The 'Schreve' is Just a Pencil Line:

Struggles over Regional Assembling Along the Franco-Belgian Border

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the current regional developments in northern France and the cross-border relations that have (re)emerged in the context of globalization and Europeanization. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, it investigates what actors are involved in the construction of the region and focuses on the power play between them to analyze how they struggle to work towards regional institutionalization. Borrowing from Latour, I approach the region as a 'regional assemblage,' highlighting the importance of the historical trajectory. I aim to demonstrate that the process of regional assembling can be understood as, what Bourdieu has termed, a 'symbolic struggle' during which particular forms of capital are mobilized in order to work towards the construction of a legitimate perception of the region. I argue that the historical trajectory has forced French Flemish regionalism to confine itself to the cultural, folkloric realm and that, contrary to other French regionalisms, it has made it difficult – if not impossible – to frame efforts in a political or ethnoregionalist way. Nonetheless, new understandings of territory, and the weakening of the state boundaries have provided space for new regionalist strategies to emerge.

Key Words: *Europe, France, Border, Border Region, Border Studies, Regional Identity, New Regionalism, Territorial Cooperation, Cross-Border Cooperation, Integration*

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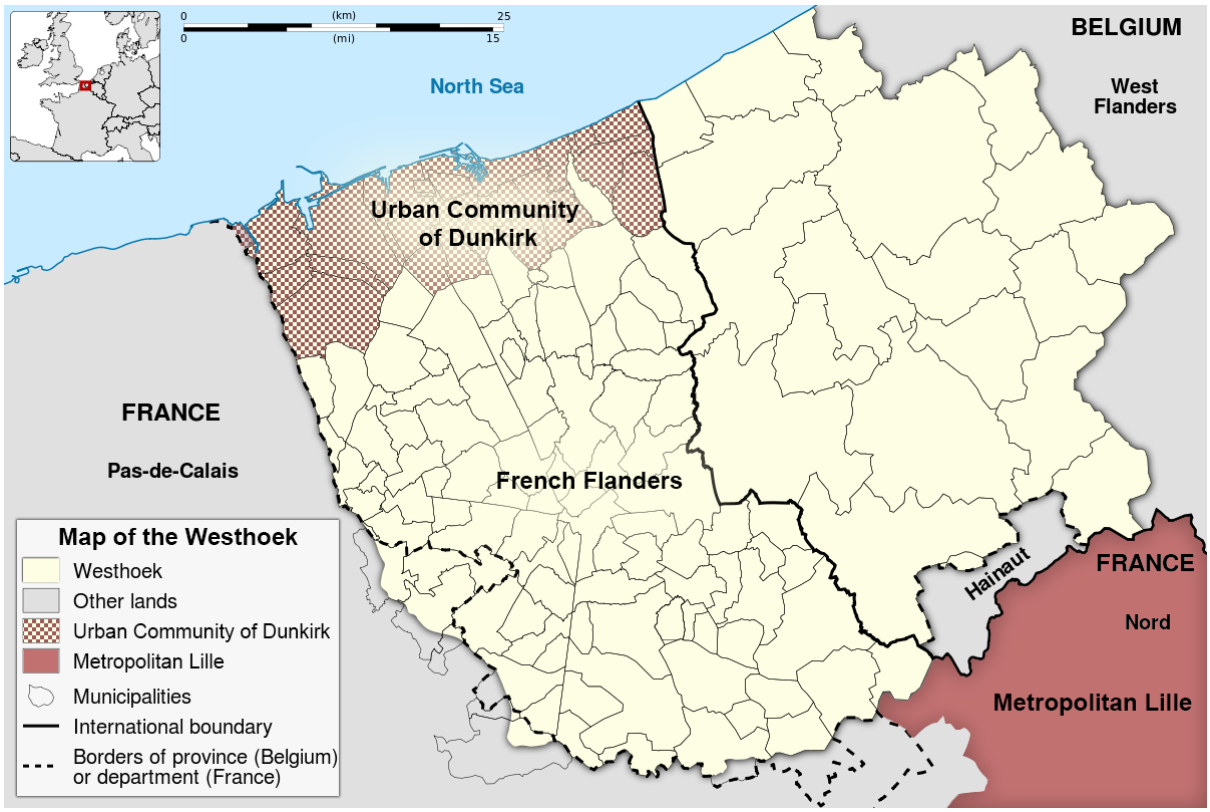


Map of the Westhoek on the Franco-Belgian border (adapted from Sémhur 2011).

INTRODUCTION

In 2008, the film *Bienvenue Chez les Ch'tis*, one of the biggest successes in the history of French cinema, put the city of Bergues on the map. Over twenty million cinema enthusiasts were amused and touched by the story of a postman from the South who is relocated to the far North and who, at first resenting his relocation to Bergues, comes to love it after getting to know its inhabitants. By the end of the film, the postman's life lesson is expressed in a proverb which says: 'a stranger who visits the North cries two times: once when he arrives, and once when he leaves.' Soon after the release of the film, *ch'ti tours* became the number one tourist attraction and shopkeepers were keen on serving their customers Ch'ti bread and Ch'ti sausages (Moerland 2008). But while the so-called 'ch'ti craze' or *ch'timisation* was perhaps beneficial to some in economic terms, many were clearly dissatisfied – not only with the film itself which reinforced the stereotypical image of 'le Nord' "where red-brick terraces cluster for warmth around the lower slopes of slag heaps; where incest, drunkenness and unemployment are taught in primary school; where the people have empty pockets, loose morals, brutal accents and warm hearts" (Lichfield 2008) – and not to forget: where it always rains – but especially because in Bergues people do not speak Picard, or *Ch'ti*, at all. In fact, Bergues is situated in what is referred to as the French Westhoek, a part of France which has Flemish origins. As a response to the *ch'timisation*, flags with the Flemish Lion as well as stickers with 'Bienvenue Chez les Flamands' increased and can still be found on cars throughout the Westhoek region. While many Belgians are often surprised to find the Flemish Lion clearly on display due to its political connotations on 'their side' of the border (which is also referred to as '*schreve'* in Flemish), the French increasingly express the region's Flemish identity without any complexities. Not only in Bergues, but throughout most of the Northern department – from Dunkirk to the metropole of Lille – regional symbols in forms of flags, street signs and bumper stickers hint towards a largely forgotten regional history.

The renewed interest in regional history and identity is not a phenomenon restricted to northern France and neither is it a completely 'new' phenomenon. Regional and local characteristics are brought to the forefront throughout France[1] and the rest of the European continent. The importance of the region as a territorial entity has increased and fields across the social sciences have been picking up on this (see Agnew 2001; Hettne and Söderbaum 1998, 2000; Keating 1998; Paasi 1998, 2003, 2009, 2013; Söderbaum and Shaw 2003; Söderbaum 2016). These new territorial configurations that emerged under pressure of both internal and external processes led scholars to conclude that a new theorization of regions was necessary and the concept of 'new regionalism' emerged, characterized by its economic dimension and its complex and fluid nature. In this context of new regionalism, the region is seen primarily as a territorial unit facilitating economic development and (trans)national competition, often by making use of regional identity as a 'currency' (Paasi 2013). Since new regionalism appears to be "both the context and the result of the ongoing re-scaling of the state" (Paasi, 2009:11), territorial configurations within – and particularly along – state borders pose interesting objects of study. As Donnan and Wilson (2003) suggest, these (re)new(ed) identities throughout Europe are generated by "new relationships to territory, institutions and narratives of moral and political order and disorder" and these are "best studied in the places and spaces in between the traditional structures of nation and state" (Donnan and Wilson 2003: 11)

Therefore, even in the so-called 'borderless world,' "a broader understanding of state borders that highlights both their porous and not-so-open qualities" (Paasi 2012: 2303) remains necessary. While physical borders have become more fluid and easier to cross, they remain to continuously influence "the minutiae of our daily life practices, identities and affiliations"

[1] Brittany, for example, has a strong attachment to its regional identity and while this has never translated into strong regional politics, the start of the decade has witnessed the emergence of a Breton movement fighting for cultural preservation and devolution (Tran 2014). In the Alsace region, the promotion of regional identity revitalized (Duane-Anglard 2015) and there has been a resistance against the recent territorial restructurations as well as Manuel Valls' statement that "there are no Alsatian people, there are only French people" (PS 2016; Rousseau and Vogel 2016). In Occitania we can witness a revival of regional consciousness, an increased interest in Occitan language education (Hourquebie 2015), and bilingual street signs (Goutorbe 2010; Servant 2011; La Dépêche du Midi 2012)

(Newman 2006: 183; see also Anderson 1997). Most central to borderlands, and often the object of focus of border studies, is the idea of separateness – separate from those on the other side of the border as well as of those inhabiting the inland regions. This sense of 'otherness,' Martinez (1994) explains, can be used to people's advantage by using loyalties to different groups in a strategic manner, changing identities according to convenience. Similarly, Paasi argues that borders should not be perceived as fixed entities but rather as "dispersed sets of power relations that are mobilized for various purposes" (Paasi 2012: 2304). It is thus precisely at the level of social practice where borders become concrete and objectified entities that are maintained by "a large ensemble of connected practices, ranging from printed bodies of law and maps to corporeal inscriptions and the surveillance of boundaries on the landscape" (Van Houtum, Karmsch and Zierhofer 2005: 3). The border can therefore be seen as an active actor involved in the construction of the social world, making border regions fields of social power (Paasi 1998).

It is precisely this field of social power, and the power play between different actors involved in the construction of the social world, that will be central to my inquiry. My focus will be on French Flanders, with a particular focus on rural French Flanders (or the French Westhoek) which roughly corresponds to the territory between Dunkirk and Lille. The current socio-economic context has created a favorable environment for the (re)development of cross-border relations as well as a (re)invention of regional identity. Approaching the region as a 'regional assemblage' (Latour 2005) made up of different actors that attempt to impose a legitimate vision of the region, I trace its trajectory to form an understanding of how different actors struggle to work towards regional institutionalization. I attempt to demonstrate that due to the historical trajectory, contrary to some other regionalisms in France, the construction of a more political or ethnoregionalist movement in French Flanders has been – and still is – unconceivable, but that the current context has paved the way for new regionalist strategies to emerge. Closely investigating the different actors involved in, what Bourdieu calls, the 'labor of representation,' I analyze the different visions that have emerged and the conflicts these have

generated. I argue that the regional assemblage embodies a symbolic struggle during which actors actively mobilize various forms of capital to work towards regional institutionalization (Bourdieu 1985; 1989; 1991).

Considering the vast amount of literature available on French regionalism, it is rather surprising that the north of France has received little attention[2]. But while this region might have been easily overlooked in the past, perhaps because of the implicit nature of French Flemish regionalist expressions, this former 'periphery' is now labelling itself as a region located at the crossroads of major economic centers, ready to enter the game of regional competition (Deas and Lord 2006). Therefore, in the light of the crisis of the state whose efficiency is challenged as it is "perceived to be failing in its primary role as the provider and guarantor of internal and external sovereignty" (Donnan and Wilson 1999: 153), it becomes interesting to investigate in what new ways people respond to economic, political and social problems and how these responses affect traditional spaces of governance, the legitimacy of the state, but also the role of the border as a divider of communities. As Donnan and Wilson (1999) argue, political power is no longer solely exerted through formal politics, but works through social practices that are not always explicitly framed as 'political.' In line with their argument, I attempt to illustrate how this power is "demonstrated, projected and contested in the social, economic and political practices of quotidian life at international borders" (Donnan and Wilson 1999: 157). With this study, I aim to provide an empirical contribution to the study of border regions in the context of the transformation of state spaces by providing an understanding of the workings of power in everyday life.

From November 2014 onwards, I started establishing contacts in the region and I spent approximately six weeks in French Flanders divided over several episodes (Winter 2015, Summer 2016 and Winter 2017). Although the multiple research episodes were a practical rather than

[2] Studies of French Flanders include the works of: Verbeke 1970; Ryckeboer 1997, 2002; Van Huffel 2002; Baycroft 2004; and contributions from *Stichting Ons Erfdeel*. Some authors also devote some paragraphs or lines to French Flanders such as Brustein 1988; Augusteijn and Storm 2012; Thissen and Van der Meer 2013.

methodological decision, they made it possible for myself and my informants to reflect on our conversations. Furthermore, it was during the first episode of field research that I managed to establish contact via an online forum[3] with Philippe who became my key informant and who put me into contact with others. This study is based on the thirteen semi-structured interviews – which on average lasted two hours – I conducted with informants coming from the Northern department[4], the Province of West Flanders (Belgium) and the Netherlands. Although the age of my informants varies, most of my informants are between 50-75 years old. Generally, all of them stem from an educated middle class and are either pensioners with the necessary resources to be actively involved in the promotion of the Flemish history and language, or they are in a certain position (e.g. in education or government) which permits them to do so. The assemblage approach and tracing of actors did result in some limitations. Firstly, although the area of Lille and its surrounding territories were discussed, none of my informants could provide me with detailed insights on current developments which resulted in a more specific focus of this study on the North-Western part of the Department. Secondly, due to time constraints it was impossible to approach all actors part of the regional network. A closer study of economic actors that shape the assemblage – cross-border commuters, factory owners, and the VOKA (Flemish Network of Enterprises) for example – could help to provide a more thorough understanding. Moreover, the language barrier served as an asset as well as a limitation. Being a native Dutch-speaker facilitated the connection in some cases, but not completely mastering the French language made it more difficult to have more in-depth conversations with my French informants. The present tensions in the field also resulted in the fact that my established relationships with certain informants meant that other possible informants were no longer willing to speak to me.

[3] The online forum *Frans-Vlaanderen in het Nederlands* (www.fvlinhetnederlands.nl) proved to be a very useful and rich source of information.
[4] The majority of the informants from the Northern Department are from the French Westhoek.

This thesis is roughly divided into two sections of which the first section serves as a contextualization for the main body, the two ethnographic chapters. Taking the concept of assemblage (Latour 2005) as a methodological tool, this study is shaped by 'tracing' the actors as they are involved in the construction of a region, in the phase of regional 'becoming.' Particularly interested in this process of construction, I use theories of new regionalism and regionalization to situate the regional assemblage in the phase of 'regional society' taking a 'symbolic' and 'institutional' shape (Hettne and Söderbaum 1998; Paasi 2009). I will explore the historical trajectory of the assemblage to consider the factors that have determined its current shape and possibilities before moving on to the second section of this thesis in which the ethnographic material gathered will be put central. New understandings of territory and governance at the turn of the century have produced a critical juncture, a new context, that generated new visions within the regional assemblage which, in turn, have resulted into tensions and divisions. While generally all actors are involved in the mobilization of different forms of capital to legitimize their vision of the region and acquire new forms of capital, the internal struggle between these visions has given way to two different frameworks of reference through which the region is approached: the first one is that of 'the region within the region,' a culture- and identity-based frame which is more inward-looking than its counterpart which is a frame of reference that is broad in scope, works according to the logic of new regionalism and has more pragmatic and economic underpinnings.

1. THEORETICAL EMBEDDING

1.1 New Regionalism and Regionalization

Even though globalization processes have intruded the entire world and transformed relations between place and space, there is no such thing as the 'end of territory' (Massey 1994) and despite the 'softening' of boundaries due to European integration, territory continues to contribute to the formation of identity and senses of belonging. The resurgence of regions, regionalisms and regional identities in academic literature over the past decades is an indication that instead of disappearing, territory and borders have remained important subjects of investigation (for a brief overview of the usage of the concept of 'the region' in academic literature see for example Agnew 2001, 2013a). While much of the literature has a strong focus on states being the principle driver behind these developments as they instigate processes of formal institution building, this centrality of the state obscures the practices of non-state actors and informal institutions that often effectively manage to instigate or further develop these processes (Börzel 2016; see also Donnan and Wilson 1999). Although the state remains a dominant actor in terms of territorial governance, processes of reterritorialization have resulted in the displacement of power "upwards (to an array of supranational institutional entities), downwards (to cities and regions)" but also "'outwards' (to non-state bodies)" (Deas and Lord 2006: 1847) which has provided the possibility for new socio-spatial identities to emerge (Charron and Diener 2015).

