. The first two decided to present a common solution and the third preferred to work separately. Accordingly, their propositions were also very different. De Vijlder and Lampaert proposed a logo that faithfully reproduced the coat of arms. They thought Flanders already had a symbol and that it expressed the qualities sought by the Flemish government. On the contrary, according to Lampaert and De Vijlder, Verstockt presented an abstract, geometric logo, without any references to the emblems of Flanders (De Vijlder 2005; Lampaert 2005). Mark Verstockt offered a continuance of his own artistic practice, which is distinguishable by the use of elementary, geometric figures – mainly squares and circles – and a limited palette – black, grey and white. His neutral logo objectively reflected a new Flanders, a logo without tradition to reflect a new political entity with a completely new political status.

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The commission decided to keep Lampaert and De Vijlder's proposal (see Figure 4). Arguably, this solution was the most reconciliatory of the two. First, it would not trigger criticism from those who defended the lion as a valid logo for Flanders. Second, it would fulfil the first intentions of the government to express modernity. The Flemish government, which appreciated its heraldic suitability and its 'modern and visually attractive' qualities, finally approved the project on 28 July 1989 (Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap 1989, 0.2a). Thus, the motif was not innovative, but at least its graphic style was. The lion was redrawn as a pictogram – i.e. no illusion of volume and no detail – which substituted the calligraphic representation of the coat of arms. But still, the lion seemed essential when depicting Flanders. Although the intention was to 'design a logo that can present Flanders abroad as a progressive, highly qualitative and recognizable region', the weight of the past seemed to be indispensable as far as identity symbols are concerned (*Vlaamse Raad* 1989, 899).

The Flemish logo illustrates the permanence of antique symbols as suitable for the identification of objectively new governments. The result was not as modern as planned but was a consensual solution, which joined different pairs of antonyms: modernity/tradition, heraldic (high culture)/ pictographic (low culture) and local/international. Consequently, divergent perceivers could appreciate it – first, those who were seeking a traditional symbol, and second, those viewers who were searching for the internationally recognizable and progressive Flanders. According to Smith, the third way of demotic nationalisms can combine different levels of identification between the regional and the European. Similarly, symbols reflect this multiple identification and can reflect multiple affiliations with tradition and modernity.[5]

Figure 4. Herman Lampaert and Antoon De Vijlder's logo for the Flemish Executive (1989).

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Brussels: the iris flower

The administrative regions of Flanders and Wallonia came out of the 1980 State reform. Unlike these two, Brussels was a product of the third State reform of 1988–89. Making a region out of Brussels was not an easy task, due principally to its complicated symbolic meaning within Belgium and its mixed social composition. Brussels is indeed a (big) metropolis, located right in the middle of Flanders, and officially bilingual but informally French speaking. Moreover, it is an independent region but little bigger than a city and, in addition, the capital of Belgium. Hence, it is a site of strong symbolic value as an engaged part of the country but little more than a crossroads point if it were to form an independent entity. Population figures are revealing in this sense. In 2002, the total population in Flanders was 5,972,781, that of the Walloon region 3,358,560 and that of the Brussels-Capital region only 978,384 (Lessafer and Van Landeghem 2003, 22).

