

ARTICLE

Politics in the Low Countries through a Gramscian lens

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Abstract

This article develops a Gramscian lens to grasp political changes in the Low Countries. To date, politics in the Low Countries is mainly understood via the concept of consociationalism, but this term is better suited to understanding political stability than change. Yet exactly the political changes of the past decades led many to question whether the Netherlands or Belgium still pass as consociational democracies. Since the debate on 'wither consociational' is severely constrained by the lack of alternative concepts, this paper introduces a series of Gramscian concepts such as 'Caesarism' and 'passive revolution' that demonstrate a striking resemblance with, respectively, 'consociationalism' and 'the politics of accommodation'. Yet those concepts also widen the analytical scope and situate political institutions within a broader struggle for hegemony. Their relevance is affirmed by the implicit or explicit adoption and application of a Gramscian politics by the New Left and, later, the far right.

Keywords: Consociationalism, Gramsci, Hegemony, Caesarism, Passive revolution

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Introduction

Over the past couple of decades, the Low Countries (The Netherlands and Belgium) have witnessed dramatic electoral and ideological shifts. Aside from several heavily volatile elections, a more general trend can be observed in which social-democratic and Christian-democratic parties, especially in the Netherlands and Flanders, have

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either gradually or suddenly lost sizable chunks of support, while at the same time right-wing and far-right parties have been gaining ground on what was once the political centre. More fundamentally, both countries witnessed an ideological swing to the right as most social-democratic and Green parties embraced (neo)liberal doctrines while centre-right to far-right parties increasingly adopt nationalist or ever-more reactionary positions.

Those dramatic shifts trigger new questions about the nature of politics in the Low Countries. Politics in the Low Countries has long been described as consensus-oriented and conflict-averse. Lijphart's (1969) concept of 'consociational democracy' was most frequently used to understand politics in the Low Countries. Yet in more recent decades, scholars increasingly questioned whether the Netherlands (Daalder, 1996; Otjes & Louwerse, 2023) and particularly Belgium (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2020; Deschouwer, 2006; Van Haute & Wauters, 2019) still pass as consociational democracies (if they accept that term in the first place). But if either the Netherlands or Belgium are not, or no longer, consociational, what are they?

The lack of alternative concepts to understand and examine Dutch or Belgian politics severely constrains the debate on how to understand politics in the Low Countries in the light of more recent developments. Consociationalism was meant to describe practices that preserved political stability, but it laid out little guidance on how to understand change. Even if one substitutes or combines consociationalism with federalism, as is the case for Belgium (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015), the focus remains on mechanisms for resolving or institutionalising conflict rather than exploring its potential emancipatory effects. Since there is little focus on what drives those changes in Lijphart's work or where those conflicts originate, it is difficult to account for the political, institutional and ideological developments described above – the erosion of the 'centre-parties' and the rise of the far right – in Belgium, the Netherlands and beyond by primarily relying on Lijphart.

This contribution attempts to widen the scope of analysis by invoking a series of Gramscian concepts and theories to understand politics in the Low Countries. The central claim of this paper is that a Gramscian lens is better suited to analyse and understand politics in the Low Countries because it not only accounts for relative stability, but also articulates several factors that drive political change. A Gramscian framework is more sensitive to the role of structural imbalances between various 'social segments' or classes, without compromising on a neat analysis of the mechanisms by which ruling forces maintain their power.

At the same time, the Gramscian perspective links up with existing Marxist critiques of consociationalism by Kieve (1981) that problematise the simple dichotomy between elites and masses, subdivided into allegedly independent 'pillars'. Yet whereas this Marxist criticism claims that Lijphart downplays the relevance of class conflicts – which were hardly accommodated according to Kieve – the

Marxist approach overemphasises the role of workers' struggle over other conflicts (Bakvis, 1984). Gramsci's writings were of central inspiration to post-Marxist authors such as Hall (1988) and Mouffe (2018) who aimed to incorporate other aimed to incorporate other antagonisms in their analyses of social and political conflict. As will be demonstrated, studying politics through a Gramscian lens renders a framework that captures class conflicts and other conflicts while enabling a better study of elite practices that either result in stability or change.

For the most part, this paper suggests a different Gramscian-inspired conceptual framework geared towards (differently) interpreting the evidence for the contradicting claims regarding the nature or very existence of consociationalism. The first and second parts of the paper contrast Lijphart's theory with a Gramscian perspective in relation to existing criticism of consociationalism. The third part highlights the importance of Gramsci as an inspiration for bringing about some of the most significant political changes of the past decades via political confrontation and critique. The conclusion, then, reflects further upon the capacity of a Gramscian framework to analyse and understand some of the drivers of political change that a consociational perspective has little to say about.

Consociationalism and its Critics

Each conceptual framework that becomes dominant for studying certain cases has a confining effect on the discussion and analyses of those cases. This is no less the case for the conceptual apparatus introduced by Lijphart which became dominant for studying the Low Countries. Contrasting this framework with a Gramscian lens is, however, not self-evident. Lijphart and Gramsci were writing at different times and working from different contexts. And even though most writings on Gramsci emerged in the same period as Lijphart rose to fame, both authors responded to different problematics and had different objectives. For Lijphart the objective was (to explain) *political stability*, whereas Gramscian perspectives focus on the *emancipation* of subordinated groups. This is important because it leads to different evaluations of political ruptures and developments.

Yet the fact that Lijphart and Gramsci were responding to different problematics does not mean that contrasting them cannot be productive. Stein Rokkan (1987, p. 76) once stated, when engaging with the work of Perry Anderson and Immanuel Wallerstein, that "nothing definitive can be observed in the work of a single researcher: progress is much more likely to be achieved by confronting a diversity of paradigms and by trying to combine several partial theories into simplified schemes". This would in the end contribute to "broaden[ing] the empirical foundations for examining and questioning the implications of models, not only for particular territories, but in general" (Rokkan, 1987, p. 99; translation by author).

