Fear of crime as a political weapon: explaining the rise of extreme right politics in the Flemish countryside

Nick Schuermans and Filip De Maesschalck

Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven
Celestijnenlaan 200 E
3001 Heverlee, Belgium
Email: Nick.Schuermans@ees.kuleuven.be

Abstract In this article, we discuss the recent success of extreme right politicians in the Flemish countryside. Because the Vlaams Belang, the dominant extreme right-wing party in Flanders, plays to racist attitudes and everyday fears, we study the interrelations between the rise of the extreme right, racism and a spatialized and racialized culture of fear. Based on a multi-level analysis of spatial variations of racism and a qualitative analysis of focus group interviews on fear of crime, we suggest that a rural or suburban vote for the extreme right Vlaams Belang has to be understood as a protest vote against the racialization and the insecurity of the central cities and as an anticipatory vote that has to stop the imagined infection of the 'white' and 'safe' countryside with urban 'diseases' like crime and foreigners.

Key words: fear of crime, extreme right, racism, whiteness, countryside, Flanders.

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1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, extreme rightwing parties have re-emerged as an electoral force in democratic countries like Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Norway and Switzerland. Even though the success of these parties has attracted a lot of scholarly attention (see Rydgren 2007 for an overview), the spatial dimensions of their popularity remain underresearched. So far, researchers have mainly connected their electoral geography with the geographical distribution of socio-economic and cultural indicators. In the Dutch case, De Vos and Deurloo (1999) have demonstrated, for example, that the support for parties on the extreme right of the political spectrum is higher in neighbourhoods with concentrations of people with an Islamic lifestyle. In the same way, academics have shown that extreme right-wing politicians are particularly successful in municipalities with a small network of social organizations (Coffé, Heyndels and Vermeir 2007). Because sociologists and political scientists have mainly focused on such variables at the scales of the neighbourhood and the municipality, insufficient light has been shed, however, on the politicization of extreme right-wing issues at larger spatial scales. Even though it is generally accepted that extreme right-wing politicians play to everyday fears, the manipulation of fear of crime as a political weapon remains underresearched, for example, beyond the scale of the neighbourhood (Pain and Smith 2008; Robin 2004; Shirlow and Pain 2003).

To address this critique, this paper will discuss geographical dimensions of the recent success of the Vlaams Belang¹ (VB), the dominant extreme right-wing party in Flanders, in the Flemish countryside. In order to introduce our case study and to set our objectives, the second section of this paper will briefly sketch the political landscape of Flanders and the main political issues of the VB. This introduction will make clear that attitudes against immigrants and everyday fears are the backbone of the VB. For this reason, we will focus, in the subsequent sections, on spatial variations of racism and on racialized and spatialized discourses on fear of crime in rural and suburban Flemish municipalities, respectively with a multi-level analysis of survey data and a qualitative focus group research. In the conclusion, these two analyses will be linked to suggest that the success of the VB outside the cities cannot only be explained by issues with immigrants and criminal offences in the immediate living environment of its electorate, but also by the politicization of issues playing at larger spatial scales.

2. Flanders and the Vlaams Belang

To understand the position of the VB in the Belgian political landscape, it is important to note that the gradual federalization of the country since the 1970s included the establishment of three different regions (the Flemish Region, the Walloon Region and the Brussels Capital Region) and three different communities (the Dutch-speaking Flemish Community, the French-speaking Community and the German-speaking Community). The communities have powers over personal matters like education, health and culture, while the regions have powers over nonpersonal matters like spatial planning and housing. In this complex institutional puzzle, elections are organized for six different parliaments. Apart from the bicameral federal parliament of Belgium, there are different parliaments for Flanders, the Brussels Capital Region, the Walloon Region, the German speaking Community and the French-speaking Community.