Its own mixed nature presented some difficulties for identifying Brussels with a single symbol. However, shortly after the institutionalisation of the Brussels-Capital Region, some parliamentarians submitted proposals. On 18 October 1989, Stéphane de Lobkowicz (1957), member of the French-speaking Christian-Democrat party (*Parti Social Chrétien* – PSC, since 2002 *Centre Démocrate Humaniste* – CDH), argued that Brussels-Capital Region had to choose its emblems in order to differentiate it from the other two Belgian regions. Paradoxically, Lobkowicz's account did not seek to create a third region but reaffirmed Brussels as a symbolic site for the federation. The main quality of Brussels was its condition as Belgium's leading city and, accordingly, its flag should have the three national colours (i.e. black, yellow and red). Simultaneously, this choice would identify Brussels with the Flemish and Walloon colours – black, yellow for the former and red, yellow for the latter – and, consequently, 'Brussels, as a meeting point for the two communities, could not better express its will for harmony than by adopting these colours' (Conseil de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale 1989, 1). Moreover, as the capital of Belgium, Brussels 'could only adopt the "Brabant", also called "Belgian" lion on its coat of arms' – this is a yellow, crowned lion on black background (Conseil de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale 1989, 1). Lobkowicz's proposal tried to dilute Brussels' identity into Belgian identity and, at the same time, to insert Brussels into a nebulous mixture of the better defined Flemish and Walloon identities. At a time when there were no unitary parties anymore and when nationalist discourses reached their peak, this proposal did not prosper. Indeed, Lobkowicz's proposal passed on to the Brussels government but did not go any further (Conseil de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale 1989, 174).[6]

The Socialist government of Minister-President Charles Picqué sought an alternative. An iris flower would be the symbol of the region. On 27 February 1991, the specific form of the emblem was revealed in Parliament (Conseil de

la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale 1991a, 1–2). It was a design by Jacques Richez that depicted an iris flower in yellow with a white border on a dark blue background (see Figure 5). The formal interpretation of the flower recalled art nouveau shapes, a typical Brussels style. The iris flower displayed the stylisation of pictograms – that is, monochrome, without shadows or illusion of depth. Unlike characteristic pictograms, round, fluid contours rather than geometric shapes recreated the natural origin of the motif.

The meaning of the iris was explained in great length by the work commission. First, this was a flower that grew on marshland terrain, as the ground in Brussels had traditionally been. Second, Brussels art had repeatedly represented this flower. Third, it was unique, as no other symbol from the other Belgian communities and regions resembled it. Fourth, the commissioners invoked Greek mythology. There, the goddess Iris was the messenger of the other gods. Fifth, the iris and other flowers had been widely used in heraldry. Last but not least, the yellow and blue were the colours of the European flag and Brussels was the seat of most European institutions (Conseil de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale 1991a, 1–2). And so, the emblem appeared to bring together all the advantages of tradition, high culture (i.e. art, mythology and heraldry) and the international projection towards a European-intensive future.

Unlike Lobkowicz's proposal, all the then chiefs of most of the parliamentary groups signed this proposition. This included principally both the French- and Dutch-speaking factions of Socialist, Liberal, Green and Christian-Democrat parties.[7] Accordingly, the parliamentary reception of this logo was enthusiastic. The deputies called the author, graphic designer Jacques Richez, an 'artist', even an 'artist of international renown', but never a designer (Conseil de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale 1991b, 573). The French-speaking Socialist Moureaux described it as a 'collective work', with recollections of Brussels art nouveau. He pointed out:

> For Brussels, multi-cultural City-Region, with diverse, and often antagonist, sensitivities, this has been a kind of squaring of impossible adventure. What we knew, more or less, from the very beginning is what

Figure 5. Jacques Richez's logo for the Brussel-capital region (1991).

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we might not do: no rooster, or lion, black-yellow-red, yellow and black, yellow and red, red and green, Saint Michel, Atomium, Mannekenpis, no City Hall, twelve, nineteen or twenty-five stars . . . As a city with European vocation, Brussels wants to transmit a spirit of openness. Within this symbol, past and present come together. (Conseil de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale 1991b, 573)

Conclusion

The creation of a regional symbol seeks primarily to differentiate regions from their neighbouring regions. To achieve this aim, the antiquity of the symbol is clearly preferred over its novelty – even when no symbol existed, as in the case of Brussels, and it had to be newly created and some kind of past attached to it. However, the recent need for creating an international, modern profile injected the logos with modern features, either pictographic language as in the case of Flanders, or European colours as in the case of Brussels. Thus, their common characteristic was their consensual nature among national/federal, international/local and central/regional, which the parliamentarian composition established in each case. Both the emblems and logos – as visual recipients of regional identities – demonstrate how regional identity is not necessarily monolithic but can rather combine different qualities into a single symbol. Consequently, the symbols accumulate layers of meaning, which fulfil the expectations of several currents of opinion by counting on the selective perception of the citizenry.