Markusse (2004) states that the increased importance of the region is related to two particular developments: the first being the increased need for decentralization in the context of global and European competition which resulted in the need for regions to "foster their own indigenous development and to organize their competitive strength in the open European market for exogenous investments" (Markusse 2004: 42); and secondly the increased pressures from within regions for greater independence paired with a growth of regional consciousness. The necessity for local actors to defend their own interest has, as Markusse argues, led to a

strategic converging of interests on a regional level to be able to join the game of regional competition.

The form of regionalism corresponding to these strategically shaped spaces of economic vitality, is labelled 'new' regionalism. It stands in contrast to 'old' regionalism, which is described in two ways. Firstly, it can refer to those forms of regionalism that refer to a historically shaped region that carries meaning for its inhabitants, an entity to which people attach emotions and that forms a source of regional identity (Paasi 2009). Secondly, it is described as a deliberate strategy mobilized in the Cold War context with regional integration as its central aim, centering on issues of trade and security. This old regionalism is top-down in nature with the state as its main actor and formalization processes resulting in regional organizations – the European Union being the prime example. But the production of new meanings of territory from the 1980s onwards – in which regions came to be perceived in neoliberal fashion as spaces of competition and economic and political integration – combined with the rescaling of governance by decentralization and devolvement, has generated – or at least demanded – a transformation in the relation between the national and the local, between the state and its regions and this new context required a new approach to the phenomenon (Keating 1998; Perrin 2012; Jones and Paasi 2013; for an overview of waves of regionalism see Söderbaum 2016).

The concept of 'new regionalism,' emerging in the 1980s, is the outcome of the 'relativization of scale' which generated the development of different economic and political spaces competing to "become dominant or nodal points of capital accumulation, the exercise of state power, or identity formation" (Jessop 2005: 227). While the 'old' regionalism revolved mainly around cultural aspects and regional identity and confined itself "to formal inter-state regional organizations and institutions" (Paasi 2009:10), the 'new' regionalism with its central – but not exclusive – economic dimension acknowledges the importance of actors other than the state and is much more complex and fluid for it does not confine itself to state boundaries. But although 'new regionalism' is often related to regional competition and economic growth, this is

not to suggest that new regions are 'empty' of historical or cultural elements. The actors involved in its formation often draw on historical and/or cultural elements to create discourses which form the basis of the possibility for the region in the first place. Moreover, despite its economic underpinnings, what has been labelled 'new' regionalism should not be seen as a phenomenon devoid of political tendencies. On the contrary, Agnew (2013b) argues, regionalism can be seen in political terms since it demands governments to be responsive to claims of its population connected to territory and identity; it can be seen in political terms because it emphasizes the multi-ethnic or multinational nature of states; and lastly, regionalism can be seen in political terms since supranational organizations promote the institutionalization of regional consciousness and therefore encroach on the political field previously dominated by the state.

The reemergence of regional identity and cross-border networks can also be seen in the case of French Flanders since, with the development of the European Union, the Franco-Belgian border lost its static form and became more fluid, which even resulted in a modest revival of the Flemish language (Baud and Van Schendel 1997). But cross-border connections are no novelty in this region, and due to its shared past, one would assume that this region would prove to be fertile ground for 'new regionalism' to emerge. Considering the Franco-Belgian border region is involved in EU projects focused on cultural and economic cross-border collaboration, and considering a large part of the actors involved are non-state actors all working across frontiers, the new regionalism approach seems to be a suitable general framework to make sense of the regional developments.

1.2 Region in Becoming

In order to work towards clarifying 'the region' it is possible to situate this research at the point where two theories converge. At the basis of the conception of the Franco-Belgian border region as a 'region-in-becoming,' are the New Regionalism Theory by Hettne and Söderbaum (2000) and Anssi Paasi's theory of institutionalization of regions (2009), both underlining that a

region is always a *region in progress* shaped by the continuous involvement of actors in its construction. Their approaches to regionalization or regional institutionalization have allowed me to situate my empirical findings in a so-called 'stage' or 'shape,' the characteristics of which allowed me to pinpoint what processes are most important.

Hettne and Söderbaum (2000) take as their starting point the concept of 'regionalization' which they define as "the (empirical) process that leads to patterns of cooperation, integration, complementarity and convergence within a particular cross-national geographic space" (Hettne and Söderbaum 2000: 458). Put differently, regionalization refers to a process of regional institutionalization in which a region, by increasing or decreasing its 'regionness,' turns from a passive object into a subject with agency. The theory, in which they define five levels of 'regionness,' serves as a guide to make sense of 'regions in the making,' and emphasizes that the actors driving these processes are not only states but a wide variety of institutions, organizations, movements and individuals that contribute to the formation of the region – be it in a formal or informal way. First there is a *regional space*, a geographically bounded space in which a group of people with a shared history and cultural values reside. With the expansion of translocal relations a *regional complex* emerges in which "increased social contacts and transactions between previously more isolated groups" (Hettne and Söderbaum 1998: 463) contribute to the increase of regionness. Only on the third level, that of *regional society*, the framework of the national state is transcended and the process of regionalization develops and intensifies by the increase of interactions (economic, political and cultural) between state and non-state actors. Depending on the nature of the interactions, regions can take on either a formal or informal shape. The fourth level of regionness is that of the *regional community*, the region has by now acquired a "distinct identity, institutionalized or informal actor capability, legitimacy and structure of decision making in relation with a more or less responsible regional civil society, transcending the old state borders" (Hettne and Söderbaum 1998: 466). The fifth level of regionness is described as "still rather hypothetical" (Hettne and Söderbaum 2000: 467) and is that of the *region-state*:

multicultural, heterogeneous and political entities "where sovereignty is pooled for the best of all" (Hettne and Söderbaum 2000: 467).

Similarly, in order to contribute to, and assist in, the analysis of the emergence of regions and regional identities, Anssi Paasi (2009) introduces a theory of institutionalization of regions. Like Hettne and Söderbaum, Paasi considers regions as historically contingent processes of which the constitutive forces may emerge from both within and outside the region. Again, the process of institutionalization is described in stages. First there is the emergence of a *territorial shape* (by which the region distinguishes itself from others) and boundaries which can vary from 'open' to 'closed'; the production of *symbolic shape* which involves the process of naming and regional representation in forms of symbols which aim to contribute to collective identity formation; the emergence of an *institutional shape* in which institutions (such as social or political organizations, educational and cultural establishments etc.) are developed to contribute to the production of other shapes and contribute to the significance of the region by expanding networks also outside of its territory; and lastly the emergence of an *established shape* which requires that the autonomy of the region is recognized and which enables the region to become involved in "struggles over power and resources" and reproduce themselves "in discourses and social practices" (Paasi 2009: 23).

The phase of 'regional society' as described by Hettne and Söderbaum seems to correspond with Paasi's symbolic and institutional shapes. These are precisely the phases that are most interesting for they are the phases 'in between' where social actors are visibly and actively engaged in the construction of the region. The theoretical frames as offered by these scholars particularly underline the constructivist nature of the middle stages, almost as if to suggest that in the first and final stage of regionalization the process of construction is reduced to the background or no longer present. This idea seems to be the strongest in the frame of Hettne and Söderbaum and much less in that of Paasi for he leaves more space for the enduring importance of the labor of representation. As I will indicate shortly, the process of regionalization – or

process of regional assembling – is a continuous process no matter what form the regional assemblage takes. Moreover, the above-mentioned theories do not provide us with the conceptual tools necessary for empirical inquiry. In order to do so, I will borrow from the works of Bruno Latour and Pierre Bourdieu.

1.3 The Symbolic Production of a Regional Assemblage

What is a region? How does it 'become'? And what is the role of various social actors in this process of 'becoming'? Borrowing from Bruno Latour and Pierre Bourdieu I will proceed by approaching the subject of this study with an emphasis on the relational. Unquestionably, there are differences in how the relational is articulated by both scholars, what kind of actors they consider to be involved, and how they define 'the social' that emerges from the relational. But despite the various differences that exist between Latour and Bourdieu, and while I am perhaps treading on thin ice borrowing concepts from both these renowned scholars, at the core of both their approaches is an emphasis on the idea that entities come into existence through – and are shaped by – relations (for an extensive account on this idea see Schinkel 2007).

With the aim to stay as close to my informants as possible I will borrow from Latour the concept of 'assemblage' and use it as a tool to orient this research. In his work *Reassembling the Social* (2005) Latour argues for an associational sociology which denies the existence of stable ontological realities and claims that the social is made up of assemblages. Assemblages are associations between actors – human and non-human – that form networks that can disassemble and reassemble. The concept of assemblage stresses the fluid and heterogeneous nature of 'the social' (also see Latour 2005 for this critique on the concept of the social). The constructivist[5] and relational nature of the concept of assemblage offers a pragmatic tool in the sense that it

[5] The social as a social fact, Latour argues, is indeed constructed but not *socially* constructed for "adding the adjective 'social' to 'constructivism' completely perverts its meaning" as it replaces "what this reality is made of [associations or assemblages] with some other stuff, the social in which it is 'really' built" (Latour 2005: 91).

enables us to look at the regional assemblage as a process, shaped by different interacting actors who are faced with both constraints and opportunities. Methodologically this means that working with the concept of 'assemblage' involves mapping the relations that form the assemblage and tracing how they came into being which allows us to better understand what makes up the region and what are the shared – or contested – visions and hopes. The use of the plural sense here is important, for by no means the assemblage is a homogenous network in which all actors share the same horizon. As I will describe in the following chapter, this set of connections is subject to change. Assemblages have histories and require labor to be produced and maintained. "At different moments of time, these relations within and between sites may require different kinds of labor and are more or less vulnerable to collapse, or to reassembling in different forms" (MacFarlane 2009).

With '*regional* assemblage' I do not mean to suggest that the assemblage is tied to a specific territory, rather it refers to a set of connections between different sites that relates and refers to a specific geographical space but is not bounded by it. The assemblage approach has allowed me to get in touch with actors across national boundaries, actors that would not fall within the geographical scope of the region as a territorial entity. In a practical sense, it has allowed me to circumvent clearly defining the region by drawing borders in a geographical landscape and implying who does, and does not, belong to it.

But while Latour's concept of assemblage is useful, it does not help to connect it to the broader context within which the network evolves and to which actors respond. According to Brenner, Madden and Wachsmuth (2011) the notion of assemblage looks at the interactions within assemblages in an 'inert' manner which is why it is important to bring to the forefront "the force field of struggle among diverse socio-political agents" (Brenner et al. 2011). So, while borrowing from Latour the notion of assemblage as a methodological tool that enables us to think of the region as relationally determined, and while it certainly offers "useful insights for exploring and mapping [this] emergent geograph[y] of […] possibility" (Brenner et al. 2011), I

connect it to other tools which help to make it more effective and allow for a better understanding of the current regional developments. Borrowing from Bourdieu the concepts of symbolic struggle and forms of capital, the force field of struggle among different agents can be brought to the forefront of the assemblage again.

In *The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups* (1985), Bourdieu explains how different groups in the social field become involved in symbolic struggles over the representation of the social world, and it is through symbolic strategies that agents attempt "to impose their vision of the divisions of the social world and their position within it" (Bourdieu 1985: 732). He highlights the importance of the agents that take up the task to produce or mobilize a particular group and the belief in its existence, which is the basis from which new social classifications can emerge. But this production of a vision of division, and the attempt to turn it into a legitimate perception of the social world, is dependent on one's position in the field and the properties one possesses. According to Bourdieu, actors are in a constant competition for the appropriation of these properties which are also referred to as forms of capital (economic, cultural, social and symbolic). It is through the distribution of capital that the social world is organized according to "the logic of difference" (Bourdieu 1989: 20). Since the amount of capital as well as the composition of capital differs per actor, they occupy different positions in the social field. These positions, however, are always contested as the forms and combinations of capital attributed to agents are always subject to change. It is this fact that makes it possible for a variety of visions of the world to exist, resulting in struggles over the perception of the social world. Central to this struggle is what Bourdieu calls the 'theory effect,' the implementation of a "vision of divisions" (Bourdieu 1989: 18). But this "'theory effect' is all the more powerful the more adequate the theory is." (Bourdieu 1989: 23). Hence, for a new vision of divisions to emerge and acquire recognition, it needs to expose what is already there – a social reality not expressed in the legitimate point of view. Only through knowledge and recognition can new social classifications come to existence, and to spread this knowledge and recognition, this alternative social reality

must be represented – there need to exist agents that consider themselves part of these new social classifications. Throughout this thesis, the concepts of symbolic struggle and forms of capital are used as analytical tools to investigate how this regional assemblage attempts to require legitimacy and what sources are mobilized in this process. The aim is to understand how the region is symbolically and relationally produced and what forms of capital are integrated in the regional strategies.

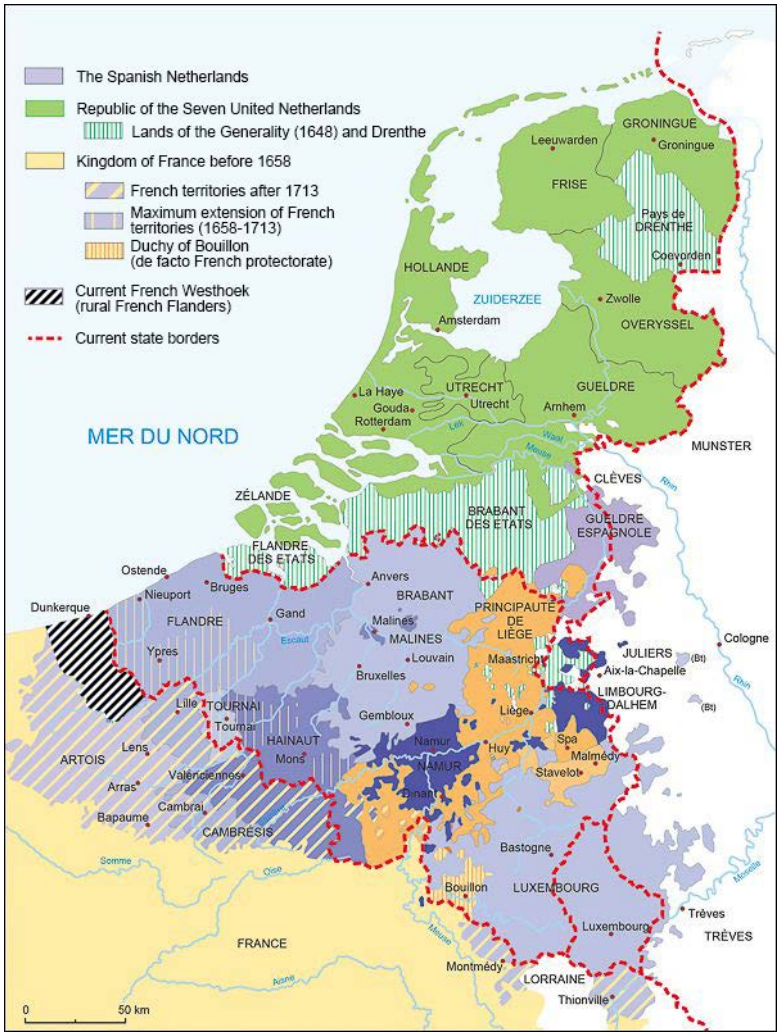
1.4 Frames of Reference

As indicated above, making use of the concept of assemblage, I was able to map the network of my informants which took me across national borders. Leaving the definition of the 'region' unclear and unbound allowed my informants to attach their own meanings and perspectives to it and it soon became clear from my conversations that defining the region was a more complex task than I had expected. The regional assemblage has produced two different frames of reference: while both frames are embedded in a historical context, one is defined in cultural terms while the other is defined more economically. This division of frames of reference makes the investigation of the symbolic production of the regional assemblage more complex. The following chapters will set out to describe how these two frames of reference emerged, how they are related as well as how they are different. 'Tracing' of the actors took me back to the 20th century, but to understand from within which context the assemblage emerged some historical contextualization on the French Low Countries and the French regions in general is necessary which is the purpose of the next chapter.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION

During my fourth and last visit to the region I had agreed with Philippe to meet him at La Musée de la Bataille located in Noordpeene. La Musée de la Bataille is the right place to visit for those who seek to learn more about the region's Flemish history and heritage. Here one can find information on it all: from traditional regional games, festivities, regional crafts and stories to the great historic events such as the Iconoclast (which started in the town of Steenvoorde) and the Battle of Cassel. As of its opening in 2007, Philippe has been active at the visitor center as a guide as well as one of the principle spokespersons. I arrive in Noordpeene on a Friday morning; the parking lot is largely empty and as I walk towards the visitor center I immediately spot the European flag and the flag of the Flemish lion which flutter about foregrounding the grey February sky. In front of the entrance there is a small herb garden with little signs in Flemish making it possible to distinguish the plants from each other. The signs '*oopen/ouvert*' and '*fermé/esloten*' at the entrance of the center are the first to indicate its multilingual approach: information is provided in French, Dutch and many cases even in French Flemish.

