

Mimeos, Zines and Read Ins **Re-evaluating the 'Cultural Revolution' in Sixties Flanders**

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The beginning of a golden era

From April 17th till October 19th 1958, for the first time since 1939, another World Fair was organised. It was located on the Heysel plateau in Brussels, the Belgian capital, which already back then, be it very carefully, began to present itself as the capital of an integrating Europe. The fact that it had taken the more than a hundred years old tradition of great international expositions almost two decades to pick up the thread, was of course due to the long war that had broken out only a few months after the last World Fair was held in New York - which in retrospect could only be considered as having the painfully ironic title 'The World of Tomorrow'. Apart from the frightening high body count among soldiers and civilians, particularly the holocaust and the nuclear bombardments on Japan had quite damped the optimistic faith in progress which had dominated the political-social discourse in the industrialised nations ever since the days of Enlightenment. Moreover, after the gruelling battle practically all warring parties – except the United States – were ruined or at least faced a huge financial hangover. Only when the smoke of battle had cleared in Europe and the wind had carried away the mushroom clouds over Japan, people began to realise the real extent of the material havoc, which paled the damage done in the First World War. There was neither time nor money for after-parties. In the first couple of years after 1945 life would be lived under the motto of reconstruction. However, when people saw that – certainly in Western Europe and Japan – this reconstruction was being carried out with a miraculous speed, their faith in science, technique and reason was rekindled. Certainly for the architects of restoration the world after the 'Wirtschaftswunder' seemed more controllable and makable than ever before.

In the light of this evolution it need therefore not come as a surprise that the fifties would create a new World Fair. By the way, not only the reconstruction could rightly be called a marvellous success, also new developments in the domain of technology and science had created the perspective of a quasi unstoppable progress. After the Soviets had shocked the world, including themselves, by bringing a satellite into orbit, not even the sky could be considered as a literal limit anymore. And when one month later Sputnik 2 was launched with the Muscovite mongrel Laika aboard, the ultimate proof was given: man had finally conquered gravity.

Of course the spectacular revolutions in the domain of space travel were elaborately displayed on Expo 58, as the World Fair came to be called. In the stately USSR pavilion replicas of the Sputnik satellites were on display, not in the last place to convince the democratic West that the communist state under Nikita Khrushchev was definitely on the map. Also the fifty other participating countries showed their most modern and technically advanced best in Brussels. The epitome of the renewed faith in technology and science was the recalibration of the atom as a symbol of hope and salvation. For instance in the pavilion of the United States, the United Kingdom and France, nuclear fusion was enthusiastically promoted as the ultimate future source of energy. The host country of the World Fair even erected a shrine for the dawn of the Atomic Age: the so-called Atomium, a depiction of the crystalline structure of an iron molecule. It

was one of the absolute major attractions of the Expo and it was due to its popularity that, unlike most other constructions, it was not taken down after the Fair [cf. Hennebert 2006: 35].¹

In short, the World Fair grew into a high mass of modernity, repressing the two World Wars as mere collateral damage in the high of a rekindled faith in progress. Certainly for most Belgians the Expo served as the tailpiece of the post-war reconstruction. Material scarcity was now forever a thing of the past; the dawn of a new period of an unparalleled economic boom was breaking. Historians are right when they say that in Belgium the golden sixties started on April 17 1958 [cf. Hooghe 1999: 9 and Reynebeau 1988: 9].

Notes of discord

To twenty-first-century people the Expo's rash enthusiasm and euphoria might appear like a weird spectacle. By now we have grown used to assertive citizens who are not so easily taken in by promotion talks and we might find it amazing that the event wasn't contested just a little bit more. Indeed, it did not take all that much ill will to cast a doubt on the Atomic Age's festive inauguration. Hadn't Nagasaki and Hiroshima given the most horrendous proof that the powers created by nuclear fission could be used in unwholesome ways as well? And hadn't this nuclear holocaust proven itself to be but the foreplay of an insane arms race? The destructive powers of the hydrogen bomb, developed in the mid fifties, both by the United States and the USSR, were hundreds of times the power of Little Boy and Fat Man.² After Stalin's death the cold relations between the Eastern Bloc and the West indeed entered a period of careful thaw, but with the whimsical Khrushchev in the Kremlin the danger of a Third World War, including nuclear battle, was not gone by far.