Adding to that, there may also be common ground for bringing theories of Lijphart and Gramsci into conversation with one another. Despite their diverging objectives, both authors have rather similar starting points for their analysis. Lijphart (1975) departed from the observation that the Netherlands, in which he developed his model, was a 'segmented' or 'deeply divided' society. Similarly, Gramsci is often credited for acknowledging that society is fundamentally pluriform and that one cannot simply assume that it can be divided into two classes as in (caricatures of) the Marxist model. It is precisely by highlighting how both authors derive different aims and tasks from their analyses of social structures that the limitations and contradictions of both conceptual models and theories are revealed. This prerrequires first a more detailed description of their writings and existing criticisms, beginning with Lijphart.

Consociationalism and the Politics of Accommodation

The 'consociational democracy theme' was initially developed in the Netherlands but was soon applied in various smaller countries in continental Europe and beyond. The Netherlands and Belgium stand out as being the most discussed cases of consociational democracy, although Belgium has become increasingly federalised since the 1970s. Most debate on the validity of the consociational model centred on the Netherlands – and the same applies to the debate in this part of the paper – but there is growing interest in comparing the two countries (Andeweg, 2019; Andeweg et al., 2008). This is in part because a comparison generates more insights into both the workings and limitations of consociationalism.

So how did consociationalism emerge and what does it entail? In Lijphart's (1975) analysis, the Netherlands became a consociational democracy in 1917 when liberals, Christian-democrats, and social-democrats compromised on several highly divisive issues such as universal suffrage and public financing of parochial education. Following the consociational principle, 'highly segmented' or 'deeply divided' societies could still become stable democracies. This required that contact between the various segments (or 'pillars', as they were called) was limited, and people would actively be held passive or acquiescent (*lijdelijk*) so that a 'cartel' of elites would have sufficient leeway for compromise. According to Lijphart, the spirit of compromise that resulted in an elite-cartel would remain intact during the following decades, at least until the 1960s.

The Belgian political scientist Luc Huyse (1970) was the first to apply Lijphart's theory to Belgium when he studied the period from 1944 to 1961 and observed "remarkably much resemblance with aspects of the politics of accommodation" (Huyse, 1970, p. 182). Although Belgium was less divided by different religions (yet more strongly when it came to the secular-Catholic cleavage), many of the mechanisms Lijphart observed to resolve conflict and ensure stability also applied to Belgium. Lijphart (1981, p. 8) himself would even describe Belgium in 1981 as "the

most perfect, most convincing and most impressive example of a consociation" and predicted that this would probably remain the case for decades to come.

Lijphart (1975) explained the remarkable political stability following no less than seven factors that together make up consociational democracy, which were later reduced to only four (Lijphart, 1989): (1) the use of grand coalitions or power-sharing arrangements, (2) the presence of autonomy or (3) veto power for each social group, and (4) the use of proportional representation to ensure that each group has fair representation in government. Lijphart (1975) argued that consociational democracy is particularly well suited to countries with a history of deep-seated social divisions, as it allows for the peaceful coexistence of distinct groups within a single political system.

In practice, political stability was, according to Lijphart (1975), achieved through "summit diplomacy", which held that the elites of the various pillars would hold a country together through amical agreements in which the masses were held passive. Consociationalism entailed a 'self-denying prophesy' in which the permanent threat of disintegration would make the elites of each segment in society better off with compromises. Although there was a range of factors facilitating consociational democracy, Lijphart emphasised that it was ultimately the 'prudent leadership' of the relatively autonomous elites that was decisive to political stability. In the end, Lijphart (1969, p. 213) wrote, the "essential characteristic of consociational democracy is not so much any particular institutional arrangement as the deliberate joint effort by the elites to stabilize the system".

Criticism, Contexts, Classes

Already after its initial publication *The Politics of Accommodation* triggered a wide variety of criticisms on historical, empirical, and theoretical grounds (for overviews see: Andeweg, 2000; Van Schendelen, 1984). Moreover, consociationalism would have a strong normative imperative as a model in which elites would be self-legitimising and lack accountability, while it required ordinary people to be acquiescent (*lijdelijk*). In that sense, consociationalism was not only a descriptive, but also a prescriptive, model.

Though there are different currents of criticism, the uniting factor is that Lijphart pays too little attention to the contexts which facilitate the type of accommodative behaviour that characterises consociational democracy. Many scholars, for instance, subscribe to the so-called nation-building perspective, developed by Stein Rokkan (1973), which points at the fact that the remarkable stability of the Netherlands can also be explained by the existence of cross-cutting cleavages (a secular-religious and a class cleavage). Daalder (1974, 613), in this light, holds that "this trend of thought combines a somewhat deterministic belief in the explosive potential of social cleavages and in the ability of autonomous elite groups to thwart their effect".

Others have directed attention to structural geographic, cultural, and economic factors that could play a role. Rokkan (1973, p. 19) states regarding The Netherlands, Belgium, and Switzerland:

It was no accident that the three consociational systems had to be developed along the broad 'buffer zone' between northern Protestantism and southern counter-reformation in Europe. Nor was it an accident that they had emerged out of the strong networks of independent cities at the margins of the large continental systems of territorial control. Consociation represented a constructive solution to an inherited configuration of cultural and economic forces: a stronger drive towards administrative centralisation. A greater investment of resources in efforts of cultural unification might have disrupted the balance in each system.

In other words, the experiences of the consociational democracies could not be compared with those of large continental states exactly because they departed from a different structural economic and cultural position.

The farthest-reaching critique of consociationalism was the Marxist perspective developed by Kieve (1981), who argues that the static representation of Lijphart does not correspond to the political dynamics before and certainly not after the pacification of 1917. In Lijphart's representation, the four pillars are relatively independent from each other and consist of elites on the one hand and rank-and-file 'masses' on the other. The mutual relationships between the members of the various pillars and the ways in which members transfer from one pillar to the other remain underexamined. Aside from the fact that pillars often stood in an (unequal) social relation to one another (i.e. socialist workers in relation to the liberal bourgeoisie), Kieve (1981) also points out that members of different classes were part of the denominational pillars. Once class conflict intensified, many workers defected to the socialist pillar despite efforts of particularly the Catholic elites to keep workers passive and to forbid them from joining the trade union movement.

