

Success of a Belgian Political Elite

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This review of Martin Conway's *The Sorrows of Belgium* notes its emphasis on continuities across the liberation and its implicit reperiodisation of Belgian history so that the 1960s rather than 1945 mark the real break with the country's nineteenth century past. Conway argues that this continuity was facilitated by a widespread desire for a return to normalcy, a desire which helped political elites inside and outside parliament reassert the central role of the state in the country's life. Mark Mazower also discusses Conway's treatment of political ideas, especially those that emerged in response to the occupation.

Succes van een Belgische politieke elite

Deze bespreking van Martin Conway's *The Sorrows of Belgium* benadrukt de continuïteit na de bevrijding en de impliciete nieuwe periodisering van de Belgische geschiedenis die in Conway's boek centraal staan, waarbij de jaren 1960 in plaats van 1945 de echte breuk met het negentiende-eeuwse verleden van het land markeren. Conway stelt dat deze continuïteit werd vergemakkelijkt door een wijdverbreid verlangen naar normaliteit, een wens die de politieke elites binnen en buiten het parlement hielp de centrale rol van de staat in het dagelijkse leven opnieuw te bevestigen. Mark Mazower bespreekt ook Conway's uiteenzetting van politieke ideeën, met name de ideeën die ontstonden als reactie op de bezetting.

*The Sorrows of Belgium*¹ reads, to this inexpert reader, as the story of a remarkable success – the success, that is to say, of a political elite, aided unwittingly by the King, in bringing parliament back into the centre of the political life of the country. The book focuses on politicians, political parties and their modes of operation, although it has also many fascinating and important things to say about the impact of the German occupation on society and popular attitudes, and on the life and well-being of different strata of the population. Conway's summary of the ways in which German rule actually reinforced social inequalities seems to me both new and exemplary.

His story is shaped by the pressure of two larger historiographical concerns: one is how far to present this as a matter of continuities rather than change: the other is about how far to see in this period the origins of the country's future political and constitutional sorrows. Conway gives a clear answer on the first point, emphasising continuities. Few ideas were radically different in 1945, and fewer still of the key personalities. The weaknesses of the state were more apparent than real. The key break with the country's nineteenth-century past came not in 1945 but in the 1960s. On the second, if I read him aright, he hedges his bets. On the one hand, there was no radical or revolutionary conjuncture whose stifling stored up difficulties for the future. Conway effectively disposes of the idea that those who stood for revolutionary change in 1945 had any real mobilising capacity capable of representing a major challenge to the return of politics as usual. On the other, comments in the book's final pages suggest that there was an opportunity missed, if not for political and social revolution, then for the kind of economic modernisation that might have eased the pain of de-industrialisation thirty years later.

A recovered normality

Lacking any expertise in Belgian history, I prefer instead of assessing these judgments, which strike me as entirely plausible, to draw attention to some features of Conway's arguments and areas in particular that left me wanting to know more. The first concerns the concept of the 'normal'. Early on, we learn that one of the greatest forces mitigating against more decisive breaks with older institutional and ideational traditions was the widespread desire of many people to return to some kind of normality after the years of occupation (see 62: 'the lure of a recovered normality was a powerful force'). What people understood by this must have varied greatly. For some, presumably, it would be simply life under a regime they regarded, in some sense, as their own and hence capable of maintaining order at a much lower intensity of violence than under the occupation, for others, not worrying about shortages or absent menfolk. For others, it would be the possibility of a genuinely private life, while for others, on the contrary, the possibility of political action, and so on. Some of these conceptions of the normal life would have prevented radical political programmes from gaining popularity; others would not. Remaining under-specified, the concept ends up carrying a fair amount of analytical weight. The relative lack of space the book allocates to purges perhaps contributes to this too, since one of the purposes of purges was to redefine the bounds of the normal, at least in political and administrative terms.

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

This connects to a larger observation about Conway's approach, which is its tendency to play down the importance of ideas (e.g. 24-25. Is this the Cobbian influence² at work?) in explaining a new pragmatism and flexibility in attitudes to government. Maybe others have made too much of the importance of the war as a seedbed for new ideas (early historians of European federalism were especially prone to this). In a book which covers three years in over three hundred pages, it is not surprising that ideas matter less than political tactics: they operate at a different pace and in other milieus. Nevertheless, not only does it seem to me that the war was an especially fertile time for the democratisation of thinking about society, in Belgium as much as elsewhere, but also that some of this new thinking did indeed find its way rather dramatically into policy. Whether these ideas had sprung up fully formed in the war itself is not the point. Ideas always have longer germinations, and it was the interwar slump rather than the war that catalysed new approaches to capitalism: but behind the easy rhetorical appeals to 'new orders', a different attitude to industrial relations and to social welfare had won widespread acceptance. That the Belgian version of this bore a family resemblance to versions espoused elsewhere is natural; no prizes were needed for originality, but as Conway himself points out, the social welfare reforms passed immediately after liberation did indeed represent something new in Belgian life. If political forces manifested a new willingness to work together to make democracy work, it was partly because such policies articulated the ideal of a new ethos of common purpose that they believed in, an ethos developed over the past decade but reinforced in all likelihood by the experience of the war, and just as important, by debates taking place concurrently about the war's wider meaning. In short, Conway's political points seem to me to reflect ideational and intellectual shifts that deserved more weight than they get.