The VB is an extreme right-wing party in the Dutch-speaking north of Belgium with representatives in the Flemish parliament, the Brussels parliament and in both chambers

of the federal parliament. The party was established in 1978 as a coalition of two dissident factions of the dominant Flemish regionalist party at that time. In the beginning, the VB had the support of less than 2 per cent of the voters, but the party increased its share of the votes with every subsequent election. The federal elections of November 1991 were the major breakthrough (Coffé, Heyndels and Vermeir 2007). After this 'Black Sunday', the electoral success of the party seemed unstoppable: in the Flemish region, the electorate rose from 10.3 per cent in 1991 to 12.2 per cent in 1995 to 15.5 per cent in 1999 and 24.2 per cent in 2004.

According to Walgrave and De Swert (2004: 485), the VB is an 'outspoken issue party'. VB voters are much more inclined to vote for political issues than the electorate of other parties. Based on an analysis of party manifestoes and election surveys, they identify four such issues: Flemish nationalism, immigration, anti-politics and crime (Walgrave and De Swert 2004: 484). While the struggle for an independent Flanders has always been central in the VB manifestoes, it was only in the middle of the 1980s that the party started to mobilize against immigrants (De Maesschalck and Loopmans 2003). The official VB discourse was that the concentration of immigrants in certain urban neighbourhoods would create 'ever growing and more terrifying problems' (Vlaams Blok 1985). In the beginning of the 1990s, the party stressed, for example, that the average non-European foreigner living in Belgium commits four times more crime than the average Belgian (Vlaams Blok 1991). Because other parties had politicized the issue of Flemish separatism already, such explicit links between foreigners and crime became the backbone of the VB programme (Billiet & de Witte 2008; De Maesschalck & Loopmans 2003; Walgrave & De Swert 2004).

Figure 1 The growth of the extreme right Vlaams Belang in municipal elections (1982–2006).

As foreigners are mainly concentrated in disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods in Flanders (Figure 2; Kesteloot 2006) and as the Flemish countryside tends to have less crime than cities like Brussels, Antwerp or Ghent (Federale Politie 2006), it was not surprising that the electoral geography of the VB initially corresponded with the degree of urbanization (De Decker, Kesteloot, De Maesschalck and Vranken 2005). Up to 1994, the electorate of the VB was mainly confined to cities and regional towns, as can be seen on Figure 1.² While VB councillors occupied nineteen of the fifty-five seats in the city council of Antwerp in 1994, the Flemish countryside had not yet been conquered by the extreme right-wing party. In subsequent elections, the electoral growth of the VB has, however, been stronger in rural and suburban municipalities than in central cities. While the expansion of the VB seems to be curbed in cities like Antwerp and Ghent, the extreme right-wing party has become a meaningful electoral force in the villages around these cities. In the remainder of this article, we will suggest explanations for this electoral breakthrough.

Figure 2 Percentage of non-EU foreigners in Flanders and Brussels (2003).

3. Researching the geography of racism

In order to understand the expansion of the VB outside the big cities, it is essential to find out whether inhabitants of Flemish cities with a lot of foreigners are, in general, more or less racist than those of rural or suburban municipalities where these are rather rare. After all, it has been indicated above that attitudes against foreigners are a crucial component in the motivation to vote for the VB. In the words of Billiet and de Witte (2008: 264), 'everyday racism constitutes the most important attitudinal determinant of political racism in Flanders'. Because people with racist attitudes are more inclined to vote for the VB, it is important to know whether the electoral geography of the extreme right-wing party corresponds with the geography of racism.

To map this geography of racism, we have conducted a multi-level analysis of survey data from the Belgian General Election Study of the ISPO/PIOP (2002). After the federal elections of 1999, trained interviewers questioned a representative sample of 4,239 respondents from 361 municipalities about their political attitudes and voting behaviour. As we only retained the municipalities of Flanders and the Brussels Capital Region with a minimum of ten respondents,³ our sample contained 2,113 respondents in ninety-six municipalities.