For Kieve (1981), conflicts that do not threaten bourgeois rule were easily accommodated, but issues related to the class struggle led to more intense conflicts that cannot be captured by accommodative politics. For example, he emphasises that Lijphart would have exaggerated the centrality of 'the school struggle', while the social strikes in the 1920s were brutally crushed. Because the confessional elites would have trouble satisfying all members of their pillars, those would prove to be 'pillars of sand' that crumble once class conflicts were intensified. Thus, the class struggle, which is the 'primary conflict' according to Kieve, is much less prone to accommodative practices of power sharing than the conflicts between secular and religious identities.

In response to Kieve's critique, Bakvis (1984, p. 330) argued that although economic factors deserve to be put more "front and centre" than previously had been the case, Kieve had "seriously misinterpreted the evidence concerning a series of events". For instance, Kieve had exaggerated the importance of moments of intense class struggle (such as the "near-revolutionary" period of November 1918) while misrecognising the efforts by the Catholic pillar, at times, to challenge bourgeois rule. In fact, if one adopts a broader definition of accommodation, also economic disputes were often resolved following consociational practices, especially when compared to other European countries.

At the same time, Bakvis (1984) posed a series of questions to which a political-economic or even a Marxist perspective could contribute. For instance, he wondered whether the stability prior to 1965 in the Netherlands can indeed be explained by consociational arrangements or if the sources of stability lie elsewhere. Moreover, Bakvis (1984) emphasised, much in line with other critics of consociationalism, that the origins of various pillars and "their connections with differing economic interests" should be a central object of study if one seeks to explain the lasting political stability. Although Bakvis (1984) did not address these issues himself, a Gramscian perspective enhances such analysis in a more fruitful way than Kieve's account.

A Gramscian Perspective

If Lijphart, by centring on the pacification of 1917, quite literally departed from *compromise*, the starting point for Gramsci are the *contradictions* in the sphere of production and how those would or would not develop in political *confrontation*. Much of Gramsci's (1971) writings analyse how ruling social forces avert threats of direct confrontation by forging what he called a 'historic bloc' comprising an alliance of different 'ruling' and 'auxiliary classes'. In order to maintain or reproduce hegemonic stability, ruling forces require the passive consent of certain social groups or classes, while coercively subordinating others. Though this was partly done by using coercive instruments of the state, Gramsci (1971) emphasises how *ideas* were crucial in attaining the passive consent of subordinated forces. Intellectuals – which according to Gramsci include teachers, journalists, clergy and so on – played a vital role in constructing a historic bloc as they formulate and disseminate ideologies that serve as the cement holding the historic bloc together.

Bourgeois Hegemony and the 'War of Position'

In his prison notebooks and earlier work, Gramsci (1971) analyses how ruling classes were able to acquire or maintain hegemony by creating various alliances – thereby exploiting social, geographic, economic, religious, and cultural differences to bind other classes or social strata in society to the ruling historic bloc while suppressing

and dividing others. Although the Low Countries are virtually absent in his writing, many of the concepts and theoretical implications of his analyses bear relevance far beyond their original scope. In fact, many of the practices described by Gramsci strongly resemble the accommodative practices and consociational arrangements that Lijphart describes, but they are differently evaluated.

As noted, the objective for Lijphart was *political stability*, whereas in Gramscian approaches the focus is on social *emancipation*. Analyses in the Lijphartian tradition depart from the consociational arrangements and tend to consider any actor that destabilises the consociation as either a potential threat or as improving the accountability of the system (Andeweg et al., 2008) – the central tension is between stability and accountability. Such an approach, then, does not consider whether this destabilisation benefits or hampers the emancipation of subordinated classes or marginalised groups (Bogaards, 2021).

Even though much of Gramsci's writings focus on analysing bourgeois hegemony, precisely the emancipatory practice was his ultimate interest. As one commentator put it: "[a]nalyzing bourgeois hegemony ... could not be the ultimate problematic of Gramsci. The ultimate problematic was a search for the most appropriate revolutionary strategy of the Left under the condition that subordinate classes give their consent to bourgeois rule" (Im, 1991, p. 124). For Gramsci, the analysis of hegemony was instrumental to finding adequate strategies to realise political change, especially since he deemed a putschist strategy of the Leninist type unlikely to be successful in advanced capitalist societies where the state would be counter-balanced by strong forces in civil society.

Since Gramsci considered the Bolshevik 'Winter Palace' model of the revolution – or what he called a 'war of movement' – unfeasible in the West, he theorised alternative avenues for change. Gramsci argued for what he called a 'war of position' in which counter-hegemonic forces would be able to slowly gain ground on the ruling classes. The 'war of position', or trench-war, served in that sense as a metaphor for an alternative model of confrontation to realise revolutionary change by slowly conquering the 'fortresses' of bourgeois hegemony (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 108–120, 238).

One could argue that Gramsci's perspective transcends that of Lijphart because the political system that Lijphart seeks to stabilise without compromising too much on accountability is, for Gramsci, one of those 'fortresses' of bourgeois hegemony. In other words, the goals of accountability and stability and the practices, arrangements or institutions that facilitate this are rather instruments to reproduce hegemony and avert the challenges and confrontations of contradictory social forces. To gain insight in those dynamics requires looking beyond the reified pillars and invoking a historical dimension that exposes the conflicts between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces that result in consociational or other arrangements. Several of the

practices, some of which are particularly relevant to the Low Countries, are conceptualised in more detail by Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*.

Passive Revolution

For Gramsci, establishing a different hegemony was only possible if fundamental changes in the structure of the economy would also be realised. Consequently, conservative or bourgeois hegemony could even persist if their affiliated parties would be (temporarily) out of power, as it could employ various strategies to subdue challengers to bourgeois rule. Although commonly referred to as the theorist of 'the revolution in the West', Gramsci was particularly interested in demonstrating how ruling classes were able to avert revolutionary threats through a variety of tactics, with accommodation and co-optation on the one hand, and different forms of coercive repression on the other.

Especially the notion of *passive revolution* that Gramsci (1971, pp. 105-120) develops encompasses this range of alternative strategies to maintain hegemony when faced with a strong workers' movement. Gramsci (1971, pp. 277-318) singled out 'Fordism and Americanism' on the one hand, and the 'Corporatist' passive revolution on the other. Fordism, according to Gramsci, represented a strategy for capitalist elites to maintain hegemony by disciplining and manipulating the needs and habits of the working class as to intensify and rationalise production and accumulation.