Philippe is just ending a phone call in French and as he hangs up the phone he immediately updates me on the status of bilingual education in northern France – the issue he had just been discussing and which one could undeniably call his life project. As Philippe prepares us some spiced licorice tea I look around the reception area. On some of the shelves books are displayed about the region's history while on others one can find all kinds of souvenirs such as mugs, stickers and keychains with the Flemish Lion. With our freshly brewed teas we make our way to the museum-area of the visitor center. The first thing I see is a large print of the painting 'La Bataille de Cassel de 1677' and turning to the left, I find the centerpiece of the room (if not the entire museum). We stand in front of a large scale model which displays the battlefield of the Battle of Cassel that took place in 1677 during the Franco-Dutch war. Enthusiastically Philippe explains how the battle evolved, making use of all the different miniature landmarks. He points at a small creek. "That's the *Peenebeek*" he says, "it's where it all started."



Map of the Low Countries (adapted from Marissal, Medina Lockhart, Van Hamme, Vandermotten et al. 2007).

2.1 From Flemish into Frenchmen

Starting at the Peenebeek, the Battle of Cassel eventually lead to the Treaty of Nijmegen in 1678 which was part of a series of treaties[6] that allowed for the gradual occupation of the Counties of Artois, Cambrai, southern Hainaut and southern Flanders. The Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 further divided the historic Seventeen Provinces and resulted in the establishment of the Franco-Belgian border as we know it today[7] (see map of the Low Countries above). Particularly

[6] It followed the Treaty of the Pyrenees in 1659 and the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1668 and preceded the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713.

[7] After the Treaty of Utrecht, the national border remained stable until the period of the French Revolution when it shifted again. The Treaty of Courtrai in 1820 eventually established the present Franco-Belgian border (Baycroft 2004).

concerned with the region of 'French Flanders,' Philippe and his colleagues aim to promote awareness of the cultural identity and history of the region that, due to its peripheral position alongside the state border, has always been a region subject to the effects of warfare resulting in treaties, shifting identities and ambiguous solidarities. Historically, the region has been divided linguistically in *la Flandre flamingante* (which roughly covers the arrondissement of Dunkirk) where West Flemish long persisted after the annexation and *la Flandre gallicante* (referring to the area of Lille and a part of Douai) where French in the form of Picard was the main language. While both are part of what used to be the Seventeen Provinces, and can therefore collectively be referred to as 'French Flanders,' at present 'French Flanders' is used mostly to refer to the rural area in between Dunkirk and Lille. This area has no administrative status but corresponds to the Communauté de Communes des Hauts de Flandres and the Communauté de Communes Flandre Intérieure[8] which roughly cover the Flemish-speaking area of French Flanders. It is this rural area, historically also referred to as the Westhoek, that will be my point of departure since the basis of the regional assemblage is here to be found. To avoid further confusion with regards to terminology, 'French Flanders' will therefore be used to refer to this area in particular, but as we will come to see, it cannot be studied in isolation from its surroundings.

Precisely due to its peripheral position, French Flanders was for a long time isolated from all the activities that took place at the center of the state and it continued to maintain closer ties to its Belgian Flemish neighbors with regards to "cultural, social, geographic and religious traits" (Baycroft 2004). For a long time, the region was able to organize itself around its own structures and customs until it was forced to play a role in the development of the French nation state. The French nation-building project can be considered one of the most successful ones in terms of creating national unity and the development of 'Frenchness' as an all-pervading national identity. In his admirable work, *Peasants into Frenchmen: Modernization of Rural France,* Eugen Weber

[8] The communauté de communes is a federation of municipalities established to facilitate inter-communal cooperation, they only have limited competences with regards to spatial planning and economic development.

(1976) describes in much detail the modernizing processes taking place in France between 1870 and 1914 and the birth of the French nation state (or at least the idea of it). At the basis of the cultivation of the nation lies the French Revolution which produced the concept of, and need for, national unity (Weber 1976). This idea of unity was, and still is, a necessary precondition for the cultivation of a sense of national belonging among citizens. The nation building project, in France and elsewhere, was an undertaking aimed at creating an imagined community in which people felt connected to their fellow citizens. And even though the members of this community would "never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them," what was important was that "in the minds of each live[d] the image of their communion" (Anderson 1991). This turned out to be a slow, and complex process that was achievable only by the combination of several developments, namely; industrialization, political modernization and socialization through the system of education. The case of French Flanders indicates that – like in other regions of France – the transformation from 'peasants into Frenchmen' did not always go smoothly and was not without resistance.

French Flanders is a rural and peripheral region that had, and still has, as its principle resource its high population congregating in small and middle-sized centers. Before the 19th century, agricultural production had been the central economic activity in the region with the production of potatoes, sugar beets, flax and rye. Although a flourishing textile industry existed from the Middle Ages onwards, and the port of Dunkirk acquired in 1662 contributed to the prosperity of the region, the economic success of French Flanders was stabilized only in the 19th century with a rather late industrial revolution. The development of the railways in Dunkirk resulted in a process of a large-scale industrialization of metallurgy and shipbuilding. Moreover, the Freycinet plan of 1895 – which encouraged the development of infrastructural networks –

contributed much to a spill-over effect of Dunkirk's economic blossoming to its surrounding areas where textile industry began to flourish again[9] (Baycroft 2004).

Aside from the high population density which significantly contributed to the advancement of the region's industrialization, it is clear that the region also enjoyed a perfect geographical location: coal and steel were readily available giving way for the development of a large mining and metallurgy industry; the port of Dunkirk gave access to the trade routes to neighboring countries as well as nations overseas; the developments of the infrastructural network connected the region to inner France as well as Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany (Baycroft 2004). Hence, the industrialization of the North contributed to inserting this marginal region into the market economy and the 'modern world.' But there were more consequences to the infrastructural developments. The construction of roads and railways also offered the means for national integration and cultural change. The principle outcome of the improved transportation network, therefore, "was to open the economy to the outside and integrate it into market forces and to encourage the population to think of itself more clearly in relation to others" (Baycroft 2004: 69). As Weber writes, "there could be no national unity before there was national circulation" (Weber 1976: 218). The system of roads and railways symbolized the creation of a network, initiating the beginning of an increasing parallel penetration of the worlds of the center and periphery that could no longer be seen as dispersed.

The modernization of infrastructure and modes of production was accompanied by a political and administrative modernization. But since French Flanders, belonged to a category of regions considered to be "either self-contained or part of entities to which the larger entity, France, was largely irrelevant" (Weber 1976: 218), it was not immediately integrated in these processes. Nonetheless, due to the modernization of agriculture and the dependency of the new

[9] Interestingly, however, is that while Lille and Dunkirk became industrial and economic centers, processes of urbanization did not take place. The reason for this was that agricultural work was often supplemented with earnings from seasonal work in factories nearby; traditional economic practices were merely complemented with other ways of earning revenue which allowed the French Flemish to commute when necessary and held off large-scale urbanization (Baycroft 2004). This characteristic of commuting, as we will come to see, has persisted up until today.

economy on state spending, a network of state patronage developed itself in which regions began to increasingly rely on the center. And not only did the state infiltrate the economic realm, it also penetrated the minds of the inhabitants of the periphery. In all its engagements with the peripheries, those that represented the state aimed to transmit the values in line with the Republican project; the 'backward other' "had to be taught manners, morals, literacy, a knowledge of French, and of France, a sense of the legal and institutional structure beyond their immediate community" (Weber 1976: 5). This acculturation brought about by political and administrative modernization, is captured by Weber who compares this acculturation of the masses with colonization since the ruling idea was that "conquered peoples are not peoples, have no culture of their own; they can only benefit from the enrichment and enlightenment the civilizer brings" (Weber 1976: 486). This notion of colonization and the gift of the civilizer to the uncivilized was particularly apparent in the national education system as the pursuance of linguistic uniformity was paired by an evident intolerance towards minority languages.

As Durkheim emphasized, "educational transformations are always the result and the symptom of the social transformations in terms of which they are to be explained" (Durkheim 1977: 166) and this account could well apply to the case of French Flanders. The inhabitants of the Westhoek, that for a long time lived in isolation from those coming from culturally and linguistically deviant areas, began to see a connection between mastering the French language and possibilities for social mobilization. Moreover, to bridge the cultural differences between the center and periphery, "the peasant had to be integrated into the national society, economy and culture: the culture of the city and of the City par excellence, Paris" (Weber 1976: 5). The main element central to this 'integration of the peasant' was the education system[10] that took the role

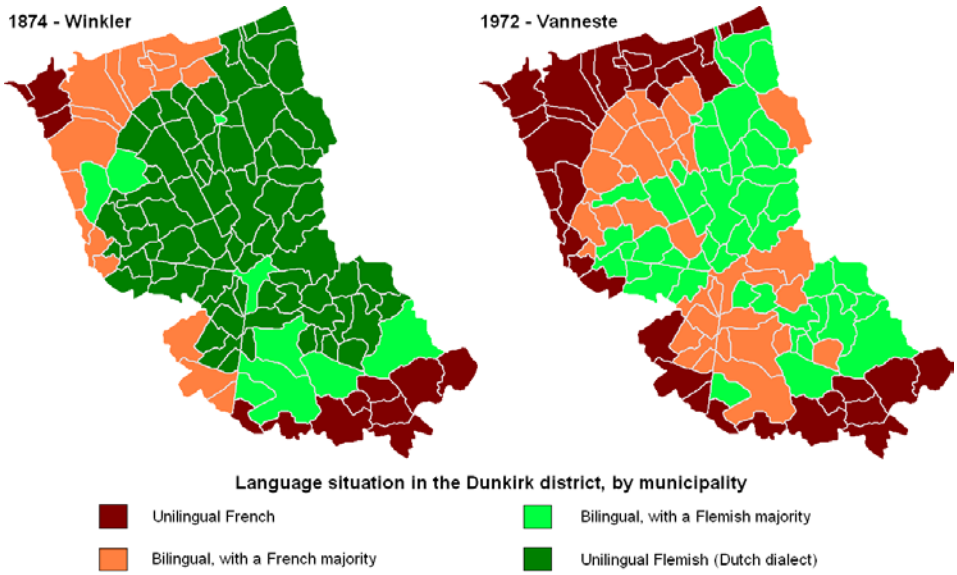
[10] Ernest Gellner's writings have touched upon the importance of education in theories of nationalism (see O'Leary 1997; Hall 1998). Gellner stressed that the education system has become indispensable in the nation state as "[t]he employability, dignity, security and self-respect of individuals, typically, and for the majority of men now hinges on their education" (Gellner 1983). Socialization and education became a public undertaking ruled by the principle of homogeneity and thus became tools and symbols of state power (Guibernau and Rex 1997). Benedict Anderson (1991) emphasized the importance of mass literacy and readership with regards to the creation of a national consciousness. Gellner does not refute this statement, but adds to this that it "can only be provided by mass education which only the state is capable of underwriting, if not directly supplying" (Gellner 1983). Historian Eric Hobsbawm also considered the education system of major importance as "standard national languages,

of a socializing agent to assimilate the 'backward' peasant and it was in this field where the monopoly of the French language was institutionalized (Ryckeboer 1997). But this did not work out in the same way in all regions and for a long time the Westhoek managed to resist it, largely due to the catechism classes where Flemish remained the first language up until the Second World War. Many proudly speak of this resistance and emphasize that up until the 20th century Flemish was still used in everyday communication. But from the second half of the 20th century onwards it was followed by a rapid decline and "the almost complete loss of the ability to speak or even understand Flemish within two generations" (Baycroft 2004: 35). This was apparent during my visits as it appeared to be difficult to find people that could still hold conversations in the dialect, those that could were in their seventies or eighties and generally did not pass it on to the next generation.

Moreover, aside from language, the importance of history in the curriculum and the false representation of France as a homogenous nation was also emphasized. Talking to Philippe, I realized it was an issue close to his heart. Visibly agitated he tells me the stories about those who were punished for speaking Flemish at school, arguing that the state had done everything they could to destroy Flemish sentiments. "We do not teach the history of the region but the history of Paris," he says as he leans back on his chair thinking about how to phrase what he wants to say. Then he makes an unexpected comparison. "Daesh in Syria, they destroyed Palmyre because they did not want us to know the culture from before the Islam, and so the French state… of course it is not Daesh but the French state… it is kind of the same reasoning, they do not want the people to know the history from before Louis XIV." He looks at me in a questioning way,

spoken or written, cannot emerge as such before printing, mass literacy, and hence, mass schooling" (Hobsbawm 1990). Important to keep in mind as well, in the context of the Westhoek and the Flemish language, is that print-capitalism and mass literacy involved creating languages-of-power. The linguistic diversity present in France certainly formed a complication in the process of unification, and naturally, certain dialects that were closer to the dominant print-language survived whereas others disappeared (Anderson 1991). The state apparatus thus used socialization and education as powerful tools to institutionalize a national pedagogy and subsequently confer a national identity on its French citizens.

trying to see if I understand the metaphor he had just made up. "Because there is a *roman national*," he adds. "La France Éternelle, we were always in France. Period."



Change of Language Situation French Westhoek (Dimitri 2006).

Schools thus served as principle social agents that were able to turn the peasants into Frenchmen (see Gellner, 1983; Weber 1976; Baycroft 2004). And it was the education system that was used as a tool by the state, which, by doing so, proved to be a "powerful 'identifier'" as it managed to impose its vision of the social world, its "categories, classificatory schemes, and modes of social counting and accounting with which bureaucrats, judges, teachers, and doctors must work and to which non-state actors must refer" (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Slowly the inhabitants of the Westhoek became familiar with the nation's "history, geography and culture, as well as the national republican value system, such that they could identify themselves directly with the French state and nation" (Baycroft 2004). By the second half of the 20th century the French Flemish dialect and culture had vastly disappeared from the Westhoek – even the names of villages and their streets had been Frenchified (see Appendix) – only to be revived again in the 21st century.

2.2 The Flemish Movement in France

Christine, the owner of the apartment I was renting during one of my stays, had arranged a meeting for me with Claudine. Claudine is an old lady who lives in the main street of Cassel. We sit down at a large table as she flips through her address book, clearly prepared for our meeting because I can see she had been writing down contact details on a sheet of paper before my arrival. While continuing to do so, she explains that she had always been interested in the Flemish regional history. What started with exploring the library of her uncle, who owned a rich collection of books on local and regional history, grew into an interest she maintained her entire life and which connected her – especially when she joined a genealogy club – to others that were concerned with regional history and the preservation of regional culture and identity. We briefly speak about the disappearance of the Flemish language as her tiny dog walks into the room, frantically wagging its tail excited to meet the stranger at the table. It is a dachshund which she has given the name 'Vlaemsch'. Vlaemsch looks old, and I wonder how long he will still be around for. What a perfect allegory, I thought.