The survey included eight five-point scale questions measuring negative attitudes towards immigrants. These negative attitudes reflect a particular form of cultural racism in which the exclusion of 'strangers' is legitimated on the basis that they are culturally different and that their presence leads to conflicts (cf. Wren 2001). Since these conflicts are thought to be the result of cultural differences and competition for scarce economic resources, we did not only include questions in the domains of culture and customs, such as 'foreigners are a threat to our culture and habits', but also in the fields of employment and social security, such as 'migrant workers threaten the employment of Belgians' (Billiet and de Witte 2008: 254). Based on these eight scale questions with a value from one (completely disagree) to five (completely agree), we constructed a compound scale measuring everyday racist attitudes. This compound scale had a minimum of eight (very racist) and a maximum of forty (not racist at all). The scale was normally distributed and the value of Cronbach's alpha, measuring the internal consistency of the scale, was satisfactory too (alpha = 0.92).

In our study, the central question is whether geographical differences in racist attitudes are context-related or a compound effect of individual-level characteristics. To answer such a

question, a multi-level analysis is the most suitable technique. It is a form of regression analysis whereby, after the computation of a general regression equation (fixed terms), the remaining variance (random terms) is split into an individual variance and an intergroup variance. In our case, the former is a measure for remaining differences between the 2,113 respondents, the latter for remaining differences between the ninety-six municipalities. If the inter-group variance is statistically significant, the technique allows for the construction of separate regression equations for different municipalities as well. Thereby, it is important that the estimates of the parameters of these equations are influenced by the general regression equation. Because the technique models the different levels simultaneously, this influence is the strongest for the most imprecise equations of the different municipalities. As such, 'it is important to appreciate that multi-level estimates have the very useful property of being precision-weighted' (Jones, Johnston and Pattie 1992: 356; for an extensive discussion of the multi-level analysis see Jones 1991 and Duncan 1997 too).

4. The Flemish geography of racism

In the first step of our analysis (model 1 in Table 1), we tried to explain the geographical differences in cultural racism with one variable at the level of the individuals and one at the level of the municipalities. At the level of the individuals, we used the net household income ('income') because it had the most extensive scale of all variables synthesizing the socioeconomic position of the respondents. The variable comprised twenty-eight different income categories with a range of 20,000 Belgian Francs or 496 euro, while education contained only five categories (lower, lower secondary, higher secondary, higher, university) and occupation eight (based on the British social economic classification). At the level of the municipalities, we used the percentage of non-European foreigners ('% Foreigners') because a correlation has been found between the presence of immigrants from outside Europe and attitudes towards them (Meert et al. 2004). In the second step of the analysis, control variables such as age, gender, occupation and education were added to the model (model 2 in Table 1).

Table 1 Output of the multi-level analyses

	Model 1	Model 2
Fixed terms		
Intercept	20.54**	23.31**
Income	0.23**	0.03
Education		1.80**
Occupation		-0.33**
Gender		-0.65†
Age		-0.06**
% Foreigners	0.18**	0.07*
Random terms		
Individual level	45.31**	39.10**
Municipal level		
Intercept	7.74**	2.15*
Intercept/slope	-0.25*	-0.06**
Slope (income)	0.01†	0

** $p \leq 0.01$, * $0.01 < p \leq 0.05$, † $0.05 < p \leq 0.10$.

In the general regression equations of both models the intercepts and most independent variables turn out to be statistically significant. In the first model, the income variable and the percentage of non-European foreigners are both significant at the 1 per cent level (model 1 in Table 1). In the second model, all dependent variables at the level of the individual are significant at the 1 per cent level as well, apart from gender, which is significant at the 10 per cent level, and income, which is strongly correlated with education in the Belgian case. The percentage of non-European foreigners in the municipality remains statistically significant at the 5 per cent level too (model 2 in Table 1).

In both models, the socio-economic position of the respondents is an important factor. In the first model, the compound scale measuring racist attitudes is positively related with income and in the second model with education. This means that rich people, or well-educated individuals, are generally situated at the higher end of the scale (less racist), while poor people, or less-educated individuals, are generally situated at the lower end of the scale (more racist). In both models, the compound scale measuring everyday racism is also positively related with the percentage of non-European foreigners in a municipality. In our sample, higher percentages of non-European foreigners go, on average, together with lower levels of everyday racism. The hypothesis that there is no racism outside the cities, because there are no foreigners, is thus clearly disproved. The general regression equation even demonstrates that inhabitants of municipalities with a lot of non-European foreigners are in general less racist than those of municipalities where these are rather rare.