Still, the forty-one million visitors of the Expo – next to many kings and princes, emperors and ministers, pop stars and movie idols, mainly a lot of ordinary people, among whom no less than eighty percent of all Belgians – could hardly be bothered with these questions. The monument was treated as a 'trophy', not as a symbol of 'indignant protest'. [Compare Schuyt and Taverne 2000: 419]³ Does this mean then that really everybody was dumbfounded by the wonders of technical ingenuity? No, it doesn't. It could hardly be called a well-orchestrated protest, but those who listened carefully could pick up at least some notes of discord in the Brussels Heysel Plateau, slightly disordering the triumphant concert of nations. More than once Belgian journalists reported gangs of youths creating unrest at night on the domain of the World Fair [compare Dierinck 2001: 28]. Apparently 'the atomic generation', as the Belgian youth of the late fifties was called, was not so easily impressed with the event on the Brussels Heysel Plateau. For many an observer this was yet another sign that something was wrong with contemporary youth. The Belgian press had already signalled that *teens* and *twens* remarkably often committed acts of aggression and criminality and that they were less strict when it came to the dominant ethics. The bourgeois and then still largely Catholic establishment soon proclaimed youth to have succumbed into moral degeneracy and lawlessness.

The so-called 'youth problem' was not only a Belgian phenomenon, it had also caused a stir in other Western European countries and in Northern America. Everywhere the apparently drifting youth were given labels. In Germany they were called Halbstarcken, in England Teddy Boys, in France blousons noirs, on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean beatniks, and in the Netherlands and Flanders nozems. The international 'rebellion of youth' enjoyed quite a lot of scientific interest. The study *Die skeptische Generation* (1957) of the German sociologist Helmut Schelsky was one of the influential studies in drawing a profile of 'youths without world-improving paroles, revolutionary pathos and animated ideas' [Humbeeck 2005:

850]. The young appeared to be detached, materialistic, sceptical and capable of putting really anything into perspective, including the show-off of technical ingenuity at Expo 58, that took the breath away of ordinary mortals. Despite their critical attitude towards the establishment, the young offered few alternatives though. In this respect it seemed to follow the motor gang leader performed by Marlon Brando in *The Wild One* (László Benedek, 1953), a movie that was controversial back then in Belgium as well. When this leather-wearing anti-hero is asked 'What are you rebelling against?', the well-known answer comes with a sigh, short and cynical: 'Whaddya got?'

A couple of years later, the 'Rebels without a Cause' were followed by a generation that was no less recalcitrant, but that, unlike the nozems, Halbstarcken, beatniks and other misspent youth, did cherish ideals – or at least were more open about them. This generation, the 'product' of the post-war baby-boom, was even prepared to go out on the streets and loudly proclaim their demands, dreams and desires. For a moment, in 1968, precisely ten years after the Brussels World Fair, it even looked as if their protest would cause a world-scale revolution.

The 'difficult behaviour' of the young in the sixties was met with even more incomprehension than it was in the fifties. All in all this was not so surprising: of the many historical commonplaces the epithet 'golden' in combination with 'sixties' is definitely one of the less disputable. In the 'swinging' decade, wealth and the standard of living were speeding up like never before. In Belgium for example the income per capita of the population doubled in the period 1958-1973.⁴ All kinds of luxury and comfort articles, mostly American made, struck root in the middle and working classes. In 1960 Belgium had for instance only 615.000 televisions in use, in 1970 this number had more than tripled (2.100.000). The Belgian fleet of cars expanded likewise and increased from 753.000 cars in 1960 to 2.060.000 in 1970. Indeed the optimistic adepts of progress and technocrats who had dominated the discourse on Expo 58 seemed to have been right all along. The Belgians, just like most of the Western Europeans, had never been so well off.