Yet while Fordism, in Europe, would only become the dominant mode of production and accumulation after World War II, Gramsci observed a 'corporatist' form of passive revolution in pre-World War II Europe which finds strong resemblance to the politics of accommodation. Passive revolution can be understood as the "policy whereby social struggles find sufficiently elastic frameworks to allow the bourgeoisie to gain power without dramatic upheavals" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 115). Social struggles are not absent in the process of passive revolution, but Gramsci (ibid.) articulates how passive revolutions mostly take place as the aforementioned "successive small waves of reform ... made up of a combination of social struggles, interventions from above of the enlightened monarchy type, and national wars – with the two latter phenomena predominating".

Note how Gramsci's (1971, p. 115) conception of the 'enlightened monarchy type' of interventions from above shows strong similarities with Lijphart's idea of 'prudent leadership'. For Lijphart, this was essential for political stability, while Gramsci emphasises that the 'elastic frameworks' are ultimately installed to safeguard bourgeois power or hegemony (and are in that sense a form of repression). Importantly, while Lijphart deemed the politics of accommodation a stable feature of Dutch politics since 1917, for Gramsci (1971) the process of passive revolution was always an elite response to the Jacobinist 'revolutionary explosions' experienced earlier or elsewhere.

Taking other or earlier revolutions into account places the accommodative attitudes of political elites in consociational democracy in a different light. Regarding the 'pacification' in the Netherlands, Kieve (1981, p. 323) rightly states that

the nonsocialist coalition government ... which came to power in September 1918, was compelled by its fear of the consequences of the near-revolutionary upheavals in Holland *and the even more serious events in Germany in November* to expand greatly, and in an ad hoc manner, its original program of modest political and social reforms. (emphasis added)

Even if the bloc-elites of the different pillars were not as hostile to working class demands as Kieve presents them to be, their attitude can be as much the consequence of the revolutionary explosions elsewhere as of the domestic (class) structure.

Periodisation and History Writing

Incomplete characterisations of ruling elite practices and their motivations not only result from limiting the geographic scope of analysis, but they can also result from limiting a period of study. Gramsci (1971, p. 114) famously criticised liberal history writing for strategically drawing on partial histories – for instance when he focused on the history writings of Benedetto Croce on Italy and of Europe. Gramsci (1971, p. 118) argues that Croce, “for extrinsic and tendentious reasons”, excludes the moment of struggle in pre-1815 Europe and pre-1871 Italy “in which the structure is formed and modified”. Croce’s history of Europe, according to Gramsci (1971, p. 119), “is nothing but a fragment of history, the ‘passive’ aspect of the great revolution which started in France in 1789 and which spilled over into the rest of Europe”.

Lijphart’s work faced very similar critiques as those of Croce’s. Historians generally agree that the periodisation, Lijphart’s emphasis on the pacification of 1917, and his more general treatment of history are among the weakest elements in his argumentation. Putting central emphasis on the 1917 pacification enabled Lijphart to present the four pillars as more or less independent ahistorical elements or even create a semi-Hobbesian ‘origin myth’ of the stability of Dutch politics (Oudenampsen, 2018, p. 67). But in fact, the 1917 events posed less of a break with earlier periods. Daalder (1995), for instance, argues that the relative autonomy and lack of accountability of Dutch elites were more of a general feature of the past centuries. Moreover, it is claimed that Lijphart’s empirical indicators of the ‘remarkable stability’ neither indicated much stability, nor a significant change since 1917.

Similarly, Belgian political scientists have wondered in ever louder terms whether Belgium could still pass for being a consociational democracy or whether it had ever been one. Faithful to the calls for further democratisation of his time, Huyse (1970, p. 252) had already remarked that the “politics of accommodation with its

drawbacks should be regarded as a 'point', a phase in the development of political democracy". Yet it was not so much further democratisation, but a process of federalisation that was set in motion under pressure of the Flemish nationalist movement. Some argue that the many state reforms since 1970 undermine the consociational model (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015), while others argued that, at best, Belgium was only consociational in certain phases of its political history. Deschouwer (2012) observed that Huyse did study a noticeably brief period of time (1944–1961) to arrive at his conclusion. Also, Huyse (2003, pp. 382–402) himself observed later how the consensus model was quickly eroding and making place for a less consensus-oriented politics.

To date, Daalder's (1974, 1995) writings have been regarded as the most important counterweight to Lijphart's theory. Daalder famously criticised the *regentenmentaliteit* (the mentality of the regent/upper class) of the Dutch political elite before Lijphart published his work. Daalder complemented the consensus-oriented model with a 'conflict model'. But those conflicts in this model do not necessarily serve the purpose of social emancipation, as Daalder's analysis is not anchored to the emancipation of a specific social group. Moreover, although Daalder's (early) analysis deviates significantly from that of Lijphart, especially in his later work he tends to approve of the consensual politics of Dutch elites and ignores the fundamental inequalities that compromises often affirm.

Scholars have also pointed out that whether one finds support for Lijphart's claims depends on the type of history writing. Stuurman (1983), in this light, invoked the fruitful distinction between 'conflictual' and 'conciliant' history writing (see: De Wit, 1965) – where writings like the politics of accommodation (and the many histories that emphasise the compromise-oriented nature of Dutch or Belgian politics) systematically ignore or downplay the more conflictual periods in the histories of the Low Countries. By paying more attention to the more conflictual periods in Dutch and Belgian history as well as the international developments, the politics of accommodation can be regarded as a response 'from above' to appease conflict while retaining power.

Consociationalism or Caesarism

Gramsci's writings provide a more complete account of the dynamics and dialectics that give rise to political compromise, which bears deviant political implications from those of Lijphart. Although Lijphart's aim was primarily to explain political stability, his work was frequently criticised for its acquiescing and self-legitimising political implications. Gramsci, who articulates the role of conflict and confrontation, was more transparent about his own normative commitments, but also exposed the political agenda behind the historiography of others. For example, with regard to Croce's 'fragments of history', Gramsci (1971, p. 119) wonders "whether this Crocean

construction, in its tendentious nature, does not have a contemporary and immediate reference”, thereby referring to the fascist period of his time. In economic terms, fascism represented, according to Gramsci (1971, p. 120), a movement that increased the “socialization and co-operation in the sphere of production ..., without however touching (or at least not going beyond the regulation and control of) individual and group appropriation of profit”. Although certain reforms were realised, the ownership relations are left untouched, while at the same time the reforms do create a “period of expectation and hope” with “the great mass of urban and rural petit bourgeoisie” (ibid.).