From the random terms in Table 1, it is clear that the variances at the individual level are much more important than the variances at the municipal level. Nevertheless, the variances at the municipal level are also significant at the 1 per cent level for the intercept in the first model, nearly significant at the 1 per cent level for the slope (income) and significant at the 5 per cent level for the interaction term between slope (income) and intercept (model 1 in Table 1). Even when additional socio-economic variables are added, the residuals on the municipal level remain significant at the 5 per cent level (model 2 in Table 1). This demonstrates that the geographical distribution of everyday racism cannot be considered to be a compound effect of individual characteristics and the percentage of foreigners in a municipality alone. The geography of race is, thus, not the only spatial factor that has to be considered in order to explain the geography of racism.

Because the variances at the municipal level are significant, and because the first regression model is only two-dimensional, the intercepts and income slopes of the different municipalities can be computed and plotted on a simple XY graph (Figure 3). On this graph, it is striking that a lot of rural and suburban municipalities show levels of racism which are at least as high as those of urban areas like Antwerp or Ghent. The municipalities of the Brussels Capital Region, on the other hand, exhibit low levels of racism. Interestingly enough, the municipalities in the Brussels Capital Region with the highest levels of racism are the most suburban ones (De Maesschalck and Luyten 2006).

Figure 3 Levels of cultural racism by income category in Flemish and Brussels municipalities.

It has to be acknowledged that the results of the municipalities of the Brussels Capital Region are more pronounced because they are, on average, less populated and more homogeneous than the cities of Antwerp and Ghent. While the city of Antwerp contains several districts that were merged into a single municipality with about 500,000 inhabitants, the Brussels Capital Region is a conglomerate of nineteen municipalities with an average population of about 55,000 inhabitants. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that the inhabitants of cities are, in general, less racist than the inhabitants of rural and suburban municipalities. This is still the case when their income and the geographical distribution of non-European foreigners are taken into account.

These findings are in line with the work of a number of political geographers in the USA who argue that the results of referendums on gay rights (Omrod and Cole 1996; Brown, Knopp and Morill 2005) and tax reforms (Webster and Webster 2004) reflect a major cleavage between 'modernizers' and 'traditionalists'. Just like they argue that the progressive modernizers are said to be mostly urban based and that the conservative traditionalists can be found in small towns and rural areas, our multi-level analysis suggests that urban dwellers are in general less racist than the inhabitants of rural and suburban municipalities. From this observation, it has to be concluded that it is wrong to assume that the electoral potential of the VB is small outside the big cities. Because racist attitudes are a crucial component in the motivation to vote for the VB, and because such conservative attitudes are more prevalent in the countryside than in the city, it has to be acknowledged that the lure of the extreme right might even be stronger in rural and suburban municipalities than in the traditional extreme right's bastion of Antwerp and other cities.

5. Researching fear of crime

As has been indicated before, racist attitudes against immigrants are not the only explanation for the success of the VB, however. Recently, it has been argued that 'crime took the central role that the immigrant issue had played before in the [VB] party manifestoes' (Walgrave and de Swert 2004: 486). To confirm or shatter the idea that fear of crime is not an issue in the countryside, we will analyse racialized and spatialized discourses on fear that we recorded in a qualitative study on feelings of insecurity. For this study, trained researchers conducted focus group interviews with four diverse groups in four different rural or suburban settings: secondary school students in Haacht, neighbours in Liedekerke, train commuters in Rotselaar and women in Overpelt (see Figure 2 to locate these villages on the map). The researchers invited people to participate in the study through their contacts with schools or associations. Each focus group contained ten to twenty people and was gathered three times for about two hours. While the moderators encouraged all participants to come up with their own discussion topics in the first two sessions, every group was confronted with quotes from the three other groups in the last session in order to increase the credibility and the transferability of the data (in the meaning of Baxter and Eyles 1997).