Belgian regional symbols brought about a difficult negotiation between their past, their nationalist movements, their current institutions and their political forces. Brand new regional identities had something in common with nationalisms from the past but also something different – namely, that they could participate on different levels of identification, from a European level to a local one. In any case, the confusion in applying traditional emblems to modern institutions remains. Superimposing history onto administrative divisions can be misleading when it is done in a simplistic way. What can historians do in all this? A possibility is of course to follow Ranger's proposal of making history according to the needs of the citizenry – in the case of Belgium, by showing that both regions and its citizenry have little or nothing to do with their ancestors but that they are involved in a different national project. The search for a 'useable past' will then consist of the 'de-automatization' of the nationalist canon. This would renew national identities and help to achieve a collective identity that would be related to history, but in a proper way, not necessarily in a traditional one. That is, the existence of contemporary Belgian regions would not be justified through the existence of a primordial seed, whether that be the County of Flanders or the County of Brabant. Those regions are being constructed today, in a

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constantly changing world whose ethnicity and ancestors cannot be used as justifications for any community. This would make it easier for citizens to understand that nationality is to be found on identity cards and not in ethnicity, language, race or blood ties.

Therefore, a 'useable past' in twenty-first-century Europe would mean that historians would acknowledge the discontinuity of history and denounce the artificiality of some established continuities. Otherwise, citizenry would be like Ava Gardner in *Knights of the Round Table*. They would combine a present-minded being in the world with ancestral ideas about what a nation must be. Along these lines, Nietzsche's alternatives for the harm history has for life are the *unhistorical* and the *superhistorical*, where the *unhistorical* is an state of mind that denies history (similar to animals) and the *superhistorical* a perspective above the historical perspective (such as art or religion) (Nietzsche 1980[1874], 62). Nevertheless, neither a position under nor above history need be taken to interpret history properly. The right implementation of history can also be an antidote for misuses of history. In other words, historians can also apply a 'useable past' policy to combat the wrong applications of history. In this case, a 'useable past' ought to commend past and present appropriately. In the case of nation-building processes and national symbolism, the present would not need to suffer under the weight of the past. Against the establishment of an excessive continuity between past and present, the job of historians would then be the 'decompression of history'. A better knowledge of history involves keeping the right distance with the past. Understanding the present means acknowledging both its dependence and its autonomy with regard to the past, as well as its projection towards the future.

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Notes

1. To achieve this aim, this article makes use of parliamentary documents. These primary sources contain the discussions between Belgian politicians at the very moment when the decisions were taken. Indeed, this article seeks to give a complementary point of view in this particular subject to other studies on national identities in Belgium, such as Kesteloot (1993); Morelli (1999); Vos and Deprez (1999); and Wils (2005).
2. The Parliamentary Commission drafted the decree, which the Council debated in the Cultural Council on 22 May 1973. As expected, Article 2 of the decree

specified that the flag had to depict a lion with red tongue and claws. In his reaction, parliamentarian Raskin launched an amendment in order to eliminate the red tongue and claws and to restore the completely black lion. The Council ultimately refused his amendment. Out of the 125 parliamentary members who voted, only 28 supported the amendment, 95 rejected it and two abstained.