Gramsci makes some important observations on the nature of fascism and its relation to the accommodative politics associated with passive revolution. Gramsci ultimately claims that the period of “passive revolution” he describes for the period of 1815–1870 is quite similar to the period of fascism starting after 1921. Gramsci continues (1971, p. 119): “But, in present conditions, is it not precisely the fascist movement which in fact corresponds to the movement of moderate and conservative liberalism in the last century?” In both cases, popular social demands

were satisfied by small doses, legally, in a reformist manner – in such a way that it was possible to preserve the political and economic position of the old feudal classes, to avoid agrarian reform, and, especially, to avoid the popular masses going through a period of political experience such as occurred in France in the years of Jacobinism. (ibid.)

Instead of a challenge to the kind of liberal or conservative attempts to pacify conflict as advocated by Croce (and Lijphart), fascism is regarded by Gramsci as an extension of this type of moderate and conservative liberal tendencies.

This becomes clear when Gramsci develops the concept of Caesarism to describe Mussolini’s trajectory to power as well as the practices of other European governments. The concept of Caesarism could well serve as a stand-in for consociationalism – especially if we note that the compromise-oriented nature of political elites in consociational democracies may not stem from their prudent leadership, but results from a particular balance of (class) forces.

At first glance, Lijphart’s descriptions of elite accommodation perhaps more accurately depict the political processes in the Low Countries than a remote projection of class struggle. Yet Kieve (1981, p. 322) may also be right in pointing out that the consociational model mistakes the cause for its effects:

It assumes that the cause of political stability or social peace is the internalization by the relevant elites of accommodationist attitudes, rather than that the acceptance at any given time of accommodationist procedures is the outcome of social and political conflict that reflects significant changes in the balance of class forces.

The problem, however, is that the class-struggle perspective lacks the descriptive and conceptual capacity to describe these practices. It is only in Gramsci's writings (which are often said to engender the first genuine Marxist theory of politics), and in particular in his concept of Caesarism, that we encounter a more neat description of those practices.

Consider, for instance, the similarities between some of Lijphart's critics with regard to the balance of power in the Low Countries and Gramsci's description of Caesarism. The relevant criticism, in this case, holds that in the Netherlands the need for compromise was ever-present, given that no group (or pillar) was able to reach a majority on its own. But in Belgium there was, for some social groups or pillars, a "permanent temptation of majoritarian politics" (Andeweg, 2019, p. 414). In other words: it is the power that matters. Frogner (1997, pp. 77-78) notes, for instance, regarding Belgian governments:

It is as if governments which perceived themselves as 'strong' tried to gain decisive advantages without much concern for consociationalism. Consociationalism reappears, however, when conflicts become so deep that they might destroy the political system and none of the conflicting actors is able to overcome his adversaries. The agreements are more the result of a stalemate than of a permanent spirit of compromise.

As the above interpretation shows: the emergence of consociationalism in the Netherlands is that elites simply could not win over majorities given the various cross-cutting cleavages and therefore moderated their demands in order to realise anything at all. In Belgium, the absence of internal religious divides – namely between Protestants and Catholics – meant that each social group could articulate more radical programs, as elites of the respective pillars had a better shot at realising some of those demands.

When stripped of its normative (ideological) implications and reduced to a simple power balance, the notion of consociationalism comes rather close to Gramsci's (1971, p. 219) concept of Caesarism, which he described as follows:

Caesarism can be said to express a situation in which the forces in conflict balance each other in a catastrophic manner; that is to say, they balance each other in such a way that a continuation of the conflict can only terminate in their reciprocal destruction. When the progressive force A struggles with the reactionary force B, not only may A defeat B or B defeat A, but it may happen that neither A nor B defeats the other – that they bleed each other mutually and then a third force C intervenes from outside, subjugating what is left of both A and B.

This abstract scheme suggests a simple logic that can be found in majoritarian democracies. Force C is then represented as a possible 'strongman' that, to quote Gramsci (1971, p. 219), expresses a "particular solution in which a great personality is entrusted with the task of 'arbitration' over a historico-political situation characterised by an equilibrium of forces heading towards catastrophe".

Yet a paragraph later Gramsci (1971, p. 220) nuances this position and also applies it to situations that better resemble the Dutch or Belgian political stalemates: "Caesarist solution can exist even without a Caesar, without any great, 'heroic' and representative personality. The parliamentary system has also provided a mechanism for such compromise solutions". As an example, Gramsci (1971, p. 220) points at the British MacDonald government, in which the Labour politician Ramsay MacDonald led a number of subsequent governments that only found support with a conservative majority – which "increased the Degree of Caesarism". Similarly, different 'gradations of Caesarism' could be observed with the developments of Mussolini's Italy between 1922 and 1926, from a coalition government to the point that all opposition was dissolved and some of its leaders – of which Gramsci was one – were arrested.

According to Gramsci (1971, p. 220), "[e]very coalition government is a first stage of Caesarism, which either may or may not develop to more significant stages". Anticipating the criticism of those who celebrate compromise (such as Lijphart), Gramsci adds within brackets: "(the common opinion of course is that coalition governments, on the contrary, are the most "solid bulwark" against Caesarism)". Rather than claiming that accommodation, coalition government and compromise are the best means to prevent a country from sliding down to a (fascist) dictatorship, Gramsci claims that compromises can as much be a prelude to fascism, although this does not have to be the case.² What Gramsci implies is that if one opts for political stability via Caesarist (or consociational) solutions, the original objective of social emancipation is necessarily compromised by more authoritarian ruling forces that in Gramsci's time were identified as fascist.