In our analysis, we did not lay emphasis on the objectively quantifiable risk to become a victim of crime or the poor design of public space. Even though reviews of the literature on fear of crime conclude that there is a manifest lack of agreement on its underlying causes, such explanations have recently been criticized because they 'tend towards the individualistic and deterministic and miss discussions about the social structures and power relations which surround offenders, victims and those

who fear crime' (Shirlow and Pain 2003: 20). A growing body of literature therefore suggests that the social, cultural and emotional aspects of geographical experience should be more central to research on fear of crime (Pain 2000). That is why we focused, in our analysis, on the way social power relations interweave with identity questions to dominate the use and misuse of space (cf. Sparks, Girling and Loader 2001; Little, Panelli and Kraack 2005).

To date, feminist geographers have dominated this field. Critics argue that their interest in spatialized gender politics has definitely led to a renewed investigation of fear as a force structuring women's everyday life, but that it has minimized, at the same time, the attention for race, class or age as interlocking and overlapping positions in frightening situations (Day 1999; Kern 2005). So far, it has been demonstrated, nevertheless, that fear of foreigners is highest among racist persons and that people with a negative attitude to cultural diversity avoid supposedly scary places more often than people with a positive attitude to it (Ackaert and Van Craen 2005; Day 1999: 310). Because of the increased attention of the VB for safety and security and because of the high levels of racism in rural and suburban Flanders, we believe that an indepth investigation of the dialectics between fear of crime and race and racism is crucial to understand the electoral success of the VB outside the cities.

6. Racialization and fear of crime in the city

In light of the low levels of moderation and researcher control in our study, it should not come as a surprise that the respondents came up with a broad range of frightening issues, ranging from food poisoning and soil pollution to road safety, terrorism and drugs. In spite of this variability, fear of the city was the most talked about in all four groups. Invariably, this topic came up spontaneously and was discussed rather extensively. When we asked the students in Haacht, for example, to propose a subject related to fear or insecurity, the town of Mechelen was the first thing that came to their mind. A student told us he would never walk around in Mechelen after ten o'clock. Almost half of his classmates agreed. In other focus groups a lot of people admitted that they avoided urban neighbourhoods or even complete cities too, especially after dark. In fact, even some commuters from Rotselaar said that they would not go to Brussels if they did not work there:

In Brussels it is terrible. There are a lot of Moroccans and Turks and so on. I would not like to be left behind alone there, especially in the evenings. (Bart,⁴ male, Haacht)

Last Sunday, I have been there, in the city. And in that place, it was close to the zoo. I don't know the name. And I said it has completely changed. Only strangers. I didn't feel comfortable there and I said, come on, let's get out of here. (Monique, female, Overpelt about Antwerp)

To explain this fear in the city, two points have to be made. First of all, it is interesting to see that the respondents rarely explained their fears in a discourse that focused on the degradation of the built environment or the higher risk to become a victim of crime. In most instances, our respondents were inspired by a fear of what they call 'strangers'. Most of these 'strangers' were immigrants or asylum seekers that were easily recognizable by their facial appearance, their cultural practices or their religious clothes. For our respondents, cultural, religious and biological factors were inextricably linked to make Africans and Muslims, in particular, the subject of fear (cf. Wren 2001). According to Susan Smith (1984 in Pain 2000: 377), this implicit connection between easily recognizable 'strangers' and

crime should be seen as a way of managing and negotiating danger. As everyone can be a potential criminal, labelling criminals with certain social markers increases personal feelings of power and security. Because of the illusion that white people do not commit crime, but only certain social groups that can be clearly identified by their physical appearance, people feel safe when they encounter unfamiliar 'white' people, but unsafe when they come across so-called 'strangers':

Actually, you will always feel a bit unsafe. If it is dark outside, and there is a group of Moroccans or I don't know what, and you pass them. Then you will always feel a bit unsafe, don't you? (Wim, male, Haacht, about Mechelen)

Secondly, it is crucial that the interviewees in Liedekerke, Overpelt, Rotselaar and Haacht developed their spatial imaginaries through a thoroughly racialized interpretation of city life and city-dwellers and, as such, they assigned racial meanings to urban environments. The participants in the focus groups did not think of the city as a simple concentration of foreigners, but as an intensely racialized place (Bonnett and Nayak 2003; Sundstrom 2003). A metaphorical link between race and space was evident, for example, when respondents talked about Ostend, Antwerp or Brussels as if they were 'strange cities' where 'white' Belgians have become 'strangers' themselves:

Wherever you go, you don't meet a single Belgian anymore . . . It has become a strange city, because of these foreigners. (Ivo, male, Rotselaar, about Ostend)

There were only strangers. You didn't see any Belgians. Only strangers . . . You were the only Belgian around. (Hilde, female, Overpelt, about Antwerp)

On a school trip, we were sitting in the Brussels underground and there were so many blacks and Moroccans. My [friend] comes from Mechelen, so he was a racist already. All of a sudden he tells me, but really loudly 'I really feel like a stranger here'. (Bram, male, Haacht)

Even though some respondents were not afraid in neighbourhoods with high concentrations of foreigners—one woman from Rotselaar liked to go shopping in the Brabantstraat in Brussels, while another one was not afraid in the area around the Brussels South Station—it was clear that most of our interviewees associated urban environments with unsafety and insecurity (cf. Kesteloot and De Maesschalck 2001). Our analysis suggests that their way of thinking was the result of a triple connection between urbanism, foreigners and crime. Through the racialization of the urban landscape, fear of the criminal, which comes down to fear of the foreigner, gets encoded in space, so that cities are feared, not criminals (Day 1999: 314). Without doubt, the idea that crime practically only occurs in big cities is liberating. Just as everyone you meet could be a criminal, crime can be committed everywhere. Through the association of crime with certain people and certain places, it is distanced from the self, both socially and geographically (Pain 1997: 236). This leads to an excessive sense of security in other places or with other people.

7. Racialization and fear of crime outside the city

English geographers stress that the darkening of urban areas goes hand in hand with the whitening of rural and suburban environments (Agyeman and Spooner 1997; Bonnett 2002). While popular discourse represents cities like Manchester and London as a

disruption to the authenticity of England, the English countryside may be described as a 'repository of white values, ideologies and lifestyles' (Hubbard 2005: 12). As racialized others are deemed out-of-place in traditional 'white' villages, Tyler (2003: 408) concludes that the idea of the village is a 'potent symbol in the construction and control of a racialized set of specifically middle class values'. This racialization of the village as a 'white' space was evident in our focus groups too. When we asked the participants in Overpelt how they would describe their village, they did not think about the great number of Dutch immigrants, Turks, Moroccans and asylum seekers. Instead, they referred to sociability and solidarity, followed by a carefully pronounced 'And still few strangers'.

Initially, this caricatural division of the real ethnic and racial landscape in 'black' cities and 'white' villages led to a similar dichotomy regarding fear of crime. All respondents considered the countryside to be much safer than the city. The students in Haacht, for instance, immediately referred to the city of Mechelen as a dangerous place. Only after some specific questions, they admitted that they felt unsafe in their own villages too. In the same way, a lot of people in Liedekerke told us they were too afraid to go to Brussels, while they did not avoid any places in their own village, even after dark. In our understanding, these spatial imaginaries rest on the double racialization of criminality and space. Because criminality is automatically projected on foreigners, the contrast between the 'white' countryside and the 'black' city initially results in an interrelated dichotomy between the 'safe' countryside and the 'unsafe' city. In the imagination of rural and suburban residents, dangerous foreigners are confined to towns and cities, while the rural and suburban landscape is aligned with 'whiteness' and the absence of danger (Agyeman and Spooner 1997: 199). The idea that the village is much safer than the city is thus the spatial effect of the racist assumption that only 'strangers' are criminals.