And if there was one segment of the population to enjoy the benefits of this increase in wealth, it was certainly the young. With what seemed like inexhaustible funds, a mass of sports halls, swimming pools and cultural centres was built all over the country. The young were a lot more mobile than their parents had ever been and had oceans of leisure time to spend. Even more important was the fact that they had much easier access to higher education. And after their school career a bright future awaited them, for there was an abundance of jobs - full employment was no naive wishful thinking back then. No wonder that those who had lived through one or two world wars and who had never even dared to dream of these better chances and perspectives, blamed the young for being ungrateful.

It is not easy to summarize what the rebellious youth of the sixties wanted. The themes with which they were successfully mobilised are of course well enough known by now, and a couple of them will be dealt with in detail on this conference: the consumer society and its 'uniforming' character, environmental pollution, third world exploitation, sexual liberation, the discrimination of the black, women and homosexuals, the war in Vietnam, the arms race and in particular the arsenal of missiles that in the sixties had developed into a capacity to destroy the entire planet several times over. Most of these items were fed by a fundamental distrust towards the ideals of modernity that, as we saw before, had been picked up from under the debris of the Second World War in an incredibly unblemished state, and that for instance on Expo 58 had been expounded as publicly as unquestioningly. It is telling that the German-American philosopher Herbert Marcuse with his criticism on the 'advanced industrial society' was so successful in

the sixties that many of the protesting youth and the New Left activists revered him as something in between a guru and a pop idol.

Mimeos, zines and read ins

Rather than as a time of unprecedented wealth, today the 1960s are most commonly remembered as a period of global resistance, turmoil and revolution. 1968, 'the year that rocked the world' [Kurlansky 2003], is supposed to sum it all up. Also in Belgium people cherish the idea that the second half of the sixties, and certainly the tumultuous year 1968, was dominated by conflict. In their heroic memoirs the now pensionable *soixante huitards* have elaborated quite a bit on the turmoil of battle of those days.

As the above mentioned Marcuse had predicted, protest in our regions was indeed mainly the business of students and artists. By way of case study I will continue to concentrate on the artists and writers who noticeably applied for a place in the vanguard of the protest movement in the sixties.⁵ But before we do, it needs to be pointed out that in the sixties Belgium was split in two regions, as it is today. In Flanders, the northern part of the country, people speak Dutch, whereas in the southern part, Wallonia, people speak French. There was and is hardly any contact to speak of between the two cultural communities. My findings first of all apply to Flanders.

In the spring of 1963, the Flemish literary-artistic scene was abruptly disturbed by *Boké* ('Billy goat'), a stencilled magazine with satirical and polemic contributions on the contemporary cultural elite. The initiator of *Boké*, the Antwerp teacher and writer Julien Weverbergh, soon became the butt of sharp criticism in the leading cultural circles. He was for instance often portrayed as a 'Bok nozem', a label that clearly still referred to the juvenile problem in the fifties. On the other hand Weverbergh managed to gather quite a few collaborators and sympathizers. Not only did these brothers in arms contribute to *Boké*, which by the way disappeared after no more than one year and ten numbers, they also created a couple of new underground magazines, the titles of which most explicitly stressed their combative attitude: *Mep* (Whack), *Revo*, *Boemerang*. Moreover, also magazines were founded that were not directly related to Weverbergh, but that nonetheless had been inspired by his example, for instance *Heibel* ('Racket'), *Bom* ('Bomb'), *TNT*, *Anar*, *Arena*, *Barrikade*, *Morgen* ('Tomorrow'). As most of these low budget publications were made with mimeographs – and therefore often offered a sloppy sight – the phenomenon was quickly dubbed the 'mimeo revolution'.