2 It may be worth noting that Caesarism, for Gramsci (1971, p. 219), is not necessarily always reactionary. He states that "There can be both progressive and reactionary forms of Caesarism ... Caesarism is progressive when its intervention helps the progressive force to triumph, albeit with its victory tempered by certain compromises and limitations. It is reactionary when its intervention helps the reactionary force to triumph – in this case too with certain compromises and limitations". Progressive and reactionary Caesarism do not have "the same historical significance" for Gramsci (1971, p. 219), but what is relevant that any government coalition that passes as consociational, even when progressive, is a form of Caesarism.

Table 1 Key Concepts of Lijphart and Gramsci Compared

	Lijphart	Gramsci
Key concept	Consociationalism	Caesarism
Starting point of analysis	Compromise and amical agreement	Conflict and confrontation
Central tension	Political stability vs. accountability	Hegemony vs. emancipation
Characterisation of elite attitudes	Prudent leadership	Enlightened monarchy
Characterisation of elite practice	Accommodation	Passive revolution
Role of the masses	To be held passive	To be activated
Resulting scope of political affairs	‘Summit diplomacy’	‘The whole of living’

If consociationalism and Caesarism refer to similar kinds of political practices to resolve stalemate, then the Gramscian approach seems to encompass most of the practices described by Lijphart. As listed in Table 1, Gramsci even provides several concepts that almost exactly coincide with some of the terms developed by Lijphart. What is important, however, is that Gramsci’s concepts are incorporated in a wider theory on the struggle for hegemony of different social and emancipatory forces that Lijphart pays little attention to.

A Gramscian Politics

Gramsci’s analytical scope is much broader than the focus of most behavioural political science, and in some respects it also transcends Lijphart’s perspective (which already anchored political practice more sociologically than the behaviouralist tradition). As a result, different normative and strategic implications for political practice and advancing change emanate from the respective work of Lijphart and Gramsci. In fact, it is when translated to political practice that a Gramscian and a Lijphartian (or consociational) politics directly collide. For Lijphart the masses need to be kept passive and acquiescent in order to provide sufficient leeway to elites for compromise and accommodation. From a Gramscian perspective amical agreements and compromise-oriented behaviour are part of the broad apparatus of mechanisms through which hegemonic forces acquire the passive consent of subordinated

masses. It is only by politicising the life and living conditions of subordinated groups³ that they can be activated to destabilise the hegemonic regime of the ruling classes. This requires (party) elites and intellectuals to organise and mobilise the masses and, through ideological articulation and dissemination of ideas, suture new political alliances to form a counter-hegemonic 'historical bloc' capable of confronting (bourgeois) hegemony.

To date, political scientists have carefully analysed whether Lijphart's framework still applies for virtually every period in Dutch and Belgian political history. The Gramscian elements in the respective political histories are yet to be scrutinised. An initial effort of this kind is made below.

Contesting Cultural Hegemony

An early twentieth-century example that indicates the relevance of a Gramscian perspective could be the so-called 'school struggles' revolving around the public financing of Christian education that heavily divided Dutch and Belgian politics. Neither the Marxist perspective of Kieve nor the consociational perspective of Lijphart are fully capable of capturing those divisions in their models. For Lijphart, the *pacification* of the Dutch school struggle was a starting point for Dutch consociationalism (and most of his analysis), which conveniently leaves out most of the struggle itself that gave shape to the later pacification. In Kieve's account, the school struggle could only be pacified because it was of secondary importance since only the class struggle was the 'primary conflict'. The Belgian experience of the 'second school struggle' in the 1950s partly invalidates Kieve's account as socialist workers' parties and the liberal bourgeoisie transcended the alleged 'primary conflict' and formed a coalition against the otherwise dominant Christian democrats.

More relevant to the analytical framework is that, following a Gramscian perspective, the school struggle was not of secondary importance, but a struggle about cultural hegemony and the ability of religion to shape and discipline ideas and practices of everyday life. More than that, it explains and helps understand the 'spirit of accommodation' and 'Caesarist'-like solutions following the pacification to emerge from social struggles and stalemates – and less so, as Lijphart (1970, p. 122) holds, from the "role culture" developed by and instilled in the elite".

3 A definition that, inspired by Gramsci, does most justice to those aspects comes from Raymond Williams (1977, p. 110) who famously stated that hegemony "is then not only the articulate upper level of 'ideology', nor are its forms of control only those ordinarily seen as 'manipulation' or 'indoctrination'. It is a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living ... our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world. It is a lived system of meanings and values-constitutive and constituting-which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people".

Yet a more deliberate, at times even explicit, Gramscian politics can be discerned with the rise of the New Left in the 1960s and 1970s, followed by the emergence of the far right since the 1980s in the Low Countries. In part this is because in those cases the 'critico-polemical' engagement of intellectuals played a more central role, following Gramsci's (1971, p. 57) dictum that ideological dominance precedes seizing the state because "[a] social group can, and indeed must, already exercise 'leadership' before winning governmental power". More so, the Gramscian politics of the New Left and far right contrast the strongest with the consociational model, thereby unveiling its limitations.

A Gramscian Politics of the New Left

Different from communist parties in Italy, France and the UK, communist parties in the Low Countries initially paid little attention to Gramsci or a Gramscian politics. In fact, when in the 1950s, the poet Sonja Prins referred to Gramsci's insights when making a call to "prevent a divide between our wishes and aims on the cultural plain and those of most cultural workers", her plea was met with outright hostile responses (Verrips, 1995, pp. 325–326). In the Belgian Communist Party (KPB-PCB) it took until the late 1970s before several young communists – mainly from Flanders and Brussels – took inspiration from Gramsci, but the party leadership of the KPB-PCB had little interest in their intellectual endeavours (Turf, 1997). This changed a little when Jef Turf became a leader of the KPB-PCB and the party embraced Eurocommunism as ideology. Yet as Ernest Mandel (1978, p. 211) – who otherwise rarely references Gramsci – commented, Eurocommunism draws from a very reformist and therefore questionable interpretation of Gramsci.