The utopian vision of 'stranger' and crimefree villages has, however, been shattered by reality. According to the latest victimization surveys, there is, on average, more attempted burglaries in rural municipalities than in regional towns like Ostend or Mechelen (Federale Politie 2006). And even though it is true that Turks and Moroccans are mainly living in cities, they are also moving into inexpensive working-class houses in villages like Liedekerke or Overpelt. In fact, there is not a single Flemish municipality without foreigners and even municipalities with less than 100 foreigners are rare (Kesteloot 2006; Figure 2). Unsurprisingly, the respondents often projected their fears on these local foreigners. In Liedekerke, for example, the respondents initially could not come up with any good reasons to be afraid in their own village. Only after insisting, they started to talk about a local crime wave. Once again, the racist association between crime and 'real blacks', 'North Africans' or 'Eastern European' gangsters was patently obvious. In the perception of our respondents, rural and suburban crime was only committed by so-called 'strangers'. With phrases such as 'lately it has started here' and 'now it is beginning here', the people in Liedekerke even insinuated that their village was crime free until the arrival of these foreigners:

Ward: Lately it has started here with these Serbs, Romanians . . .

Dieter: . . . Poles, Kosovars, Albanians. (males, Liedekerke)

It is beginning here. If you see that Eastern European countries, Romania, Poland, . . . Last week they have run in another one breaking into a house. (Patrick, male, Liedekerke)

It is not Belgians that they run in. It is always strangers. I am not a racist, but it's true. (Ingrid, female, Liedekerke)

This does not imply, however, that the respondents feared their immediate living environments as much as they feared the city. Despite the increased visibility of foreigners outside cities, the sense of safety that is associated with the racialization of the rural and the suburban as a 'white' space remains largely intact. When this representation is under threat, for example because of the construction of an asylum centre in Lindel (Overpelt), the resulting 'otherness' is spatially confined and contained. People told us, for example, that they kept away from certain street corners, squares or districts in their villages (cf. Ackaert and Van Craen 2005). These places were stigmatized because of the presence of foreigners and therefore excluded from mainstream village life. By marking off such 'islands of otherness'—in the quote below Monique calls the area around the asylum centre a separate district of her village—rural and suburban dwellers do not need to cast doubt on the racialization of the rest of their living environments and the sense of security that comes with it:

It happens here as well, in the Holheide district, a separate district of Lindel. A lot of strangers are living there. And in the evening, towards half-past nine—ten o'clock, they all flock together and make the district unsafe. (Monique, female, Overpelt)

8. Discussion and conclusion

Our focus group research in Haacht, Rotselaar, Overpelt and Liedekerke revealed that a lot of rural and suburban dwellers feel unsafe in cities like Brussels, Antwerp or Mechelen and in 'islands of otherness' in their own villages. Most interviewees change their behaviour in these environments and avoid certain neighbourhoods or even complete cities, especially after dark. We argued that their conduct is mainly inspired by fear of 'strangers'. Through the racialization of space, the categorization and simplification of humanity in 'Belgian' and 'stranger', 'white' and 'black', 'good' and 'bad', 'safe' and 'unsafe', did not only work between different groups of people, but also between different places. For a lot of rural and suburban dwellers, places which are metaphorically filled with 'strangers', like 'multicultural' cities and 'islands of otherness', were, thus, automatically frightening. Throughout the paper, we stressed that this fear is symptomatic for the high levels of racism on the Flemish countryside. It is crucial, indeed, that our multi-level analysis indicated that inhabitants of cities with concentrations of foreigners are, in general, less racist than those of villages where these are rather rare. After all, it has been demonstrated that people with a negative attitude to cultural diversity avoid supposedly scary places more often than people with a positive attitude to it (Ackaert and Van Craen 2005).

As such, the findings of our qualitative and quantitative research suggest that the breakthrough of the VB in rural and suburban Flanders should not come as a surprise. The party stands for a repressive policy that fights crime by all means. With zero-tolerance policing and the forced repatriation of criminal immigrants, the VB proposes rural and suburban dwellers to secure the city against crime and frightening foreigners (De Decker, Kesteloot, De Maesschalck and Vranken 2005). A vote for the VB outside the big cities should, however, not only be understood as a protest vote against the insecurity and the racialization of Antwerp, Mechelen and Brussels. In rural and suburban municipalities, the electoral success of the VB also reflects the longing for a mythic 'whiteness' and the sense of security that comes with it. In this way, a rural or suburban vote for the VB is also an 'anticipatory vote' (De Decker and Kesteloot 2000: 257) that has to stop the imagined 'infection' of the 'white' and 'safe' countryside with urban 'diseases' like crime and foreigners.