At first Weverbergh and his mates exclusively brought up literary themes, but slowly they widened their horizon. When in 1965 the Dutch anarchist Provo-movement made its widely remarked entrance with its playful 'happenings', the young stencil makers almost immediately tried to situate their magazine initiatives within this upcoming counterculture. In 1966 Herman J. Claeys, one of the early collaborators of *Boké* and founder of the Flemish Provo movement, for instance wrote that because of their 'neo-anarchistic provo-commitment' *Boké* and *Mep* could be considered 'the speaking voice of a literary provotariat in Flanders' [Claeys 1966: 1]⁶. Moreover, and already in an early stage, Weverbergh and Claeys had been in touch with Roel van Duijn and other Provo leaders [cf. Weverbergh 2005: 127].

In the mid sixties, inspired by the success of Provo, the young Flemish writers increasingly started to take and spread a political-social stand. They published articles on public transportation and mobility, education and sexual liberation. However, the strategy to legitimise their activities by suggesting a connection with the mediagenic Provo movement was of little avail [cf. Pas: 271-272]. In contrast with the world famous Provo's in the Netherlands, who had a temporary but great influence on public debate and

who even managed to get a chair in the Amsterdam city council after the 1966 elections, the rebellious young writers and publicists in Flanders remained a fringe group. Even to Flemish standards the editions of their stencilled magazines were invariably limited. *Boke*, for example, the magazine that had proclaimed the 'stencilled revolution', never made it to more than a couple of hundred copies [Weverbergh 2005: 44-45]. Even though for a Flemish literary magazine this was not so bad a result, for an organ that claimed to have any real social importance this number was rather insignificant. By way of comparison: at one point the Dutch magazine *Provo* reached an edition of 20.000 [Pas 2003: 207].

The breakthrough in Flanders wasn't happening and this was related to the fact that there was no clear opponent. The rebellious artists could cry out all they wanted that Belgium was a totalitarian, undemocratic and repressive police state, but as long as their contra-activities were not or hardly boycotted or punished by the establishment, their criticism was rather gratuitous.⁷ Despite all kinds of actions, the so-called police state had shown to be quite stoical in the face of the actions of the Flemish *Provo*'s or other 'long-haired work-shy riffraff'. On March 10 1967 a progressive Flemish weekly ironically noted that Belgium looked like 'a lady that could not be provoked: she suffocates even the worst client in her ever-ready bosom.' [in Pas 2003: 280]

After the 'Summer of Love', which had put the Low Countries under the spell of the San Francisco hippie culture and flower power, the autumn of 1967 suddenly brought a change in the situation. On Monday October 2nd 1967 at 6.45 AM, four detectives of the Special Investigation Department (say the Belgian FBI) barged into the house of a certain Jan Emiel Daele in the Reusestraat in Ghent. The 26-year old young man was born to a fairly bourgeois Flemish-Catholic family, but was trying to struggle away from his background, which he felt to be suffocating. He worked on literary magazines like *Yang* and *Mep* and for a while he moved in the inner circle of Weverbergh. Since 1966 he printed and spread his own stencil magazine called *daele*, in which he published his own texts next to contributions of New-Leftist writers, literary dropouts and all kinds of subversive elements.

The reason for the police raid in the beginning of October 1967 was the publication in *daele* of 'The penis salutation', a contribution by the aforementioned Herman J. Claeys. In the contested text Claeys, who was officially unemployed, long-haired and the spokesman of the Flemish *Provo*'s, had proposed to replace the classic 'bourgeois' handshake by an alternative way of greeting. It starts like this:

'We are going to introduce a new salutation: instead of shaking each other's hands, we will shake each other's penises. The handshake is so monotonous, it offers so little variation, it is not expressive enough [...] the penis offers unlimited possibilities. With a colleague it is a matter of your fingers formally and automatically touching the trousers. When you meet your boss, it is restricted to a symbolic hand gesture in the direction of the lower belly, you with respect, he casually. When you are introduced to a stranger, during a meeting or gathering, you absent-mindedly open your fly and have your underwear touched. During a reception you can leave your fly open. But when meeting friends, there are as many variations as degrees in friendship: a light touch of the penis with one or two fingers, holding it in your hand, mildly caressing it, baring the head, pressing the head, lifting the penis to a light erection, caressing the penis into an erection, one pumping movement, two pumping movements, three etc.