A Gramscian politics in the Low Countries can, however, easily be projected onto the rise of the New Left, both in party-political and more social and intellectual terms. In the Netherlands, the first political party associated with the New Left was the Pacifist Socialist Party (PSP), founded in 1957, which absorbed most leftist intellectuals – often disenchanted communists, social-democrats and 'political homeless'. Since the party was well aware that their pacifism and radical socialism would not win over many voters, it realised that their "power resided in influencing the minds of the people" (Van der Land, 1962, p. 30) – or "to take intellectual and moral leadership" in Gramsci's (1971, p. 57) terms.

The PSP, like many political parties that emerged from New Social Movements (NSMs) associated with the New Left, opted for a less compromise-oriented and more adversarial politics. The party valued extra-parliamentary action over parliamentary politics and, during the 1970s, was unwilling to join a government of mostly left-wing parties as it believed they were only to do this at a 'pre-revolutionary stage' that was not yet achieved. Importantly, politics was also far from limited to parliamentary affairs and political contestation was articulated on other terrains, most

notably in the sphere of education. But it was also practiced using artistic expression and via provocations that could easily find their way to the mass media. The New Left placed itself ideologically to the left of established left-wing parties and workers' unions and criticised them, along with the right, for being too coopted by commodity capitalism. This way, they significantly widened the scope of political engagement and, with calls for further democratisation, attempted to make politics less of an elite affair.

Although the anti-authoritarianism of the New Left also included strands of anti-intellectualism, there were significant efforts to broaden the appeal of left-wing politics. Intellectuals and leaders of NSMs developed different articulations of socialist and other New Left ideas that spoke to a broader constituency than the working class. Catholic and, in the Netherlands, also Protestant elites developed a 'progressive Christian' worldview that eventually got institutionalised with the Green parties (or their predecessors) in both countries. Although those parties were less driving societal change and more following movements that took the street, they did develop intellectual and political currents that contributed to the eventual establishment of a different hegemonic bloc. In Flanders the New Left student movement "never lost sight" of Flemish themes to keep in touch with a broader constituency, even if they themselves were not passionately Flamingant (Goossens, 1993, p. 17).

The politics of the New Left clashed most directly with consociational politics in its criticism of the routines, procedures, practices and institutions of conflict resolution through which compromise was reached. Those ranged from formal to more symbolic institutions, including the royal family, the clergy, academic hierarchies, and regular compromises between workers and employers. In the Netherlands, the term '*regentenmentaliteit*' (meaning the unaccountable mentality of the historical upper class) was mobilised to criticise the dominant mode of governance and the 'coalition game' of shifting coalitions between parties, without much effort to increase democratic participation. In Belgium, the main institution that received criticism for supporting the status quo and facilitating compromise was the Belgian state along with the mostly francophone elite that was historically running it.

Most of Gramsci's insights had only indirect influence on the New Left in the Low Countries, via the more directly Gramsci-inspired NSMs abroad. It took until the late 1970s and early 1980s before explicit references to Gramsci became more commonplace in the Low Countries (and the first translations of his writings were published). Since the 1980s, mainly post-Marxist theorists such as Stuart Hall, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe took Gramsci as an inspiration to reformulate and promote a different adversarial politics that would incorporate the demands of NSMs into the socialist project. Their efforts were of limited impact in the Low Countries, however. As capitalism in the West decisively transformed from 'factory' to 'finance' capitalism (François & Lemercier, 2021), new social and political stalemates emerged.

The adversarial politics of the (New) Left in the 1960s and 1970s made way for a more compromise-oriented or 'Caesarist' type of politics more aimed at transcending than instigating political conflicts. The formal and informal institutions and political practices were no longer contested but rather accepted.

More contestational types of party politics in the Low Countries could mostly be found with the Dutch Socialist Party (SP) and more recently with the Belgian Workers Party (PVDA-PTB). Yet the former has limited experience in recruiting people based on ideas but primarily uses widely accepted 'common sense' positions to gather support rather than winning voters over for new ideas (De Jong, 2014, pp. 17–18). A more intellectually anchored (though less adversarial) politics could perhaps better be found with the Dutch Party for the Animals (PvdD) that emerged in the 2000s. In Belgium, the PVDA-PTB follows a more Gramscian approach and is, compared to the SP, historically more ideologically grounded and more active at, for instance, university campuses. Yet over the past decades, a more explicit Gramsci-inspired politics could surprisingly be found on the right.

Gramscian Politics of the Far Right

When the New Left gained momentum during the 1960s, intellectuals to the right of the mainstream were desperate to turn the tide. Some of them, most notably Alain de Benoist, were frustrated with the lack of intellectual endeavours on the right. They decided to take inspiration from the (New) Left to theorise strategies of how to break away from the shifting consensus and, in this effort, Gramsci became an important 'counter-figure' (De Benoist, 1977, p. 456). De Benoist led a far-right think tank named GRECE (Research and Study Group for European Civilization) whose members are often referred to as right-wing Gramscians and constitutive of the French *Nouvelle Droite* that aimed to establish a 'European ethnopluralism'. Although this idea has been criticised for promoting racist, anti-Semitic, and strongly anti-egalitarian ideologies (Bar-On, 2008; Casadio, 2014), the movement was of key influence on European far-right parties.

In the Low Countries, Gramsci's indirect influence on the far right became for the first time manifest after the Black Sunday election in 1991 when the *Vlaams Blok* (Flemish Block) forced an electoral breakthrough. Filip Dewinter, a frontman of the Flemish Block, already called to 'learn from Gramsci'. Concretely, Dewinter learned from Gramsci that "the political power cannot be conquered without there being sufficient cultural basis present that supports and nourishes the political power. He has made culture into a metapolitical weapon" (Dewinter quoted in Spruyt, 1995, p. 164). Thus, the party decisively focused on ideological warfare to create a cultural basis that could nourish their power.

The far right mirrored the confrontational strategy of the New Left and successfully tried to get their themes and narratives across. The Flemish Block was not

bothered too much when their emergence was met with significant resistance – for instance by officially signing an agreement, known as the *cordon sanitaire*, that no party would govern with the Flemish Block at any level. In fact, the party itself could hardly be happier, as their magazine read: “beside the idea of ‘integration’ and the ‘multicultural society’ there is now the idea of ‘remigration’ ... those modalities can finally be discussed. Let the opponents whine about dots and commas. The discussion has finally moved to Flemish Block terrain” (Staveaux quoted in Spruyt, 1995, p. 166). They were not the only party buying into the project of changing the cultural and ideological terrain to nourish political power. References to Gramsci can also be found in the borderline far-right New-Flemish Alliance (Rooduijn et al., 2023) that emerged a decade later and presents itself as more moderate compared to the Flemish Block (which was banned after being convicted as racist organisation but reincarnated as the Flemish Interest).