These results imply that most contemporary studies on the success of the extreme right in Western Europe should be criticized for at least two reasons. First of all, it is clear that sociologists and political scientists have differentiated between a number of issues to explain the quick succession of extreme right electoral victories in Western Europe. In the case of the VB academics have focused, for example, on Flemish nationalism, anti-politics, crime and everyday racism (Walgrave and De Swert 2004). Our analysis has shown, however, that crime and everyday racism should not be considered as independent factors influencing people's decision to vote for the extreme right, but as open-ended frames that are strongly interlinked and interwoven (cf. Rydgren 2008). Our focusgroup study has indicated, indeed, that fear of crime and negative attitudes towards ethnic minorities are so intimately connected that a vote for the VB cannot be considered as a vote for either of the two issues. In the minds of a lot of rural and suburban dwellers, immigrants are criminals and criminals are immigrants.

Secondly, it has to be acknowledged that the spatial understanding of electoral motivations has been too limited to date. Most researchers have tried to connect the electoral geography of extreme right-wing parties with the spatial distribution of socio-economic and cultural indicators like the unemployment rate, the number of crimes per capita and the share of the population with a Moroccan or Turkish background (e.g. Coffé, Heyndels and Vermeir 2007). While these studies demonstrate the indispensability of contextual determinants at the neighbourhood level, this paper suggests that the VB can exploit issues like everyday racism and crime at a number of spatial scales concurrently. In rural and suburban Flanders, a racist discourse linking immigrants and crime will not only be popular because people want to safeguard the feelings of safety attached to the 'whiteness' of their immediate living environments, but also because they are worried about the perceived insecurity of the central cities. It is precisely because the VB can politicize issues like crime and immigration beyond the neighbourhood level that studies relating the geography of the VB with neighbourhood characteristics have always underestimated the spread of the VB outside the traditional extreme right bastions of the cities.

This critique is closely related to the observation that social and cultural geography has been blind to the problems of rural and suburban racism and fear of crime for too long (Panelli, Little and Kraack 2004). The refusal to study the relationships between race, racism and rurality has often been premised on the idea that it is the presence of foreigners which creates a race problem and that therefore, without this presence, the issue becomes superfluous and irrelevant (Neal 2002: 448). Our racialized and politicized analysis of rural and suburban racism and fear forces us, however, to think beyond the deeply disturbing cliché that 'white' areas do not have a race problem (Bonnett 1993: 175). Our findings have demonstrated, indeed, that the notions of fear of crime, race and racism are as central to the social, cultural, emotional and political construction of the Flemish rural and suburban landscape as the conservatism of the traditionalists to small town and rural America. The political exploitation of the high levels of cultural racism and the omnipresent fear of foreigners in rural and suburban Flanders make us plead for a renewed interest in rurality, politics and racialization in geographical studies on fear of crime, and this at a number of interrelated spatial scales.

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Notes

1 In 2004, the Vlaams Blok was forced to dissolve as a series of its constitutive organizations were convicted for racism. Afterwards, the party re-established itself under the new name Vlaams Belang. Its political staff and the basic ideas of its political programme were not changed, however.

2 The percentages on the graph are the weighted means of the results of the VB in those municipal elections where the party had a list of candidates. The six spatial entities on the graph have been defined by Van Hecke (1998) and Van der Haegen, Van Hecke and Juchtmans (1996). The agglomeration is the continuous built-up area around the central city, while the banlieue consists of morphologically rural municipalities functionally integrated with the central city. The commuter zone is less influenced by suburbanization, but a lot of its inhabitants still work in the central city. The Brussels Capital Region is not included because the region is bilingual and most people do not vote for Flemish parties.

3 In geographical research, it is generally accepted to have less than twenty-five respondents in the higher level units. In their analysis of electoral data, Jones, Johnston and Pattie (1992: 357–358) only used an average of nine voters in each constituency, for example.

4 We have changed the names of the respondents to guarantee their anonymity.

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