On Thursday October 5th 1967 about three PM, the author of the above quoted text, had an unsolicited visit by the criminal police. Just like with Jan Emiel Daele, letters, magazines and all kinds of documents were confiscated from Herman Claeys' house.⁸

From the very beginning, the police had kept an eye on the Provo scene and every now and then happenings were followed by administrative arrests and the confiscation of underground magazines. But raids were something new. It has never become clear why the playfully provocative text 'The penis salutation' had driven the Ghent and Brussels public prosecutors to these intimidating and (even for those days) disproportionate actions [cf. Claes 2006: 53 et seq]. I will already give the show away and tell you that Claeys and Daele were quickly given back their documents and that the confiscations never led to a trial. The fact that this case had consequences nonetheless, was the exclusive 'merit' of the targeted authors. This was the opportunity for which they had been waiting for so long: finally a case that stirred the imagination and that revealed the true, totalitarian nature of the Belgian state. Censorship, repression, totalitarianism, fascism... all the fancy words came out. Jan Emiel Daele sounded the tocsin with a press release and prophesised that '1984 [had] really started.' [Daele 1967]

A petition was started as a reaction on the raids at Daele's and Claeys'. In this pompous manifesto Belgium was called a 'police state' and the judicial action was portrayed as 'a direct assault [...] on personal freedom, freedom of speech, freedom of press and some more freedoms that democratic countries are full of in all official speeches.' The writers called out for resistance: 'It would be nonsensical to protest against these kinds of actions in other countries and let similar matters happen in our own country without further ado' [in Claes 2006]. The manifesto was signed by a great number of prominent writers, artists and intellectuals.

The protest finally resulted in a grand Protest Read In that took place on March 15 1968 in the Antwerp hall Majestic. That night 29 Flemish writers, a couple of word artists and a folksinger performed texts and songs to protest against the judicial actions, against all kinds of censorship and in favour of sexual liberation. It is estimated that 1.500 people saw the manifestation, which is a more than respectable result that exceeded the edition of all underground magazines together. (Take into consideration that *daele* had no more than some hundred stencilled copies.)

The Protest Read In also had a couple of spin-offs. A couple of months later, for example, a second and equally successful Read In was organised in Brussels. But within the scope of this lecture, I cannot go deeper into that.

A cultural revolution?

The so-called 'mimeo revolution' and manifestations like the Protest Read Ins have contributed greatly to the image of the sixties as a period of turbulence and conflict. However, I think that this picture is not entirely correct or at least to a large extent misleading. The deeper I dig into the history of the sixties, the more I suspect that in Belgium/Flanders '1968' is not only a one-dimensional metonym for the sixties as a whole, as it is in most countries, also its significance is overrated. To be more precise: it appears to me that the turmoil that indeed existed back then, is all too much interpreted in terms of a conflict. There are for example a couple of remarkable facts that shed an all together different light on the 'cultural revolution' in Flanders.

To begin with, I found out that the Belgian Ministry of Culture supported various initiatives of the countermovement. By way of financial support it had multiple subscriptions to various stencil magazines,

including *Bok*. (Which by the way makes me wonder whether the American government would ever have considered sponsoring, say, *Fuck you*, Ed Sanders' notorious 'magazine of the arts'.) Moreover, the books of Weverbergh, Claeys and other self-declared Provo's were purchased by the dozens by the Ministry of Culture as a way to subsidise them. (It is at least as significant as it is ironic that in 1969 Herman J. Claeys demanded that the authorised Minister would buy more copies of his first novel *Het geluid* (*The sound*), after he found out that 'only' a hundred copies had been bought of it.⁹) Not less to my surprise I discovered that another leftist author (Daniël van Hecke) was given a state grant in 1969 to make a trip to Cuba, of all places.¹⁰ On top of that, the Antwerp Protest Read In was nearly completely funded by A. Manteau, the then most important Flemish publishing house and a prominent institute in the Dutch speaking-cultural world.