In the Netherlands, the intellectuals and politicians associated with the rise of the far right mostly took inspiration from American neoconservatives (Oudenampsen, 2018). Nevertheless, Pim Fortuyn – who was the first to force a political breakthrough for the far right – was familiar with Gramscian politics and referenced him when he was still a left-leaning socialist in the 1980s (Fortuyn & Stuurman, 1987). Fortuyn ceased referring to Gramsci when he converted to neoliberal populism but, resembling the New Left criticism, he opted for a confrontational approach to the ‘Purple’ coalitions of the time (which included social democrats and liberals that were historical adversaries) and mobilised the term *regent*.

The far right in the Netherlands and Flanders drew on a partial interpretation of Gramsci that alludes to a counter-hegemonic project, politicising everyday life by calling to defend the hegemonic practices against alternative practices and ‘ways of life’ promoted by the Left. Along with it is their confrontational, uncompromising attitude towards adversaries. Instead of holding their rank-and-file passive, they actively mobilise them in provocative, extra-parliamentary action. The far-right Forum for Democracy (FvD) that got elected in 2017 explicitly refers to Gramsci in their strategies. After the party had won the election for the Senate in 2019, its leader stated after explicitly referring to Gramsci:

we need to get to the undertide, ... the stream under the tides of the sea, the deep stream, where actually power can be institutionalized in a much more stable manner ... we are creating not just a political narrative and political alliances, but cultural and societal alliances. (Baudet as quoted in Sioen, 2023)

The far-right in the Low Countries follows a different political strategy that does not seek (or is even unable) to form parliamentary coalitions, but aims to influence

the dominant ideas and, in that sense, takes 'moral and intellectual' leadership to promote reactionary changes.

Like the New Left, the far right criticised the very same 'consociational' institutions and elite consensus that was 'politically correct' and supposedly left-wing. In Flanders, the *cordon sanitaire*, which excludes far-right Flemish Block as potential coalition partner at any level of government, was (and is) used as proof of the left-wing elite consensus. Again, criticism was directed at the Belgian state – not for disallowing the members of the Flemish nation access to the state institutions, but denying them full control over its territory, culture and finances. In the Netherlands also a critique of the so-called 'party cartel' was introduced by the far right to delegitimise the revolving-door practices of the Dutch political class. And just as the New Left got many of their main themes successfully adopted by the political establishment, the far right currently finds how the political mainstream adjusts positions to accommodate their ideas.

Conclusion

A Gramscian lens has much to offer if one seeks to understand the dramatic political and ideological shifts in the Low Countries over the past decades. The Lijphartian conceptual apparatus by which the Low Countries are most often studied is ill-equipped to study such changes. Gramsci's work can be useful to enhance our understanding of major political shifts. On the one hand, it links up with many existing criticisms of Lijphart, while at the same time Gramsci's writings supplement Lijphart's analysis with several relevant concepts to understand (and engage in) political conflict.

Gramscian analyses are not limited to the dynamics within a political system, but also attentive to the agency of various actors that by ideological, cultural, and social means impact political stability or change. Moreover, the accommodative practices celebrated by Lijphart are placed in a different light in Gramsci's writings. Foremost, they emerge from the social and political struggles and stalemates that Lijphart tends to downplay. Much more than facilitating stable democracy, consociational – or Caesarist – compromises are a first step towards authoritarian rule that consolidates the hegemonic status quo. Compromises that are a prime characteristic of consociationalism, then, necessarily comprise the subversion of emancipatory aspirations of subordinated groups by ruling forces.

A Gramscian politics focuses on mobilising social groups and classes by politicising everyday life, developing different ideological strands that other currents can connect with in order to suture new political alliances. The relevance of a Gramscian perspective is affirmed by the very fact that many of the political actors that have been driving the political and ideological changes of the past decades have explicitly

built on Gramsci. It is beyond the scope of this article to assess the effectiveness of the distinctively Gramscian elements to the chosen strategies. But as several alarming accounts on the mainstreaming of the far right have recently appeared, this question certainly deserves further scrutiny.

At the same time, it has been pointed out that similar adaptations of an adversarial Gramsci-inspired politics for the left further developed in the 1980s, but those were mostly ignored by left-wing parties. This observation may bear some explanation for the fact that mainstream parties tend to respond differently to far-right parties than to left or Green parties (Abou-Chadi, 2016). But it would not automatically mean that the suggested Gramscian strategies by Hall, Laclau and Mouffe would equally well apply in the Low Countries as in the UK (where they were mostly developed). Just as Gramsci stated that the Bolshevik Winter-Palace model of the revolution would not apply in the West, so the Westminster model of establishing hegemony laid out by Hall (1988) may not apply in the Low Countries. Instead of 'Learning from Thatcherism' as Hall (1988) and Mouffe (2018) suggested, an effective Gramscian strategy in the Low Countries can perhaps better draw from the strategies of forces that have driven most of the political and ideological shifts in Belgium and the Netherlands.

As of today, we might be experiencing a new 'Gramscian moment' given the recurring interest in his work. This is in part because a Gramscian lens enables researchers to study politics from the perspective of the political fringes and to account for the viewpoint of subordinated and historically marginalised groups. While Lijphart's work may be useful to understand the behaviour of accommodating mainstream party elites, it is less instructive for social groups who seek emancipation. In that sense it also links up with the increased focus on opposition in the Low Countries (Andeweg, 2001; Andeweg et al., 2008). Although still in its infancy, Gramscian-inspired accounts by Stuurman (1983, 1985) in the 1980s and recently Corijn (2022) may prove useful for further developing a Gramscian lens. Future research and theorising may explore to what degree Gramscian concepts can be fruitfully applied to make sense of Dutch or Belgian politics and how those render different insights compared to the existing frameworks by which we scrutinise politics in the Low Countries.

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