As Claudine goes through all the contact details again to check if she did not skip anything it strikes me that all of her contacts are either concerned with folklore, history and genealogy or the preservation of the region's cultural heritage. I had expected, or hoped perhaps, to also find some visible expressions or affiliations with political sentiments. But that little of these traits were to be found in the French Flemish context proved to be unsurprising considering the region's historical particularities. When it came to politics, most of the French Flemish were rather passive and for a long time the region had a relatively distinct and regular voting pattern with their support for the Right indicating that they were concerned primarily with stability the protection of their economic interests" rather than "any purely political ideology" (Baycroft 2004: 53). Moreover, the local character of politics made that social status was an important currency in the elections of the Westhoek where "les enfants du pays" (Baycroft 2004: 59) were often the preferred candidates. As of the 1960s this changed when

socialism started to win ground. As a response to economic transformations in the region, a vast working class emerged and during the early 20th century a worker's movement emerged influenced by Belgian trade unionists and socialists. Interestingly though, the shared Flemish heritage was not used to create appeal for the socialist movement. When concerned with increasing political solidarities, political figures refrained from using arguments of cultural or ethnic identity.

Although there were several Flemish societies present in the region in the period before the First World War, they generally refrained from framing their interests politically. Apart from a few magazines or journals most of the manifestations of the regional identity were concerned with history and folklore and were mostly confined to small circles which prevented the societies from spreading their interests. This changed with the emergence of the *Vlaams Verbond van Frankrijk* (VVF, Flemish Association of France) in the interwar period. The anti-nationalist atmosphere after the First World War allowed for regionalisms to gain foothold. The Flemish Movement in France managed to benefit from this, and the Catholic seminaries appeared to be the 'breeding place' for the prominent characters that laid the basis for a Flemish Movement in the North.

But although the establishment of the VVF contributed much to the flourishing of a Flemish consciousness in the North their efforts remained limited to the upper intellectual circles and did not manage to reach the general public. Moreover, the efforts and ideology of the principle figure behind the organization, Jean-Marie Gantois, significantly influenced the course of the Flemish Movement in the post-war period. The ideology of Gantois, and the VVF in general, was related to the idea of 'Groot Nederlandisme' which considered all the areas previously belonging to the historic Seventeen Provinces as belonging to one race, the 'Dietse Volk.' The VVF had connections with the Vlaamsch Nationaal Verbond (Flemish National Alliance) from across the border since 1933 which, in turn, had connections with national socialist Germany (Teraege Toegaen 1986). During the Second World War, the VVF received

support from the German occupiers which enabled them to publish the journals *De Torrewachter* and *Le Lion de Flandre* and these journals strongly emphasized VVF's ideology. Teraege Toegaen (1986) cites an excerpt of one of the statements of the VVF which describes France as being "méridionale, jewified" and "more attentive to the 'nègre' and the 'bicot' than to the free Flemish." Moreover, it describes that Gantois was a proponent of separatism and the formation of a new Germanic world in which the entire northern territories of France (Nord-Pas-de-Calais and Picardie just until the Somme) would be reunited with their northern neighbors – a proposition which suited the ideas of the Vlaams Nationaal Verbond in Belgian Flanders and was encouraged by the Germans.

Hence, it is not surprising that after the Second World War the regional Flemish language as well as the expressions of regional identification declined. Branded with collaboration the label 'Flemish' as well as the usage of the Flemish language became suspicious. In the decades after the Second World War, some smaller Flemish organizations emerged throughout the region but most of them were strictly cultural. An exception was the establishment of the Parti Fédéraliste Flamand (Flemish Federal Party), a political party which did not manage to gather enough support and soon disappeared. Due to the strictly cultural focus with the principle aim of preserving the cultural heritage, the influence of the present organizations was limited concerning the cultivation of a strong regional identity. But it seems that in the last couple of decades, regional developments have given way for new organizations as well as new visions and strategies to emerge, and increasingly efforts are undertaken throughout rural French Flanders – but also the larger northern region – to express and display its distinct identity. In the following two chapters I will therefore describe the assemblage that was sculpted by this historical trajectory.

The sad truth is, however, that there are as many egos as there are French Flemish organizations! No cohesion, no coherence! Division, disputes and distrust prevail! None of the big players has, up until now, understood that one needs to sacrifice his ego, push it aside to work towards one goal: the Flemish roots, culture and distinctiveness under one flag, the proud Flemish Lion, who – at this point – has no reason left for his pride. Instead, sad and sorrowful, he looks upon the divisions and selfishness. This plays into the hands of a centralist and arrogant French government! Goddamn it, finally wake up French Flemish people! Can someone finally stand up as a true leader who understands the system and parries it?

- Leslie

3. FRANÇAIS JE SUIS – FLAMAND JE RESTE

I followed Cassel's main road, a narrow street which also serves as the passageway to the surrounding towns and villages, and ended up on the large town square which – like most of the town squares throughout the region – generally serves as a parking lot. Apart from two British couples enjoying their beers on cheap plastic garden chairs at Café A Saint-Cécile, and two teenage girls hanging out on the stairs in front of the town hall, the town was practically deserted. On my way to the church I spotted Café Aux Trois Moulins with a little yellow sign on the right side of the building saying '*drie Meulen*.' A sign I obviously could not ignore. Like my fellow café-goers, who were probably all in their seventies or eighties, I ordered a *café noir*. From the corner of my eye I could see how the innkeeper was putting some *gaufres sèches* in a rusty green tin box before sitting down with a group of old women who were speaking about the *potjevleesch* and *carbonade flamande* that were on the menu. After some quiet observations, I decided to come back later but got into conversation with the son of the innkeeper. "My father still speaks a bit of Flemish!" He said after I had explained what brought me to Cassel. He pointed at the innkeeper, who looked up and smiled. "He is a *Vlaming*!" He ordered his father to grab a magazine from behind the bar. The magazine was one of the issues from Yser Houck, an association which aims to promote and protect the French Flemish heritage. He then jumped to the other side of the bar and grabbed something hanging in front of the window. I sat down again as he handed over what appeared to be a newspaper clipping. It was an article from a Belgian paper, *Het Laatste Nieuws*. 'The Force of Flemish' was its title. "That's my father you see, and it is here," he said, pointing at a picture of the yellow sign of '*drie Meulen*' I had seen outside. "He still speaks a bit of Flemish, you know. I don't, but he does!"

The article speaks of an enduring and 'shimmering love' for the Flemish regional language and identity, a love that is increasingly expressed symbolically but which also manifests itself in the increase of Flemish language classes throughout the region. The son of the innkeeper hands over a leaflet, a promotional flyer of the organization EUVO (Europa der Volkeren or

Europe of the Peoples) which is responsible for the design and placement of the various Flemish street signs and inscriptions I had spotted during my walks. While, as we have seen, some of the currently existing organizations which promote and safeguard the French Flemish culture already emerged in the 1980s, the turn of the century has witnessed a significant increase. Moreover, contrary to the organizations of the 20th century whose reach was rather limited and who did not manage to gain much foothold outside of the catholic and intellectual circles, it seems that the current efforts of organizations are paying off as they are gaining more recognition throughout the entire region.

In this chapter I will examine what efforts and organizations have flowed from the historical trajectory I have just briefly described. While the organizations present in French Flanders share an identical purpose of spreading awareness of the region's Flemish roots, it would nonetheless be a futile effort to try and describe them as a collective for they all have a different focus and different perspectives. While all the actors are "part and parcel of a 'regional' assemblage of political power that is defined by its practices" (Allen and Cochrane 2007: 28), it is important to recognize that power struggles are enacted throughout the entire assemblage. It is by virtue of their resources – here described as forms of capital – they have at their disposal that some actors can exert more or less power than others. The power balance between the different actors and the resources they mobilize, can be roughly determined by defining the types of groups present in the region that are concerned with the Flemish cause. An attempt to doing so would leave us with approximately four different kinds of categories.

The first category consists of a few individuals rather than groups that emphasize history and identity and have a more political tone. These individuals are often past retirement age and have little resources to mobilize, in their effort to become heard and acquire recognition they latch onto the idea of the historic Seventeen Provinces and attempt to mobilize their cross-border networks. But considering these networks often have a political stigma associated with nationalism and right-wing extremism, this form of mobilization of social capital has not proven

to be effective. In this chapter I will briefly devote some space to why this political tone has not been able to gain foothold.

The second category of organizations emerged around the 1980s and 1990s and is primarily concerned with regional identity preservation and affirmation. The central asset of these kinds of groups is their social capital since organizations from this category enjoy large support, managing to bring together different generations, and their practices result in the increased sense of belonging as well as a boost in local liveliness. Moreover, they are widely recognized for their cultural capital: their knowledge and skills with regards to preservation, renovation and local history is broadly respected and endorsed. The prime example to which I will shortly return is the organization Yser Houck.

The third category is much related to the second, but has developed a particular focus on the promotion and preservation of the regional language and culture. This particular group asserted itself around the turn of the century and specifically focuses on the revival of French Flemish. Their principle resources are social capital, as they have strong networks throughout rural French Flanders and enjoy wide support of local political figures, and economic capital for they receive funding from governmental bodies to support their actions. Most of those involved in these groups are above the age of 50 and generally they stem from different social backgrounds. But it seems as if this group is particularly concerned with the expansion of its symbolic capital. The groups that promote French Flemish as the regional language have, over the past years, acquired wide recognition and authority but now seem to struggle over the acquisition of symbolic capital with a fourth category, that of (4) groups that value the regional language but promote the development of Dutch as a standard language. The division between these two groups is what currently characterizes the regional assemblage, and what has resulted in a 'symbolic struggle' between the different actors that try and implement a legitimate vision. Those that promote the Dutch language also make use of their social capital, but this resource

mainly refers to their cross-border networks and other 'elites' or 'intellectuals,' as most of those involved stem from a well-educated middle class.

As my purpose is to form an understanding of the process of assembling the region, the different visions of these last two categories are of principle concern. Nonetheless it is important to briefly touch upon the others as well for it demonstrates that all groups attempt to mobilize the regional cultural capital (understood here as the historical identity of the region as well as its constructed Flemish identity) for different ends, and for it allow us to understand the different visions that have emerged and the different strategies or tactics employed. After having done so, I will be focusing particularly on the first frame of reference, that of 'the region within the region.' Those who approach the regional assemblage by this logic consider French Flanders to refer to the rural area between Dunkirk and Lille and are often driven by arguments of cultural preservation and personal attachments, and generally fall into the second and third categories I just briefly described.

3.1 Regionalism Without Politics, A Legacy of the War

While the first category could hardly be called a category in this overview at all, this might well be the interesting thing about it. Ever since the efforts of Jean Marie Gantois, there has not been a French Flemish organization that described itself as political or as aspiring to put forward political claims. Neither have there been any concrete attempts to create a collective movement to further the interests of the region aside from those of the Parti Fédéraliste Flamand. The PFF was established in 1985 and emerged out of a dispute between members of the organization Menschen Lyk Wyder[11]. While it started off as a leftist movement, over time elements of the extreme right seeped into it. The PFF, which ideologically drew from pre-war

[11] Menschen Lyk Wyder was established in 1977 and existed up until 1982 when the organization dissolved due to internal disputes. The organization's motto was "decider, vivre et travailler en Flandre" and it aimed to regroup the efforts of all individuals and organizations throughout the region to contribute actively to the revival of the Flemish community in France (Teraege Toegaen 1986).

Flemish nationalism, gradually sympathized with right-wing parties in Belgian Flanders and established links to the Belgian Volksunie. From that moment onwards, it was clear the PFF would not be able to attract much support since "the French Flemish do not want to have anything to do with those kinds of extreme movements concerning regional activities." It thus never managed to weave itself into the regional political fabric and therefore soon disappeared. "There once was an attempt of the PFF to hold a demonstration in Lille," one of my informants told me, "but I think about 27 people showed up. There were more policemen around than protestors."

Aside from the PFF, and after the turn of the century, some rare attempts to frame French Flemish regionalism in a more political manner were made by Wido Triquet – former architect from Dunkirk and by now retiree – who established the 'Mouvement Flamand' and is best known for his resistance against the name change of the Collège Michiel de Swaen in Dunkirk[12]. During most of my conversations, informants explicitly or implicitly distanced themselves from Triquet and his actions, sometimes even referring to him as "completely nuts." From my conversations, it seems there exists an 'accepted' version of the promotion and safeguarding of regional culture and identity and an 'extreme' version which is often rejected. Informants unanimously agree that this is a result of the regional history. The post-war inheritance has made the French Flemish careful with regards to what they say and how they frame their efforts because ever since the Second World War speaking about the regional culture or in the Flemish language was off limits. This suspicion remained visible long after the Second World War and many highlight how – despite the disappearance of more politically tinted actors and an almost exclusive focus on the restoration and preservation of the regional tangible and intangible heritage – the state's tendency to monitor the developments of regionalist sentiments

[12] Most of my informants jokingly speak about Triquet who, in December 2007, sent a death threat to the headmaster of the Collège Michiel de Swaen in Dunkirk since the school wanted to change its name to 'Collège Lucie Aubrac' commemorating an important figure in the resistance movement of Nazism in France. The removal of the name Michiel de Swaen, a well-known poet and playwright from the region, would be a symbolic act which would contribute to the further disavowal of the region's Flemish past. An attack on the school's headmaster who, in essence, is a state official would – in the eyes of Triquet – be a political act necessary to defend the Flemish regional patrimony.

lingered on. "I can tell you that up until 10-15 years ago those who were involved in French Flemish matters frequently got a visit from the Sécurité." Dirk, deputy chief editor of Ons Erfdeel, said as he explained to me that in the 1990s he went to visit someone in the area of Bergues and he was followed the entire way from the Franco-Belgian border to his destination. Multiple informants indicated that these situations were common, that they continued throughout the 1990s and that, although distrust has certainly decreased over the past decades, it nonetheless continues to influence cross-border interactions.

Even Philippe appears to remain reluctant when it comes to using the terms and emphasizes one should still be cautious. "I do not always dare to say les Flamands, les Flamands, les Flamands because I would be afraid people would consider me as being *vlaamsgezind*." From our conversation, it seems that the notion of '*vlaamsgezind*' (pro-Flemish) seems to carry political connotations, implicitly suggesting connections to Flemish nationalist sentiments and extremism. But most of the French Flemish distance themselves from the more political pro-Flemish sentiments, Philippe reassures me. "Bruno once was vlaamsgezind, he was *radically* vlaamsgezind… But now… now he's doing better," he says, making it sound as some kind of disease that can be cured. "Especially now with the folk radio. He's 100% folk, hence no longer vlaamsgezind. So, it's all good."

At first, I was surprised to note a repeated emphasis on the non-political nature of efforts by my French Flemish informants and wondered why the political aspect of regional identification and regional consciousness was denied, and why actors tightly grabbed onto cultural elements and symbols that also quickly seemed to be dismantled from their political connotations. But the more conversations I had, the more it became clear that the Second World War had heavily affected the trajectory of the Flemish Movement in France and that up until today one cannot hold a conversation about the regional language and identity without the necessary nuance and warnings concerning this conjuncture. This, however, is not to say that all the French Flemish actors consider their claims or efforts to be unpolitical, but by framing

efforts as cultural or pragmatic one manages to circumvent sensitive issues more easily. As Frank, vice president of APNES[13], said: "being a strong culture is a form of a political argument, right? Especially in a nationalist country like France." Andries, former Dutch politician who has been involved with – and interested in – the developments in French Flanders since the 1970s, emphasizes that to put forward their claims, the French Flemish "piggyback upon the regional movements that can be seen throughout France" and they have to since "by themselves they are too weak." His analysis has been supported by many others. He explains that despite the absence of a political movement the "demands are clearly political." Not presenting themselves as a political movement has been a wise decision, he claims, "because a) they won't be able to be successful and b) they would have to compete with other political parties and that would reduce their influence even more. They depend on *good will*." This dependence upon good will has resulted in a necessity for strategies that appeal to the larger public, strategies that are void of political connotations and references to the past and that instead respond to current needs and demands. This has generally resulted in the continuation of the trajectory the organizations of the 1980s took: the production of strictly cultural strategies to revive a certain regional consciousness.

