

A Reflection on Cultural Identities in the Scope of Multiculturalism: An Interview with Professor Walter Prevenier

By Siyu Cai and Hyerim Ko

Professor Walter Prevenier, a Flemish historian from Ghent University, is not only interested in the past of Flanders, but also in the future of Belgium. The highlight of Prevenier's visit to the University of California, Berkeley this April is his inspiring lecture "The crisis of the Belgian State," which looked back at his talk given here 28 years ago. Over the years, Prevenier's concerns accumulate, yet his belief in the future of Belgium stands firm. During the interview following his lecture, Prevenier talks about cultural identities from the perspective of history and explains the ongoing debate on immigration in western Europe, particularly that in the Low Countries. Despite the social and political resistance, Prevenier remains optimistic in the future of multiculturalism in that part of Europe.

First of all, Prevenier lays out the important language and cultural divisions within Belgium that have made the profound differences we see today. The country is divided into three cultural communities—Dutch, French and German—and three regions—Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels-Capital Region. The north of Belgium is Dutch-speaking Flanders, and the south is French-speaking Wallonia, while Brussels, the nation's capital, is located in Flanders and consists of both French and Dutch speaking communities, including a large number of inhabitants from many other cultures, because Brussels is also the capital of Europe. The language border between Flanders and Wallonia lies in the middle of Belgium. Prevenier emphasizes the importance of the social-economic realities within Belgium that has long been the result of this division, which illustrates the current political crisis of Belgium as well as the multicultural issues.

Prevenier unveils the multicultural reality in Belgium and the Netherlands today by explaining the difference in cultural identities. He says that "studying cultural identities," is a complex operation, which combines "complicated socio-economic realities" that are derived from cultural boundaries like languages. Considering the stark division between Flanders and Wallonia, Prevenier notices that "the existence of two cultures has been part of the trouble and conflicts, discussions, and several successive reforms in the Belgian state," and indeed, "two sensibilities of two cultures" themselves create a "multicultural problem." Since the independence of Belgium and the founding of the state in 1830, the elites in the North and the South of Belgium used French in daily life and in all of their political decision-making processes, and this caused a lot of tension. In the 1800s, there was a Flemish-movement in hope of opening the possibilities for the use of Dutch language." This socio-cultural factor (literature, culture, education) changed into a social-economic contrast after the Second World War and thus became a divisive force between the two regions. "Since the 1960's, there was a language problem and a social problem. Everything was split up. Since the state reforms of the 1970's and later, Belgium is what we call a federal state with two sub-states. The Flemish part and the French-speaking part." Following that, the Belgian state has arrived at the crossroads of division and the political crisis that we see today.

Prevenier introduces cultural identities in explaining the socio-political realities in Belgium today. However, in the multicultural case of Belgium, what makes this notion more complicated is the immigration wave, because the influx of immigrants and "different ideologies" is now beginning to challenge the traditional cultural identities (Dutch versus French speakers), leading to the change in the immigration policy. Then, Prevenier gives a

brief introduction of immigration history in Belgium. “After World War II, immigration was tolerated and accepted without any problem for one reason: Belgians needed immigrants for the dirty jobs that nobody wanted to do, like being miners in coal mines. The first incoming immigrants in Belgium were Italians. The second wave was from Turkey. The third wave was from North Africa (Morocco, Tunisia, etc.), who were mostly Muslims.” However, the problem with the cohabiting of different cultures was a new phenomenon, as Prevenier later explains. “In the beginning, there were no problems. They (the immigrants) had no explicit ideological and political aims. The problem of Muslim identity came after many years,” because now “they want to organize their life in their own way” and “they want to create their Mosques to show their identity, and that caused trouble.” The influx of immigrants has become an issue in Belgium and other western European countries, particularly the Netherlands.

The issue of multiple cultural identities of the immigrants in Belgium and the Netherlands, as well as in many western European countries, does not have an easy solution. It is even more complicated in the realm of politics. “After some time it becomes a part of political action. They started to bring it on (the) political table. On the one side in Belgium, the right to discriminate does not exist. On the other side, politicians wanted to avoid giving voice to people who have no respect for human rights.” Prevenier also suggests that some political parties in Belgium and the Netherlands are “against other cultures: especially Muslim cultures.” Not surprisingly, Prevenier brings up Geert Wilders, the leader of the Party for Freedom (PVV) from the Netherlands, who is a controversial public figure for his anti-Muslim action. “He (Wilders) came to United States to make propaganda for his view to influence public opinion. He wanted to come to the U.S. to speak about the ‘danger of Islam’, (and) the need to oppose Muslim immigrants in Western Europe.”

Prevenier also address other issues of Muslim immigration, some of which concern the “discrimination of (against) women.” Prevenier points out, “Westerners sometimes consider male dominance in Muslim communities a sign of discrimination against women.” Prevenier goes on to talk about the western ideology by adding, “Human rights are extremely important. Europe wants to implement and protect these rights. But there is the question about minorities and their specific concept of human rights. This conflict is the origin of a lot of ideological discussion.” According to Prevenier, behind this controversy are the conflicting ideologies of different cultures that do not easily reach a balance.

In the end, Prevenier returns to the realities of the Dutch identity that involve the complexities of politics, social-economics and beyond. Prevenier adds, “On that level, there is indeed a Dutch identity that is not limited to the state of the Netherlands but also includes the Flemish region, because there is the use of the same language for many purposes.” In the scope of multiculturalism, Prevenier believes that “identities are changing,” and at the same time “traditions are disappearing,” particularly in countries that have an influx of immigrants like Belgium and the Netherlands. In the end, Prevenier reminds us that cultural identities rest on “the unified spirit of the people” even though some traditional values are at risk of “disappearing over time, and languages are not the only “binding factor in the logical entity for a nation.” He gives examples of art, culture, and media that bring inhabitants of the country together.

Prevenier is confident in the unity of the Belgian state, so is he in the future of multiculturalism in the Low Countries, which he believes is “a real thing in the world of conception.”