A second observation concerns the location of political power. The book narrates a shift from a wartime world – occupied Belgium in 1943-1944 – where power had become almost entirely decentred to one – Belgium in 1947 – where the state and those who run have with amazing success recentralised power once more. It is, in many ways, an elaboration on the theme once explored by the Italian historian Claudio Pavone in his classic essay on the continuity of the state in twentieth-century politics, an essay which invites us to reflect, as Conway too does here, on what the state itself actually means. In the book's early chapters we are often reminded of the limits

2 Richard Cobb (1917-1996) was a British historian of the French Revolution and Conway's doctoral supervisor. Cobb was suspicious of Marxist interpretations of the French Revolution and of ideological interpretations of historical events in general.


of the power of various groups – the London politicians, the royal court, the senior civil servants, the Germans – and told that effective power rested in the hands of a more nebulous elite (23: ‘What and who comprised this elite gets various definitions, but the core groups seem to have been local notables and leading local administrative officials, judges, churchmen and members of powerful families’). The local level is obviously vitally important (as indeed it was generally in Hitler’s Europe where the Germans were strong enough to delegitimise central state institutions but not strong enough to replace them). However, this coalition of forces remains shadowy and inchoate because the story is still mostly told from the national level. To the non-specialist, it remains unclear who is being referred to or would have counted as a member of this key group of power-brokers, so too how they actually operated and to what end. It also seems that by the end of the book they have become far less powerful, thanks in particular to the Van Acker government’s success (aided unwittingly by the unbelievably obtuse King) in reasserting the prerogatives of parliament and central power: but one wonders how this story would have read if it had been told perhaps more from the perspective of Ghent, or Charleroi, or Bruges.

Elites

Elites and the woes they bring run through this book. From the perspective of the early twenty one-century, Conway’s account rings all too true – what really stored up trouble for the future was a democratic restoration that was elitarian through and through and deeply suspicious of ‘the people’, meaning voters. In this sense, Belgium’s restoration was elitist in a double sense – both suspicious of the masses and operating through local power brokers who had managed to navigate rather successfully the transitions from the interwar depression, through the war and occupation to the restoration of independence and the rise of a new kind of corporatism after 1945. The book thus rests upon a suspicion of elites and their pretensions that chimes with the general current disillusionment with Eurozone politics.

Yet approaching the history of Belgium as told here from a different perspective – in my case, from Europe’s southern and south-eastern fringe – it is hard to share in the lament. Many Greeks and Yugoslavs in 1945 would have envied the Belgians their fate: later, they would vote with their feet. (How many Belgians emigrated in the decades after the war to Greece?) What *they* got was civil war and levels of violence that often came close to or even dwarfed those experienced under the Germans and Italians. Their monarchs were just as stupid as the Belgian but were propped up by the British, or more precisely by Churchill, mostly because they were lucky enough to have got out early in the war and were thus untainted in a way that Leopold was not. British policy, on the one hand, and the national politicians’ inability to exercise power on

the other condemned these countries to a far worse fate than Belgium's. This is where the critical importance of those local power-brokers emerges: Belgium's core of provincial haute bourgeoisie, judges, businessmen, churchmen and experienced union leaders (if indeed I am identifying Conway's local elites correctly) had no counterpart in the mountainous, unindustrial and thinly urbanised Balkans. They did their bit in their boring, self-serving, conservative way, and then handed over enough power to the national politicians to keep Belgium the nation-state as a going concern. If they did so, it was partly because they feared the prospect of state disintegration that Conway more than once tells us was so overblown. However, if they did fear it, it was surely not only because they were prone to exaggeration (especially when it served their interests) but also because they had plenty of examples of genuine state collapse all around them. The state had collapsed in France and indeed in parts of Belgium in the terrifying days of 1940; it had collapsed in Italy in the summer of 1943; and it certainly collapsed in Yugoslavia and Greece, enabling the kinds of national resistance movements to emerge that never materialised in Europe's northwest. The sorrows of Belgium were the kind of sorrows that others would have been glad to experience. ◀



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