3.2 Pays de Flandre: From Suspicious Affiliation to Strategic Creation

In this context, it is not surprising that the groups that generally have gotten most support throughout the region are those focusing on heritage preservation. The largest organization in French Flanders doing so is the association Yser Houck[14], established in 1989. Yser Houck's main aim is to preserve the region's tangible heritage by conducting renovations

[13] Association des Professeurs de Néerlandais de l'Enseignement (APNES) is a professional organization which mainly focusses on promoting Dutch education along the Franco-Belgian border

[14] 'Yser Houck' refers to the area around the source of the stream Yser where one can find – among others – the villages of Buysscheure, Rubrouck, Volckerinckhove and Noord-Peene. In this rural area, the Flemish regional identity has remained stronger than in others and is therefore often referred to by my informants as the area in which one can still find most remnants of the region's Flemish past (with regards to architecture as well as street signs, the natural landscape and also inhabitants that still speak French Flemish).

but it also does research into local history, the fruits of which it publishes in a quarterly magazine. More recently, although it is not one of their central aims, Yser Houck became involved in the promotion of the regional language. This large scope of interests and activities has resulted in a wide and diverse audience. Philippe spoke of the association full of praise, emphasizing, like others, that they manage to attract all kinds of people, "reconciling the ecologists and the Flemish conservatives from the countryside." Their inclusive nature might have certainly contributed to their successes and their central focus on the region's rich patrimony has been crucial in prompting an increasing awareness of the region's cultural history. Philippe explains how 25 years ago, no one was aware of the region's rich patrimony, but that the establishment of Yser Houck changed the mentality. Today, the promotion of the region's cultural heritage is no longer left to Yser Houck alone. Over the last two decades, organizations such as Het Reuzekoor, De Katjebei, Flandre TV and Les Amis du Reuze – to name a few – all contributed to spreading awareness of, and enthusiasm for, the French Flemish cultural heritage and the emphasis of the Flemish identity of rural French Flanders. While in the 1970s waving around with the Flemish flag or driving around with a bumper sticker displaying the Flemish lion was rather uncommon, today "there are plenty of cars with the Flemish lion or a Flemish sticker on their number plate – it is something normal." EUVO, the organization that designs and places Flemish street signs and inscriptions, has also witnessed a vast increase in requests.

Original Hand-Painted EUVO Inscription (Cassel).

The revival of Flemish culture and identity started off in the late 1980s and 1990s but developments greatly accelerated over the past two decades. While the "core of the *living* Flemish culture of France" – consisting of a few of villages in the rural part of French Flanders (such as Volckerinckhove, Buysscheure, Noordpeene and Rubrouck) – is rather small, people are increasingly identifying themselves as being Flemish throughout the region. Asking about these identifications, a well-known musician I spoke with compared the current regional developments to the revival of regionalism in the 1970s during which folk musicians used music as a political tool "against globalization; it was to find their roots again." What he said reminded me of my conversation with the mayor of Wormhout who emphasized that people are always interested "in that which is at the verge of disappearing." In similar vein the musician argued that today we have a different understanding of the meanings of culture and identity. When identities are strong, he says, there is no need for affirmation, so trying "to find outside elements to build your identity" is a sign of weakness. "So, if we are looking for Flemish elements to say 'well we are Flemish because we are eating French fries, because we are doing folksongs' it is a bit artificial. So maybe it is a sign that this culture is really disappearing."

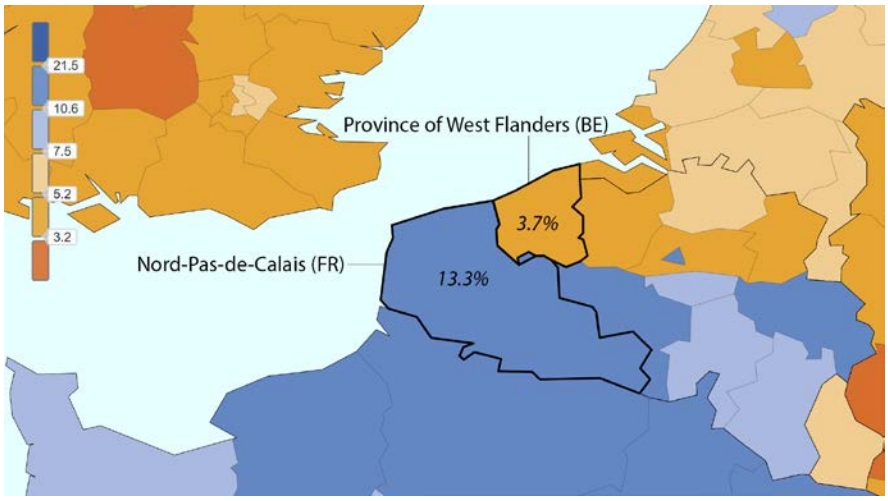
This line of thought seems to correspond with the idea of George Schöpflin (2000) who argues that if the cultural reproduction of a group is under threat, and if this groups lacks "access to institutional power, it will seek to compensate for this by emphasizing its symbolic articulation

and presence" (Schöpflin 2000: 8). Important to note, however, is that this renewed identification is generally not accompanied with an awareness of the region's history and let alone with the ability to speak Flemish or Dutch. "Although people refer to themselves as being Flemish," Ludovik says, "they hardly seem to know what this means." Ludovik was born on the Belgian side of the border but developed a strong interest in the historic French Flanders and now works as a tour guide on both sides of the *schreve*. To illustrate what he means, he gives an example by explaining the carnival celebrations in Dunkirk during which words such as '*zotje*' (kiss on the lips), '*kliper*' (salted herring) or '*klede*' (cloth, outfit) are frequently used. But "to the young participants it feels like a code language which belongs to the carnival. So, it is without other connotations – there is no awareness of them belonging to a Flemish cultural tradition or past."

The usage of Flemish cultural elements in celebrations is not limited to the carnival festivities, and the increase in popularity of local traditions, such as the Géants du Nord[15] indicates "an enduring Flemish presence" in the region. Eric – historian, author of many books on French Flanders, and former president of La Maison du Néerlandais in Bailleul – sees this revival as a 'compensation' for the hardship of the North which still has not recovered from the economic crisis; where social cohesion decreased and villages now are threatened to turn into *villages-dortoirs*; and where there is a vast disillusionment when it comes to politics. "France used to be a rich and powerful country, but also a country of peasants. But this is no longer the case," he says, and considers this the cause of the weakening of social ties and social cohesion. He shakes his head and notes that the decrease of solidarity and a sense of national belonging is most visible during the election periods. "Election after election there is an increase in those who abstain from voting," he says. "I frequently hear people in the streets saying 'well yeah, left, right, it's all the same. They don't know anything about our concerns. They are like strangers to us.'"

[15] The Géants are anthropomorphic mannequins that traditionally emerge during religious processions (but became increasingly secularized and gained more profane dimensions) and that symbolize Bible passages or local legends. The giants display the power of the community and are a tangible manifestation of the town's celebration of collective identity.

The north of France today is very different from the prosperous region it used to be in the time of industrialization. In 2010, 19.5% of the population of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region lived below the poverty line against 14.1% for the whole of France (Cresge 2013). The unemployment rate has been increasing since the economic crisis of 2008, and as long as employment opportunities remain scarce, poverty rates are unlikely to undergo a transformation. A report published by Insee in 2016 indicated that 18.9% of the inhabitants of the Northern department live below the poverty line, the majority of which live in the centers of Dunkirk, Lille or around other industrial areas (Insee 2016a). But even though the area of rural French Flanders suffering less[16] than others, unemployment rates remain high and with budget cuts, business acquisitions by foreign investors and bankruptcies, job security remains an issue.



Contrast unemployment rates between Nord-Pas-de-Calais and West Flanders[17] (adapted from Eurostat 2017).

In this context of political disillusionment, high unemployment rates, and a sense of being 'forgotten' by Paris[18] for "Paris has no interest in the north of France," it seems that local and regional traditions have maintained their 'authentic' meaning and purpose of asserting local

[16] French Flanders has an average poverty rate of 14.3% which is on the same level as the rest of the country (Insee 2016b).
[17] Map of the total unemployment rates in NUTS 2 regions in percent (of the population between 15 to 74 years old). For comparison, the NUTS 2 regions of Nord-Pas-de-Calais (France) and the Province of West Flanders (Belgium) are highlighted. Using 2016 data, Nord-Pas-de-Calais has an unemployment rate of 13.3% and the Province of West Flanders a rate of 3.7%.
[18] Eric describes that it is not only a lack of interest but that "according to those of Paris… the Flemish region does not exist. Sure, there is a northern area, old mines, old textile industries, unemployment, and the Ch'ti language… Ch'ti!!" He argues that the continuous denial of the presence of a Flemish history might have fueled – or even accelerated – the assertion of a Flemish regional consciousness.

identities and revitalizing a sense of belonging and social cohesion. But as Ludovik indicated with his example of the carnival of Dunkirk, the growth in popularity of the adjective 'Flamand', linked to regional economic development through cultural tourism, is often described as devoid of meaning. Even though the social and political elements mentioned above should not be overlooked or underestimated as potential factors contributing to the revival of regional consciousness, much of it can be primarily attributed to economic developments.

In the last decades, many municipalities as well as businesses have discovered that the region's cultural capital serves as a great asset for the development of local economies which is crucial to the maintenance of the liveliness and desirability of the smaller centers. Cultural capital is now widely mobilized in order to advance the economic opportunities, especially in the tourism sector. "Drive around and you cannot find any municipality or village that does not have a connection of some sort with Flanders. They don't exist, they don't exist!" Leslie said, a Belgian man who, since his childhood, has developed a strong love for French Flanders. "There is always something promoted and being sold as being 'flamande'. But you know, in Flanders and the Netherlands they also sell stuff from China." His sarcastic comment hints at his opinion on the artificial creation of the 'Flemish brand' which has proven to be lucrative[19].

This mobilization of culture and heritage can be witnessed in other French regions as well as it facilitates the process of regional identity production, a process that contributes significantly to the strengthening of regional institutionalization (Perrin 2012). The display of cultural symbols, for example, is significant for they reveal "the cultural characteristics that local people use to define their membership in local, regional, national and supranational entities" (Donnan and Wilson 1999: 13). Moreover, symbols are means of marking boundaries, the usage of flags and signs of the Flemish Lion, bumper stickers and street signs are part of a 'political

[19] A prime example of the profitability of capitalizing on the region's cultural history is La Musée de Flandre in Cassel. While initially the French Flemish I have been speaking to were thrilled with the prospect of having an official museum dedicated to the region's identity and history, many of them now speak about Musée de Flandre with disappointment. Ever since the Department became in charge of the museum it has changed into a "vitrine to show the culture of Flanders," Belgian Flanders. While first the museum displayed items referring to rural French Flanders and its local traditions, now it is much more focused on the display of 'high culture': paintings of Belgian Flemish master painters.

symbolism' (Donnan and Wilson 1999) that works to distinguish and define belonging. Therefore, when investigating the regional assemblage, the cultural dimension should not be overlooked as it often serves as a useful tool in (re)activating cultural resources to assert itself and attain legitimacy (see also Magalhães 2014). The usage of culture can embed a particular territory or society in history; it can bring economic revenue as it might boost the tourism industry; it has the potential to reinforce "social cohesion through cultural activities"; and it can renew identities "to project populations into modernity by giving them a sense of their common history" (Perrin 2012: 465). Paasi (2009) argues in similar vein when claiming that "the region and regional identity [are now seen] as new magic words for developing economy through culture and as important cohesive elements for social life."

In this light, the increased focus on cultural tourism does not come unexpectedly. The 'marginality' of the Westhoek has been transformed into a kind of 'uniqueness' (Bennetts 2012) that has been appropriated throughout the larger northern region to position 'the North' as being unique in their French Flemish history and character. Flemish cultural capital is thus mobilized and used as a tool to generate possibilities for cultural tourism and to put towns, villages and businesses on the map. Eric confirms this, emphasizing that many official institutions are now using the "Flemish gastronomy, the Flemish cheerfulness, the Flemish culture" to say "'yes, that is the Flemish consciousness.' The message sent out by official institutions is: visit us here in Flanders." Indeed, restaurants throughout the region are showing off the '*carbonade flamande*', '*potjevleesch*' and '*waterzooi*' on their menus. These are 'the pride of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region', the authentic dishes symbolizing the richness and simplicity of Nord-Pas-de-Calais.

The efforts of the different Flemish organizations are intrinsically linked to these 'branding' practices. In fact, one of the principle organizations, the Akademie voor Nuuze Vlaemsche Taele, is actively involved in designing touristic information panels that are multilingual. Moreover, it recently launched the Charter *Ja Om 't Vlaemsch* (Yes for Flemish)

which has the purpose to preserve and support the regional French Flemish dialect. Municipalities sign the Charter as a symbolic gesture, indicating they will actively promote the Flemish regional language and culture by placing bilingual street panels, translating the names of municipal buildings into Flemish and ensuring access to French Flemish language classes.

All of the above-mentioned elements constitute actors that generate forms of power to strengthen the assemblage. The interplay between private and public actors, formal and informal, works to make the assemblage possible. Aside from the local symbols and traditions mentioned above, that work to represent the assemblage and contribute to the legitimacy of the categories and demarcations it attempts to impose, some less visible constituents are equally important. Some of these include: the Marche de la Peene, an annual commemoration march for the Battle of Cassel; the Day of the Flemish Community celebrated on the 11th of July (supported by the Flemish government); tourism brochures, leaflets, cross-border bike routes and maps that describe the Westhoek as unified and without a clear state-border; news articles that describe the regional Flemish history and identity; and social media platforms where networks are established and maintained. All of these elements serve as actors that give shape to the assemblage and support the vision that is to be communicated, but as we will soon see, this does not mean that "the arrangement is itself institutionally coherent or without tension" (Allen 2011: 155).

Slowly, the image of the forgotten grey, muddy and rainy rural hinterland is transforming into the region of the *bon vivant* who, accompanied by a good plate of comfort food, a full jug of locally brewed beer, and a beautiful view of the sloped French Flemish landscape, celebrates the *joie de vivre*. But the significant increase over the past decade and a half of this regional branding is not isolated from developments in the larger northern region. With the centers of Dunkirk, Saint-Omer and Lille expanding, rural French Flanders is caught in between. "The internal political tension field in France is something you should keep an eye on," Katarina, in charge of cross-border cooperation at the West-Vlaamse Intercommunale, stresses during our conversation about the regional developments in the French Westhoek area. "Rural French

Flanders is captured between two *géants*: Lille which aims to exert its influence, and on the other side – especially now with Patrice Vergriete as a very important local player – Dunkirk which does the same." She explains how she noticed that political actors in rural French Flanders are "afraid to be sucked up into the communaute urbaine" and that they "don't want to lose their distinctiveness." The communautés de communes of Hauts de Flandre and Flandre Interieure are now looking for new ways to organize themselves and are "searching for ways to present themselves towards – on the one hand – the metropolis, and – on the other – the agglomeration." A strong tool for resistance has appeared to be culture, which is mobilized to emphasize their distinctiveness from Dunkirk and Lille and to make clear that they want to be respected as such without being perceived as "mere pawns in the hands of Dunkirk, of the coast, or of Lille."