3. The first attempt dated from 1972 and proposed a flag and an official festivity 'for Wallonia', which was rejected after a negative recommendation from the Supreme Administrative Court of Belgium (*Conseil d'Etat*) (Conseil Culturel de la Communauté Culturelle Française 1974, 6). The court also refused the second proposal dating from 18 July 1974, arguing that the French-speaking Cultural Community of Belgium, which included both Wallonia and Brussels, could not create an emblem for one section only, Wallonia, as the title read (Conseil Culturel de la Communauté Culturelle Française 1975, 2). The following year, there was a third decree proposal, which again referred to a 'Walloon flag and... the day of the French-speaking Cultural Community' (Conseil Culturel de la Communauté Culturelle Française 1975, 7). The Supreme Administrative Court of Belgium revised the last decree proposal and suggested some changes. It argued that none of the Belgian regions, including Wallonia, may adopt any emblems of their own, for only cultural communities possessed that power. Hence, the Court proposed to change the proposal text to 'the flag of the French-Speaking Cultural Community depicts the Walloon rooster' (Conseil Culturel de la Communauté Culturelle Française 1975, 8). Yet, this formula still presented a problem: a Walloon rooster could not be imposed – at least it could not be written so explicitly – onto the citizens of Brussels, who did make up part of the French-speaking Cultural Community as well, but not of Wallonia. Subsequently, the French-speaking Cultural Community Board modified the decree proposal, according to this report and without consulting Massart (Conseil Culturel de la Communauté Culturelle Française 1975, 4). As a result, Article 2 showed a more neutral formula, as follows: 'The flag of the French-Speaking Cultural Community is of gold depicting a bold rooster of gules' (Conseil Culturel de la Communauté Culturelle Française 1975, 6; *Staatsblad/Moniteur Belge* 1975).
4. However, it was not until 1995 that the first Flemish elections took place and therefore the Flemish Parliament could be elected directly. (See Goossens 1996, 28.)
5. Likewise, the election of the typeface was marked by this consensus between the local and the international. The design task involved not only the logo but also the whole house style. The institutional typeface was the Galliard, a standard typeface. The designers did not need to design a new type because the Galliard mixed perfectly the local and global connotations. Indeed, New York designer Matthew Carter (1937) designed the Galliard font in 1978 on the basis of his previous studies at the historical archive of Plantijn Moretus Museum in Antwerp. More specifically, it was the work of typographer Robert Granjon (1513–1589), who had worked in the printing house of Christoffel Plantijn, that inspired the Galliard (Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap 1989, 0.2.b). Therefore, according to the implementation manual, this typeface 'underlines the Flemish character of the printed papers and it is cost-effective at the same time' (Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap 1989, 0.2.b).
6. Charles Picqué (1948) was Minister-President of the Brussels-Capital Region during the legislature 1989–1995 and was re-elected for the next legislature, 1995–1999 (see Website Charles Picqué n.d.). His government launched a public competition to design the emblem of the Brussels-Capital region. The call got an excellent response from the population, who submitted more than 800 designs. Subsequently, the jury – made up of historians, heraldry specialists, graphic

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designers and communication professionals – pre-selected seven proposals. However, fellow parliamentarians questioned the procedure of an open contest as well as the quality of the submissions. Deputy De Decker even said, 'none of them could be adopted as a symbol of our region without ridiculing it' (Conseil de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale 1990a, 878). Besides, even Picqué himself confessed he was not very enamoured with the procedure (Conseil de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale 1990a, 878–9). Finally, the organizers declared the contest void in October 1990 (Conseil de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale 1990b, 1). Nevertheless, the new emblem for Brussels came out of the submissions.

7. The following parliamentarians signed the proposition: Serge Moureaux (Parti Socialiste – PS); Armand De Decker (Parti Réformateur Libéral – PRL); Didier Van Eyll (Front Démocratique des Francophones – FDF); Nathalie de T'Serclaes (Parti Social Chrétien – PSC); Marie Nagy (Ecologistes Confédérés pour l'Organisation de Luttes Originales – ECOLO); Walter Vandenbossche (Christelijke Volkspartij – CVP); August De Winter (Partij voor Vrijheid en Vooruitgang – PVV); and Michiel Vandenbussche (Socialistische Partij – SP). (See Conseil de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale 1991a, 1–2.)

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