Cultural capital is thus mobilized in order to brand the region for three principal reasons: 1) to generate economic capital by building and expanding the tourism sector around the region's Flemish history and patrimony; 2) to generate symbolic capital by transforming the region's negative image into something positive and using 'Flandre' to refer to the region instead of 'le Nord'; and 3) to generate a strong regional identity by which rural French Flanders is able to assertively position itself vis-à-vis regional centers of Saint-Omer, Dunkirk and Lille. What was once suspicious and better avoided is now utilized when possible and turned into a strategic creation, a lucrative brand which can be mobilized to further regional interests.

3.3. An Intricate Network of 'Groupuscules'

While all the actors that make up the regional assemblage work towards the promotion of regional culture and a regional identity, the idea that they share a single and shared vision is far from reality. It was during my second visit to the region that I realized that internal struggles were fundamental issues at play and that the field of different '*groupuscules*' is characterized by internal conflicts and suspicion. While some note that tensions are visible within organizations, it

is the tension between organizations that is particularly worrisome: the discussions on whether one should consider French Flemish as a separate language or a dialect stemming from the Dutch language, and the question on which of the two should be promoted. This has destabilized the regional assemblage, making it "too divided" and "too fragmented" because all the different "French Flemish organizations are pulling a string, but not the same one."

These tensions are inevitable as inherent to the process of regional assemblage, I argue, is a 'symbolic struggle,' a struggle over the definition of regional representation and regional identity. This struggle particularly plays out between those that are involved in language promotion. These groups, that are particularly concerned with the acquisition of symbolic capital and the implementation of alternative visions, are struggling over the power to define the "legitimate definition of the divisions of the social world and, thereby, to *make and unmake groups*" (Bourdieu 1991: 223). This struggle over visions of divisions is a struggle over legitimate delimitation in which the actors attempt to define the territory and its frontiers. In this process, the past can be reconstructed to adjust it to present needs and future perspectives. This labor of construction and representation is not explicit but becomes evident in practice and discourse. By investigating the labor of representation, it is possible to consider the extent to which there are spaces of potential for these alternative visions that have emerged. As all the above-mentioned groups lack formal political power, they rely on their capacity to provide alternative visions of the region. The extent to which they succeed all depends on the resources they are able to mobilize as well as position vis-à-vis others. In this struggle, capital is seen "both as the weapon and as the stake of the struggle" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 98). The main weapon and stake fought over and mobilized is symbolic capital – or authority, collective recognition – which makes the claims for recognition more effective and credible. Interestingly, therefore, it seems that parallel to challenging the dominant views of the social world imposed by the state – the principal holder of forms of capital – in which all the above-mentioned groups are involved, this 'internal' struggle obstructs the alignment of visions that would allow for an objectification and

officialization of a new vision of divisions and an effective challenge to the dominant vision of the social world.

This struggle is most visible in the debate concerning language implementation for by presenting the language as a language capable of being used in official institutions as well as the public sphere, it has the potential to become institutionalized. This vision on language is paired with a vision on regional history and identity and in both cases language is mobilized as a signifier for the vision the groups represent. This has resulted in the emergence of clear oppositions in discourse around both visions: French Flemish came to be related to the rural, traditional and inward-looking, while Dutch came to be related to the urban, the modern and the outward-looking. But how did this rupture between the two emerge? As I have indicated in the previous chapter, the linguistic and cultural developments in French Flanders were greatly determined by the inheritance of the Second World War. But as of the 1970s and 1980s – perhaps piggybacking on regional movements elsewhere – some organizations and individuals managed to breathe new life into French Flemish regionalism and the regional Flemish language (e.g. Vlaemsch leeren, Radio Uylenspiegel, Reuzekoor, Cours de Flamand, Tengaere Toegaen). As of the 1980s language classes started to appear throughout the region, especially in the areas close to the Franco-Belgian border such as those with support of the Nederlandse Taalunie in Wervicq-Sud and Bailleul[20]. While the debate has been brought up before, it was especially during this period when the conflict evolved between those that promote the French Flemish dialect, who consider the dialect to be a language in itself, and those that aim to develop Dutch language education, who argue that Dutch is the standard language of the Flemish dialect.

There is truth to both sides. As the region became cut off from its northern neighbors after the annexation, the regional language increasingly got its own characteristics and did not

[20] Ryckeboer (2002) describes how in 1982 the French Minister of Education Savary, made it possible for minority languages to find their way into the education system. Moreover, Tengaere Toegaen, a French Flemish organization, managed to organize several French Flemish language classes throughout the region which lasted only 5 years.

undergo the linguistic reforms that took place Belgium and the Netherlands[21]. Due to the course of history, the state border therefore also became – in some respect – a language border. In his work, Ryckeboer (2002) gives linguistic examples of this language barrier and notes that much of the French Flemish words primarily refer to "the world of a traditional, even old-fashioned way of life" (Ryckeboer 2002: 31). This was confirmed by the musician I spoke with who emphasizes that French Flemish has not changed since the 18th century and describes it as a "language of the past" which cannot be used in today's world for there are no words "to say 'fridge' or a 'bicycle,' there is no word! We can say 'potato,' 'carrot' and so on."

It is because of this stagnation and the lost connection with the Dutch standard language that some consider French Flemish as having developed into a distinct regional language. The organization that clearly supports and promotes this vision, and which has become central to the internal tensions of the regional assemblage, is the Akademie voor Nuuze Vlaemsche Taele (ANVT). The ANVT was established in 2004 as a federation grouping different kinds of smaller regional associations, and it has by now developed into one of the most actors. While the ANVT is widely praised for its efforts to promote and preserve the French Flemish character of the region, it is mainly on the subject of language education where opinions and visions differ and where conflict arises. The main critique on the ANVT is that it takes for granted French Flemish as a regional language, assuming that throughout the entire rural border region the dialect has developed in the same manner while – as many indicate – in each town or village the dialect had its own particular characteristics.

[21] Essentially, the French Flemish dialect is described not to differ from the other West Flemish dialects but it does have two distinctive features. First, due to its marginal position in the Dutch-speaking area and due to its historical separation from its northern neighbors, the French Flemish dialect still contains "some particular Middle Dutch phonological, morphological or lexical features" as well as other "archaic elements which have disappeared elsewhere" (Ryckeboer 2002: 28). Secondly, due to its separation from other Dutch or Flemish dialects, French Flemish has known its own particular innovations.

National Motto of France in the so-called 'invented language' of the ANVT, Town Hall of Wormhout.

But the ANVT has not responded to this critique and has instead created its own educational materials[22] which has only deepened the gap between those promoting French Flemish and those promoting Dutch. This has generated accusations of wanting to have a "monopoly on the Flemish regional language" and of "building a new language," introducing grammar rules that never existed as the language has always been a spoken language and not a written one (see picture of the national motto above).

Moreover, informants emphasize that the ANVT is avoiding contacts with linguists from across the border which seems to be characteristic of the relatively conservative outlook of those that approach the regional assemblage from the perspective of 'the region within the region.' They are said to turn their back towards the national border, and are described as a closed society which does not tolerate any intruders and which distances itself from anything or anyone Belgian or Dutch[23]. Their exclusive character and reluctance to collaborate with other organizations has resulted in the idea that some actors connected to the ANVT actively promote the polarization of the regional assemblage. Many are especially concerned by the fact that, precisely because the ANVT is highly regarded throughout the region, it also succeeds in penetrating the political fabric of rural French Flanders. Their recent initiative, *Ja Om 't Vlaemsch*, is now supported by many different municipalities and it seems that they also have some figures

[22] 'Vlaemsch Leeren' (1978) by Jean-Paul Sepieter and 'Cours de Flamand – Het Vlaams dat men Ouders Klappen' (1992) by Jean-Louis Marteel are earlier handbooks to study French Flemish. In 2012 'Schryven en Klappen' by Frederic Devos appeared which served as an addition to Marteel's handbook, the latter is used and promoted by the ANVT.
[23] Some have speculated that it is for this reason that the president of the ANVT never replied to my requests to speak with him.

that "serve as their 'mouthpiece' in parliament, Jean-Pierre Decool amongst others, who actively plead for the Flemish language." Decool has repeatedly attempted to emphasize the importance of the preservation and promotion of French Flemish, but without much success.

Nonetheless, Decool managed to put the issue of regional language on the agenda, and surprisingly, a new political voice has recently appeared, emphasizing the importance of the development of the Flemish language throughout the entire northern department. Xavier Bertrand, current president of the Regional Council of Hauts-de-France, announced that he will look for ways to preserve and further develop the Flemish language (La Libre 2017). In the same breath he emphasized how Flemish as a regional language is fundamentally connected to the regional economy: developing Flemish throughout the entire region is put forward as one of the most effective ways to combat the region's high unemployment rates. But considering Bertrand made his annoucement at the General Assembly of the ANVT, one can expect that his efforts will not clear the air between the various organizations[24].

The historical trajectory of the assemblage has resulted in the almost exclusive cultural framing of the French Flemish regional identity from the 1970s onwards. Despite the ever lasting support French Flemish organizations receive from Belgian associations[25] – of which the KFV is a prime example, and without which the French Flemish organizations would not have managed to establish themselves this quickly – cultural organizations in French Flanders have now managed to stand on their own two feet. With the support from across the border, and through their own initiatives, the regional associations have managed to turn the label 'Flemish' from a suspicious concept into a strategic 'brand.' But while some have developed a more conservative stance, turning their backs towards the *schreve* and focussing only on furthering

[24] *Ons Erfdeel* rightly notes that the focus remains on French Flemish as a regional language and that this is remarkable for one would expect that only by making a connection to the Dutch standard language of its northern neighbors, the region could advance and strengthen its position (Ons Erfdeel 2017).

[25] While this might seem a minor issue, it is a very interesting development for up until the turn of the century the organizations in French Flanders were still largely dependent on their cross-border network and the financial resources this network could provide them with. Moreover, many of the principle efforts and initiatives that have led to the enduring presence of the Flemish regional conciousness in French Flanders are largely to be attributed to Belgian actors within the regional assemblage.

claims that correspond to rural French Flanders, others advocate the maintenance and further development of cross-border ties to Belgian organizations. Increasingly, therefore, internal disagreements over visions of the region and regional interests have generated an unfavorable atmosphere. Out of the internal conflicts centering around the issue of regional language, a new frame of reference emerged that is pragmatic and economic more than cultural. This frame of reference, which is that of the larger region of the North which acts according to the logic of new regionalism, will be the focus of the next chapter.

That which we had considered lost forever now revives in a new, or similar fashion, and it develops itself over again. Therefore, in the adjective 'Flemish' now lies this renewed golden future perspective. The earlier image of cow dung and a muddy farm in the North has been exchanged for a refined cheese which is served on a patinated table in a 'Flemish' estaminet. The trouble is that this adjective also crosses a non-erasable line which has rendered it necessary to choose either side. Such a line is undoubtedly arbitrary and could have easily been drawn a bit further or closer by. However, there is no other way than to accept it for she irrevocably divides you in two separate halves. But if you take the N333 from Poperinge and drive to Godewaarsvelde through Abele, you do get the impression that this dividing line probably only exists in our imagination.

- Thomas Beaufils[26]

[26] (Beaufils 2015: 199-200)

4. THE KING OF CANNED FOODS PROCLAIMED: 'WE NEED TO LOOK AT THE NORTH'

The role of language in the education system is the clearest manifestation of the struggle over visions of the region, making it difficult to establish a unified regional discourse necessary to be able to work towards the legitimization of the regional assemblage. As we have seen, the divisions and hostility between actors within the assemblage have formed a significant barrier. But while the vision and aim of those approaching the region as the 'region within the region' has become clear, more attention should be paid to those that look at the region from a broader perspective and who, taking external processes into account, aim to strategically make use of the opportunities that emerge to not only put rural French Flanders on the map but with it, the larger northern region of France.

This chapter serves to explore this second frame of reference which roughly refers to the territory of the Northern department. As we will see, those who approach the regional assemblage by this logic primarily refer to this broader geographical scope when speaking of 'the region,' and include the historically French-speaking parts of French Flanders in their scope. Their arguments are often economic, pragmatic and modern in the sense that they form claims and strategies that correspond with the logic of new regionalism which can also be found elsewhere throughout France (e.g. Fournis 2007; Koschatzky 2000; Itçaina and Errotabehere 2015; and Pasquier 2015) and Europe more generally (e.g. Keating 2001; Prytherch 2007, 2009; Scott 2009; and Webb and Collis 2010). In this chapter I illustrate that the appearance of this vision and its reinforcements are primarily due to the efforts of individual actors, and I argue that by mobilizing forms of symbolic as well as social capital, the regional assemblage manages to work towards institutionalization and legitimization.

4.1 Regional Language and Language of Regional Importance

We were sitting at the dinner table at Philippe's place and had been talking for a few hours already over aperitifs, dinner and smelly French cheeses. Philippe decided to prepare us some coffee while turning on Radio Uylenspiegel for some background music. Across from me, his daughter was doing her homework. I noticed that at some points it seemed as if she had been closely following our conversation. When Philippe joined us at the dinner table again he confirmed that she could indeed understand all we were saying since she had learned to speak Dutch. Visibly proud, he urged her to say a few words but in his efforts to encourage her, he dictated all of it so all she could do was repeat. By the end of the night, however, she started to show off her language skills which made her father glow with pride. She told me how she used to go to school in Abele, a town right on the Franco-Belgian border. But due to the distance between Saint-Omer and Abele – approximately 40 kilometers – it was impossible to keep this up, and now the family is planning to move somewhere closer to the border to be able to send both children to Dutch language schools in Belgium.

Philippe's efforts to ensure his children are enrolled in bilingual education are exceptional, but with only 30 minutes to 3 hours of Dutch language class per week he stresses that this decision is also largely driven by necessity. Although a lot of developments took place over the last forty to fifty years, they have now stagnated and those who were at first hopeful "realized that the Dutch language faced a glass ceiling when it comes to education." Contributing to this stagnation is the emergence and increased popularity of French Flemish language classes which now compete with Dutch over the incorporation into the education system. The question is which of the two will be able to solidly establish itself, and whether this will be at the expense of the other. But both face some significant obstacles. Polder, a member of the forum *Frans-Vlaanderen in het Nederlands*, explains how the French Education Code states that French is the language of instruction in the education system, but while a solidly established legal framework remains nonexistent, some developments in the past decade have opened up

spaces for possibility for regional language education. A constitutional reform in 2008 allowed for the regional languages to be officially recognized in Article 75-1 which states that they belong to the patrimony of France. This has formed the first constitutional basis for further regional language legislation which appeared in 2012 when, due to educational reforms, the possibility for education in regional languages was mentioned in the Education Code (Article L312-10). Unfortunately, in neither of these articles the regional languages are specified. Moreover, from the official bulletins[27] on the instruction of foreign and regional languages published by the Ministry of Education, it appears that Flemish is missing from the list that already includes Basque, Breton, Catalan, Occitan, Corse and Alsatian. Polder continues by arguing that the only way to promote bilingual education in the Northern department would be by: 1) defining the regional language as West Flemish which includes Dutch as its standard language, "requiring a marriage of convenience" between the regional groups with different visions; 2) convincing the Ministry of Education to recognize the regional language, making it possible to insert these language classes into the education system for which it needs to 3) establish an academic council for the regional language[28] which is a requirement necessary to fulfill before bilingual education can be established. By doing so, it can work towards the structures used in Alsace and Moselle where German as a standard language is considered as part of the regional language. The official bulletin published on the issue could also largely be applied to the language situation in the Northern department as it says the following:

> The regional language of the Alsace and Moselle region takes two different forms: on the one hand that of the German 'alémaniques' and 'franciques' dialects, and on the other hand that of the German standard language. German presents, from an educational point of view, a triple asset for it is a written language and a reference language for regional dialects, the language of the neighboring countries and an important language with a European and international appearance[29].

[27] See Bulletin Officiel N.2 of the 19th of June 2003; Bulletin Officiel N.9 of the 27th of September 2007; Bulletin Officiel N.10 of the 4th of October 2007 accessible via http://www.education.gouv.fr/pid285/le-bulletin-officiel.html.
[28] Polder also notes that up until June 2020 the academic councils for the regional language have already been established, these can only be found in 13 academies of France and interestingly none of them is located in the Hauts-de-France region. For further information consult the Educational Code Articles D312-33 à D312-39.
[29] "La langue régionale existe en Alsace et en Moselle sous deux formes: les dialectes alémaniques et franciques parlés en Alsace et en Moselle, dialectes de l'allemand, d'une part, l'allemand standard d'autre part. L'allemand présente, en effet, du point de vue éducatif, la triple vertu d'être à la fois l'expression écrite et la langue de référence des dialectes régionaux, la langue des pays les

At this point, with neither Dutch or Flemish recognized, their integration in the standard curriculum depends on the incentives of the school administration as well as other local important figures. Patrice Vergriete for example, the mayor of Dunkirk and president of the Communauté Urbaine de Dunkerque, as well as François Decoster who is the president of the Communauté d'Agglomération de Saint-Omer, both took initiatives to introduce Dutch courses as extracurricular activities (*périscolaire*). But this has triggered the occasional roll of the eyes and deep sighs. "Those few *mandatory* hours they are *free* to fill in according to the French state" Katarina says with a tone of sarcasm. Frank, vice president of APNES, hopes to speed things up by actively pleading for the recognition of Dutch as a 'language of regional importance.' Labelling Dutch as a 'language of regional importance' not only serves as a sort of catchphrase to convince students (and their parents) of the importance of Dutch in the education system, he argues, but it is also mobilized as a strategy for a wider implementation of bilingual education. Instead of recognizing French Flemish as a regional language, which would only cover the limited territories of rural French Flanders, recognizing Dutch as a language of regional importance could have a significant influence due to its broader scope and the prospects it offers for the border region. Promoting this view, APNES aims to exert pressure on local and regional authorities to encourage them to implement Dutch language courses into the education system. By emphasizing the economic benefits of the implementation of Dutch language courses, it has become easier "to sell it alongside the English language. On the one hand, you study English because it's a world language, on the other hand you study Dutch because it is a language of regional importance here."

But although local officials have indicated their interest, and increasingly people are recognizing the benefits the Dutch language can generate in terms of future perspectives and economic possibilities, it appears that local representatives still have a lot to learn themselves.

plus voisins et une grande langue de diffusion européenne et internationale." From the Bulletin Officiel N.2 of June 2003, accessible via http://www.education.gouv.fr/bo/BoAnnexes/2003/hs2/alsace_mosellans1.pdf.

Katarina, who is involved with cross-border initiatives on a daily basis, emphasizes that while the French actors involved realize it would be beneficial since "by learning each other's language you grow towards each other and are able to better understand each other" she tells that these convictions are not translated to their practices. "I've got colleagues that have been following Dutch language courses over sixteen years and that still cannot say 'good day' in Dutch." A lot of big talk by the big players, she says, but with little concrete results. Moreover, the conflict between the different visions obstructs advancement as those that cling on to the French Flemish dialect also started using the economic argument ('learning French Flemish can get you a job across the border'), and the political support the ANVT receives could pose a threat to the support of the promotion of the Dutch language. Since the different visions are not easily reconciled, the future trajectory of the region(al language) much depends on the individual efforts of actors and how they decide to give shape to the assemblage.

4.2 The Power of the 'Patronat'

When talking about the developments that took place in the *périscolaire*, Andries described the mayor of Dunkirk as "a representative of the new generation." The municipal elections that took place several years ago put into place young, energetic mayors "whose scope crossed the national border" and who contribute to an important shift, rebranding the promotion of Flemish regional identity as an economic and political[30] issue rather than a cultural one. The *périscolaire* initiative was therefore also largely economically motivated, which is in line with the current efforts undertaken in Dunkirk to map itself as a space of possibilities. But the efforts of local politicians to search for new ways to combat regional socio-economic struggles is not confined to Dunkirk alone, and the promotion of cross-border employment seems to be taking off throughout the entire northern region of France. Evidently, the

[30] Political here referring not to identity politics but in a more pragmatic sense to the increased importance of local governance and the issue of policy-making and bureaucracy in a border-region.

initiatives around the *périscolaire* have little to no (immediate) effects, but multiple bottom-up initiatives have appeared that stimulate and promote Dutch language-learning and cross-border employment.

Interestingly, about 40 years ago, it was the other way around. Maurits still recalls that around Ypres "a lot of people left to work in the French Flemish textile business. Every morning busses left on this side of the border for the commuters." From the end of the 19th century onwards cross-border commuting was very common, especially around the area of Lille, but in the 1960s working in France became less attractive to the Belgian commuters and the number of Belgian employees in northern France dropped considerably. But with the collapse of the textile industries, a reversal took place and the 1980s particularly witnessed an increase in French cross-border commuters that has been on the rise ever since (Vandeleene 2009: 21). While two thirds of the French cross-border commuters come from the area of Roubaix and work in the French-speaking territories in Belgium, a vast number of cross-border commuters flow from the Westhoek region to West Flanders. Most of the cross-border commuters are described as low-skilled blue-collar workers active in the industrial sector, but the construction industry, healthcare industry and transport sector also employ a significant number of people.

For the French Flemish, Frank says, it is fortunate that "Belgium had the great idea, to become a rich country. The same goes for the Netherlands. The Flemish are rich *and* they are our neighbors." One of the first who saw this was Bruno Bonduelle. In the 1960s Lille lost its status as a thriving city when the textile industries, mines and the metal industry closed down. From these economic setbacks, the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region received its negative stigma and it became clear to certain local figures that if they wanted to lift the city out of poverty, they had to take matters into their own hands. Bruno Bonduelle was the first to note this and to address that it was time to shift one's gaze away from Paris and towards the region's northern neighbors. Bonduelle – who is known as the king of canned foods, but also served as former president of the Regional Chamber of Commerce in Nord-Pas-de-Calais, president of the APIM (Agence

pour la Promotion Internationale de la Métropole Lilloise) and is one of the founding fathers of Comité Grand Lille – realized that there would be no bright future for the North without help from across the border. Making use of his connections with other industrials and political figures both from inside the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region and outside of it, he managed to bring together those from the field of economics, academics and politics. Pleading for upscaling, increased regional and interregional cooperation and praising the possibilities offered by the European Union, he managed to plant the seed of interregional cooperation into the minds of others.

Bonduelle's call was particularly well received by Pierre Mauroy, mayor of Lille from 1972-2001 and Prime Minister from 1981-1984 under President François Mitterrand, who became the key figure and initiator of cross-border collaboration in northern France. In the 1970s and 1980s Mauroy worked on the revitalization of his city by deploying culture to restore the attractiveness of the region. In the 1980s when the mines had closed and the entire textile industry was close to bankrupt, Mauroy decided that the first thing he would do as the mayor of Lille was to establish an orchestra. "His theory was 'I need to show France that it's not just misery in northern France, that one can still go dancing here, that you can make great music here,' and the orchestra still exists." Although culture certainly proved to serve as a catalyst for regional development, Mauroy's efforts from the late 1980s onwards significantly accelerated regional developments. Mauroy had realized that making use of Lille's geographical asset, it being the central point at which European trading routes converge, would be the strength to draw from to realize his ambitions. His first project was that of the Channel Tunnel which opened in 1994 and transformed Lille into the point of convergence of routes that connected London, Paris and Brussels. The inauguration of the Channel was held by President François Mitterrand who, on the same day, inaugurated the Lille Europe station offering high speed Eurostar and TGV services which further emphasized the city's central position and connectedness to other important hubs. While initially the Gare TGV would be located in Amiens, Mauroy, determined to bring the Gare TGV to Lille, mobilized his vast network to exert influence in Paris resulting

in the appointment of Lille as the center where the high-speed lines London-Paris and Paris-Amsterdam-Brussels were to converge (De Pater 2009). Furthermore, while usually being placed outside of city centers, Mauroy realized what symbolic meaning the Gare TGV carried, and what it could mean to revitalize the city. He persistently defended the idea of locating the TGV Gare right in the center of Lille, "precisely because he wanted to give the city a new boost." But needless to say, the infrastructural lines that connected Lille to other major cities would only be most efficiently utilized if they would result in attracting visitors. Together with the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, in order to make most out of the city's new position, Mauroy started the project of Euralille as a panacea that would turn the impoverished, gloomy industrial town into the vibrant, culturally rich and internationally-oriented metropolis he had dreamed about. Their aim was to "create an entire service sector around the TGV Gare" and Euralille became a hub where business, recreation and transportation merged and grew to be the third most important business center of France, only preceded by La Défense in Paris and la Part-Dieu in Lyon (MM Nieuws 2010). During his time as mayor, Mauroy also proudly displayed the flag with the Flemish Lion, connecting Lille to its northern neighbors in not only an infrastructural but also a cultural sense.

But with politics alone, there was no way to realize his objectives of cross-border collaboration. Recognizing he would need help from those in the economic and academic sector, he sought out their support, tested his ideas, and started to work on them collectively in the fields of politics, economics and academics. "It is exactly because of this cooperation between politics, the academic world and the economic field that he managed to realize what he wanted," Katarina says. Through his efforts and alliances across different fields, Mauroy managed to put Lille on the map and succeeded in transforming Lille intro a metropolis "which Paris had to take into account." The creation and establishment of the EGTC (European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation) provided the necessary judicial instruments for cross-border collaboration and in 2008, the efforts of Mauroy and his supporters culminated in the establishment of the

Eurometropolis Lille-Kortrijk-Tournai connecting northern France with Flanders and Wallonia. The Eurometropolis was the fruit of the visionary approach of local officials which bundled their forces, realizing that urban and regional territorial configurations would increasingly fuel socio-economic developments, and that in order to lift the region out of poverty, cross-border collaborations guided by the spirit of pragmatism were necessary.

Parallel to the developments of Lille, similar developments were taking off in the Westhoek. This time, however, the initiative came from the Belgian side where local officials were inspired by the persistence and enthusiasm of Mauroy and convinced of the benefits of sustainable cross-border cooperation. Local officials in West Flanders reached out to Michel Delebarre, back then the mayor of Dunkirk, who realized it would "benefit the economic developments in his region, the Flemish identity, and the struggle to distinguish Dunkirk from Lille." Katarina described how those in West Flanders felt it was "the right time to take such initiative" because Delebarre – who was not only mayor of Dunkirk but also the president of the Communaute Urbaine – was born in the region and had learned from Mauroy the significance of cross-border orientation. The only difference, and main obstacle, to the cross-border cooperation between the cross-border Westhoek region was – and still is – that West Flanders is "dealing with the Communaute Urbaine near the border, so a very clear contact person for a distinct area, but also with rural French Flanders; a completely unorganized area with extremely small intercommunales of a size as big as a municipality on this side of the border." Keen on their independence, inner rural Flanders refuses to be clumped together with Dunkirk. Nonetheless, after several ad-hoc cross-border projects related to tourism, culture and environment, the EGTC West-Vlaanderen/Flandre-Dunkerque-Côte d'Opale was established in 2009.

These two cases indicate that much of the progressive initiatives that lead to regional development and (potentially) transformative transitions are due to the efforts of individual actors and the mobilization of their social (network) as well as symbolic (status) capital. Their

strategies and aims are much in line with the logic of new regionalism which focuses on interregional competition and the cultivation of regional distinctiveness. While the north of France as a regional player in the game of European competition is still in its infancy, it nonetheless seems that they comply with the argument that Frank made: "having two rich neighbors at just a stone's throw away, it would be foolish not to make use of it."

4.3 The Strategic Assemblage of a New Region

With the sun breaking through the clouds, the rural French Flemish landscape looked a lot more attractive than during the previous grey, cold and rainy days. The slightly sloping landscape was characterized by different shades of green, yellow and light brown and the wide, open view gave a great sense of tranquility. I was on my way from Hazebrouck to Veurne, passing through small villages and the towns of Steenvoorde and Hondschoote. The only visible sign of a border crossing was the gas station located immediately on the Belgian side of the border – filling up your fuel tank is still cheaper in Belgium than in France. But if I had not known that gas stations were the clearest indicator of border-crossings, I would not have noticed the transition between France and Belgium for the cross-border Westhoek region has a geographic continuity: there is no hill, river, or other natural border but only the potato fields, flax fields and grain fields that, like a patchwork blanket, cover the surrounding area. Here and there small villages or centers pop up with the usual parking lots that fill up the town squares and the similar 'Flemish' branding to attract tourists. A visible border is absent, but nonetheless it seems to have a strong presence in people's minds. Mauroy and Delebarre have laid the foundation for the closer regional integration, and the task for those that follow in their footsteps is to erase the mental border[31] many still face when thinking of the other side of the

[31] The fact that I was often met with strange looks and a chuckle when talking about the Belgian-Flemish and the French Flemish already indicates the presence of this mental border, and I soon learned that when referring to those coming from Belgium I should just stick to Flemish without a prefix. A difference between the two, however, was always made. Moreover, some French Flemish feel as if they are '*les arabes*' and that Belgian Flemish are a bit "racist as we do the dirty jobs […] in the factory." Another illustration of how the separation by the border still lives in the mind of the people.

schreve: "*c'est important dans la tête*." The awareness of the border sticks around." Interestingly, and contrary to what one would perhaps expect, the case of French Flanders indicates that although a cross-border region might have shared historic, ethnic and cultural elements in place, these do not necessarily guarantee a fruitful base for cross-border regional cooperation. In his study on the development of Euroregions, Markusse (2004) comes to the same conclusion arguing that the presence of 'interface minorities' in cross-border regions does not necessarily serve as a catalyst for cross-border developments. As we have seen, "how things develop depends in part on where they develop, on what has been historically sedimented there, on the social and spatial structures that are already in place there" (Pred and Watts 1992: 11). The term 'flamande' has been depoliticized, stripped of its ethnoregionalist connotations, and mobilized as a lucrative label capable of attracting other forms of capital. This trajectory did not only influence the make-up of the regional assemblage, but it also influenced the understanding of being French Flemish for depoliticizing this marker of regional identity has made it unproblematic to be both French and Flemish at the same time. This has led to the fact that identity-based relations between the French Flemish and West Flemish are now perhaps weaker than ever.

The 25 years of structural cross-border collaboration between the Province of West Flanders and the Département du Nord have resulted in the establishment of networks that allow for more informal collaboration links. As we have seen, these informal collaborations greatly depend on the willingness of the individual actors to reach beyond the state border and look for opportunities that will benefit both parties. Increasingly, actors feel the need to develop more structural associations and move away from the project-based interactions to a more sustainable form of cooperation. Bern states that instead of working within the frameworks of formal institutionalized projects, actors now approach each other when necessary because "there's a realization that you can no longer ignore the other side of the border. Purely out of economic interest, also for West Flanders." Katarina similarly emphasizes that it is not only northern France that profits from structural cross-border cooperation and stresses that the developments in West

Flanders – and Belgium in general – largely rest on the large centers of Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent. She returns to the map she took out of a tourist brochure and points at the cross-border Westhoek region. "West Flanders completely falls out of this scope, and that's why the West Flemish politicians think about it this way like 'well, if we're apparently that far from Brussels then we better think about what we can organize here with the French to increase our visibility in terms of economic development."

This 'bottom-up evolution,' as Katarina calls it, can only be applauded. But one should not underestimate the practical and bureaucratic obstacles those making up the regional assemblage face in their efforts to establish themselves. Although business premises are available for low prices in French Flanders, located at the center of major trading networks and with plenty of French workers willing to travel for work, this situation should not be taken for granted. The border remains still present in the minds of the people. Katarina describes how, in the run-up to the establishment of the EGTC, they had organized a meeting with all their partners in Diksmuide but the French authorities had prevented this "because Diksmuide was associated with the Yser Tower, Vlaams Belang, fascism, Nazism." Dirk also describes how officials remain hesitant to set up collaborations across the border for they "fear to accidentally get thrown into a hornet's nest." This is noticeable especially in projects of culture and education, here "people are careful. And yes, that shadow of the past – strangely enough, 70 years later – still plays a role."

Aside from the persistence of a mental border, the differences in territorial structuring and the fact that the French state is gradually cutting back on the competences of its departments also pose significant hindrances that further complicate effective cooperation. Bern states that cross-border cooperation has only become more difficult over the past years "because so many things are changing and a lot of people are uncertain about reorganizations that will take place… suddenly you lose certain competencies, and soon you might lose another." The difference between territorial structuring and governance is difficult to overcome. While the French territories have multiple layers of governance – from the immense regions to the

miniscule communes – and have a very hierarchical system which makes decision-making a long and inefficient process in the eyes of their cross-border partners, the Belgians have a structure which is less layered and which endows actors with more competences. But there are also cultural differences that, according to Bern and others, should not be underestimated. While the French like to lead conversations and chat a lot, the Belgians are "more sober and business-like and prefer to deal with a meeting in one hour and a half instead of three hours." This has resulted in the attitude of many saying: "if we do not need to work with the French then preferably not."

Hopeful as they are, the actors that make up the regional assemblage avoid prejudging the future of this territorial constellation 'in becoming.' Recognizing there are many barriers to overcome, they continue to emphasize the importance of individual actors and the bottom-up efforts that contribute to a shift of people's gaze away from Paris and towards the North. From these efforts, cross-border collaboration underpinned by pragmatism seems to be the most fruitful trajectory to pursue as it is more sensible to the current socio-economic context and has proven to be more easily embraced than alliances solely based on cultural and historic bonds. While the already institutionalized EU labels, agreements, institutions and projects part of regional assemblage are certainly used as tactic resources, this does not necessarily result in the acquisition of a strong position when it comes to the power play within the regional assemblage. The potential for change primarily comes from informal pragmatic approaches and their ability to formalize, further implementing the vision which Bruno Bonduelle already proclaimed: the vision of a region that is no longer confined by its national borders but instead is able to change its positionality by creating and maintaining networks with other important nodes in the field of interregional competition.

Thanks to the disappearance of borders, the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region has rediscovered its call as a commercial hub. It has transformed from the peripheral corner of France to a European crossroad, and the fact that the TGV lines Paris-London and London-Brussel converge in this region is an illustration thereof. Within 10 years, the new line will reach until Charing Cross, and Amsterdam and Cologne will also be within reach. With Brussels on 25 minutes from [Lille], a new world emerges. Geography, in this way, takes revenge on the vagaries of history.

- Bruno Bonduelle[32]

[32] (Bonduelle 1995: 280)

5. CONCLUSION: FRONTIER AS BARRIER OR AS JUNCTION

In this work, I aimed to form a better understanding of the current regional developments in northern France. I shed light on the historical trajectory that has determined the current shape of the regional assemblage that was my subject of investigation. My findings suggest that the reason for the absence of political and ethnoregionalist claims, which are likely to be found in border regions that have a shared history and culture, is largely determined by the course of history. Whereas both regional consciousness and regional language persisted up until the mid-20th century, the post-war stigma of collaboration that tinted these affiliations generated a serious setback for those that aimed to assert and strengthen the Flemish regional identity. While today the notion of 'Flemish' is transforming from a suspicious affiliation to a strategic and lucrative brand which contributes to regional economic development, informal cross-border relations nonetheless remain characterized by distrust and caution. But as Bonduelle said, geography now seems to 'take revenge on the vagaries of history.' New forms of connectedness and new perceptions of territory and governance have made alternative strategies of regional construction conceivable. Tracing the different actors that shape the regional assemblage across different temporalities and spatialities, I attempted to show that the regional assemblage is like an accordion which "contracts and expands to the pressures of social, economic and political developments on both sides of the border" and by doing so, produces "a complex melody over time" (Baud and Van Schendel 1997: 225). My aim was to capture a part of this melody, and to interpret it in the light of recent transformations of state spaces and the emergence of new constellations of power that work across traditional notions of territory and governance.

Returning to the new regionalism literature, I found that while new regionalism is often seen as a modern and forward-looking approach that stands in strong contrast with its older version that is perceived as more conservative and defensive of local characteristics (cf. Keating 1998), my findings complexify this binary categorization. The distinction between the two is problematic for it tends to conceal the possibility for co-existence or even the persistence of the

latter. Moreover, the so-called 'new regionalisms' are often considered as solely driven by neo-liberalist economic agendas, boosting ad hoc created growth-regions that seem devoid of political elements. Instead of approaching these regionalisms in a top-down manner, a bottom-up approach emphasizes actual practices that give shape to what is often taken for granted. As cases like these show, 'new' regions, while working according to the logic of new regionalism, can also be profoundly embedded in their local socio-historical and political context. The more pragmatic and economic approaches and incentives of regional political figures are not devoid of social and political aspects: albeit sensitively and cautiously, actors remain to flirt with the historical bond with West Flanders. 'New' regionalism is not 'new' in a temporal sense, suggesting it is to replace the 'old,' rather what is 'new' is that it offers a logic alternative to what used to inspire the 'old' regionalisms. These 'new' strategies respond to 'new' circumstances and realities: the new understanding of territory as a competitive space for economic development that transforms the traditional understanding of the relation between territory and state and the appearance of institutional frameworks that encourage cross-border developments and hence provide opportunities for regional legitimization. But these 'new' strategies coexist with the 'old,' and they overlap, making it difficult as well as redundant to sharply distinguish the two.

Through investigating how actors construct, expand and contract the region, I have shown that the process of construction occurs across various spatial and temporal scales. While the assemblage approach highlights the importance of the historical trajectory, applying the notion of symbolic struggle to the regional assemblage accounts for the uneven power relations, the present tensions in the field, and the possibilities for legitimization. Furthermore, tracing the actors and the different relations in the field, the concepts of capital served to make visible the different resources actors embody, possess, or mobilize. I argue that this approach can be successfully united with the new regionalist phase of regional society (cf. Hettne and Söderbaum 1998) and the symbolic and institutional shape (cf. Paasi 2009) I presented earlier. The symbolic struggle over the legitimacy to define the region, and the way 'regionness' is to be expressed, are

most visible in this phase because actors actively stage themselves as they are involved in the labor of representation. What this approach adds to these theories, is that it brings to the forefront the power struggles that emerge during these phases or stages of construction, not only between the established (legitimized, often state-determined, vision of the region) and the proposed (alternative vision of the region), but also amongst those who attempt to define these alternative visions. Moreover, this approach emphasizes that no matter what stage or phase a region has attained, the labor of representation continues, recognizing that without continuous acts of construction and reconstruction there would be no such thing: a region is always a region *in becoming*.

A broader question to which my study relates is whether the emergence of these networked spaces, irrespective of national borders, affect the formation and re/deterritorialization of states. And do these spaces open up possibilities for democratic involvement and more participatory approaches in regional economic development priorities and policies? These newly emerging spaces call into question the effectiveness of traditional and spatially fixed governance structures since these fluid and networked assemblages attempt to surpass the hierarchical forms of organization and seem to better correspond to the particularities and concerns of the region (cf. Hettne and Söderbaum 1998). The mobilization of shared interests allows for the creation of spaces that aim to transcend traditional territorial configurations and hierarchies. The power thus seems to lie with those that are responsive, flexible, and able to strategically displace authority. Nonetheless, as my findings have indicated, the regional assemblage is far from the phase of institutionalization and actors still are forced to maneuver within the established political frame which is territorially defined and restricts their capabilities. Although borders at some points seem relatively easy penetrable, and despite the increased networkedness of the region, these new relations and more pragmatic visions that have emerged are still unable to escape established political, psychological and administrative frameworks of the state (cf. Billig 1995; Paasi and Zimmerbauer 2016).

Throughout this thesis, I have attempted to provide an understanding of how French Flanders, by engaging in new forms of connectedness provided by cross-border connections and translocal alliances, is changing its positionality[33]. The ways in which northern France now becomes connected to other places has turned it into an emergent geography of possibility. Needless to say, however, the way in which this region and the political frontier adapt to new economic and demographic conditions is just one out of many possible responses. Investigating the changing roles and meanings ascribed to state borders can teach us more about the strength and weakness of the state itself since borders are the locus where the processes that affect institutions and policies become visible. Moreover, they draw attention to transforming notions of identity and belonging (cf. Donnan and Wilson 1999). My findings have indicated that feelings of trust and belonging to the nation have decreased, or at least changed, and that new actors have appeared on the stage to attempt to shape the social world in new ways. Forming spaces where territory, identity and authority merge, these regional assemblages work to disassemble the state as they are unsettling for traditional institutions and levels of governance. The power of the central state is eroding, and slowly these newly emerged spaces begin to eat away the foundations of support for the center and its sovereignty. This calls into question the effectiveness of the state responding to this new context.

But as it is possible to approach the region as an assemblage of networks and practices, one can think similarly about any configuration of power and authority (cf. Allen 2011). Whilst actors might mobilize new regionalist strategies to form answers to socio-economic issues in the case of northern France, assemblages can similarly appear on the national level attempting to seek out new ways to assert and maintain sovereignty, legitimacy and identification.

[33] The notion of 'positionality' related to territory and globalization was proposed by Eric Sheppard (2002) who borrowed the concept from feminist theory and defines positionality as "the conditions of possibility in a place" (319) that is defined not by the distance between localities but instead by "the intensity and nature of their connectedness" (324). This way, remote places, physically distant from each other, can be closely connected. Fruitful relationships that result in capital accumulation – be it economic, social, cultural or symbolic – can put certain localities in more favorable positions than others. Interregional competition central to new regionalism is characterized by unequal positionalities and the aim of regions is to attain a favorable position in the game of competition by acquiring a good status and position in transnational networks (for an interesting account on positionality see Kaneff 2014).

Paradoxically, in this case, while we can witness new regionalist strategies and attempts to cross-border regional integration in the North, at the same time the region forms a strong voting base for the populist, nativist Front National. These different visions are both seen as the result of widespread disillusionment with the established political powers that are considered ineffective and unresponsive to the concerns and social realities people face. Like the actors that are part of the regional assemblage, state-level actors equally provide people with alternative visions, visions that might have widespread appeal for they provide answers to problems the central authorities fail to resolve. Investigating the actors involved, the way they are tied up with other places, and the way in which symbols and resources are mobilized, can teach us more about the relation between territory, identity and sovereignty in a globalized age. Moreover, in view of the increased awareness that European integration is paired with disintegration, in which instead of disappearing, borders can also strengthen as loci of division and become symbols of inclusion and exclusion, and in times where Europe is losing its legitimacy, investigations of new possibilities of assemblages on a European level similarly deserve further exploration.

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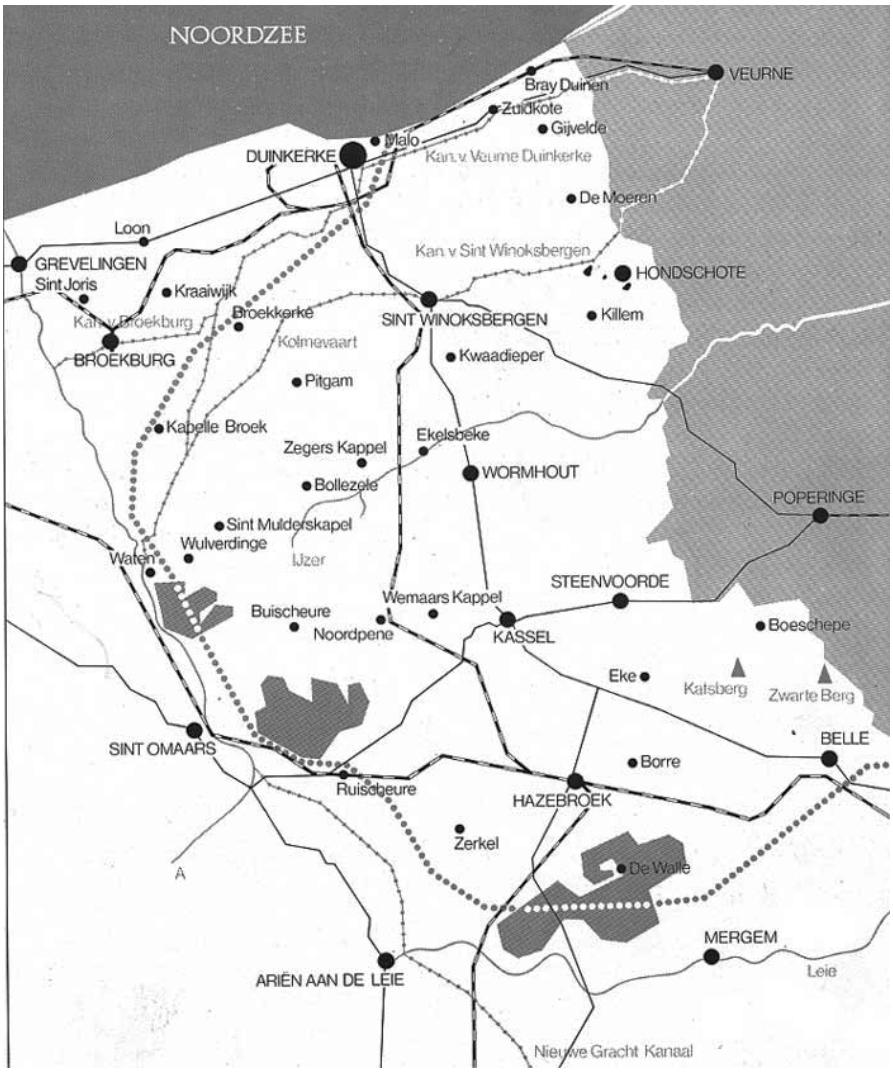
APPENDIX: THE WESTHOEK WITH THE ORIGINAL DUTCH PLACENAMES



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French name	Dutch name
Aire sur Lys	Ariën aan de Leie
Armentières	Armentiers
Arras	Atrecht
Audruicq	Ouderwijk
Bailleul	Belle
Bergues	Sint-Winoksbergen
Blanc-Nez	Blankenes
Bois-Sec	Drooghout
Bondues	Bonduwe
Boulogne	Bonen *or* Beunen
Bourbourg	Broekburg *or* Burburg
Bousbecque	Busbeke
Calais	Kales
Cambrai	Kamerijk
Clairmarais	Klommeres
Comines	Komen
Coudescure	Koudescheure
Douai	Dowaai
Dunkerque	Duinkerke
Eperlecques	Sperleke
Estaires	Stegers
Etaples	Stapel
Flêtre	Vleteren
Grande-Synthe	Groot-Sinten
Gravelines	Grevelingen
Grinez	Zwartenes
Guines	Gizene
Halluin	Halewijn
Hardifort	Harrevoorde
Hesdin	Heusden
Le Doulieu	Zoetestede
Les Moëres	Moerekerke
Lille-en-Flandre	Rijsel
Linselles	Linsele
Merville	Meregem *or* Mergem
Mont des Récollets	Wouwenberg
Neuf-Berquin	Zuid-Berkijn
Nieppe	Nipkerke *or* Niepkerke
Nieurlet	Nieuwerleet
Petite-Synthe	Klein-Sinten
Quaëdypre	Kwaadieper
Renescure	Ruischeure
Roubaix	Robeke
Saint Quentin	Sint-Kwintens
Saint-Momelins	Sint-Momelingen
Saint-Omer	Sint-Omaars
Sangatte	Zandgat
Sercus	Zerkel *or* Zurkel
Thérouanne	Terwaan *or* Terenburg
Tourcoing	Toerkonje *or* Torkwin
Valenciennes	Valensijn
Wallon-Cappel	Waalskappel
Warneton	Zuid-Waasten
Warneton-Bas	Zuid-Neerwaasten
Watten	Waten
Wissand	Witzant
Wervicq-Sud	Zuid-Wervik