There are a lot more remarkable things to be noted here, but I will draw a tentative conclusion. The sixties in Belgium and Flanders have so far been approached too one-sidedly as a period of revolution and conflict. Because of that there has been too little attention for the nonetheless noticeable patterns of continuity. To begin with, the counterculture did not come out of the blue. The fifties had already recorded a worldwide 'youth problem'. The influence of 'misspent' youth cultures of those days must have been still of importance in the sixties.

What to me seems to be even more important is that the gap between the elite and the opposition, between culture and so-called counterculture, between old and young, between mainstream and the avant-garde was smaller in Belgium/Flanders than is generally assumed. Quite a few representatives of the establishment were convinced that the times were a-changing. It is relevant in this respect that in the late seventies the ex-stencil maker Julien Weverbergh became the head of A. Manteau, the most important literary publishing house in Flanders. Angèle Manteau, who had founded the company in 1938 and who had run it ever since, declared that she had to step aside for the new zeitgeist: '[...] [the] publisher had grown older and in the aftermath of the [...] youth revolution of May 1968 she had [...] to be replaced by a younger manager.' [Manteau 1985: 42]

Indeed I think scholars dealing with the 1960s in Belgium and Flanders should pay attention to the remarkable tolerance with which the Flemish counter-culture was met by at least a significant part of the political and cultural elites, a phenomenon for which the renowned British historian Arthur Marwick coined the phrase 'measured judgement.' [Marwick 1998: 19]

Finally, in order to understand why at least part of the Belgian/Flemish establishment was open to the changes and new ideas, we need to go back to the beginning of my story. Modernisation, renewal and progress were key concepts in the discourse of the elite, who had made the Brussels World Fair in the fifties an unequalled success. Faith in the inevitability of modern life was spread back then and there. In certain cultural and political circles this faith was translated into a pressure to 'keep up with the times' or the fear of being thought of as old-fashioned. Those who didn't or couldn't keep up with progress risked losing their legitimacy. This is the only way to understand how two years after 'The penis salutation' had caused the judicial authorities – traditionally lagging in modernity – to move into brutal raids, the jury of the Belgian State's Prize for Prose, under the presidency of a Catholic professor, awarded a novel that, when it came to 'promiscuity' and 'obscenity', went far beyond Herman J. Claeys' 'cocky' text.

Let there be no mistake: there was an important shift in moral values in sixties Flanders, certainly when it came to issues concerning sexuality. However, the role of contested publications like 'The penis salutation' is not to be overestimated. If the predicate 'revolutionary' is to be used at all, then it might be

better to reserve it for the introduction of the anti-conception pill, which was regulated by the Belgian government already in 1962 without any protest to speak of.

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Notes

¹ Today, after a recently finished restoration, the nine spheres are shinier than ever before. By the way, also the American pavilion was spared. Since 1959 it is used as a recording studio for the Flemish Television and Radio Broadcasting Company.

² The effects of the 'H-bomb' far exceeded even the expectations of the experts when after an American test in the Pacific an area with a hundred and fifty eight mile radius was radioactively contaminated and unwontedly twenty-three Japanese fishermen were seriously wounded.

³ Two weeks before the Expo opened, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, founded by Bertrand Russell and J.B. Priestly, had organised a first anti-atom march. Even though ten thousand people had participated in the manifestation, it met with very little response in Belgium.

⁴ This increase in wealth was a European trend. Between 1946 and 1975 the Gross National Product of the European countries increased with an average of 4.8% per year, which means that during these three decades the European economy was growing as fast as during the hundred and fifty years before [Hooghe, p. 14].

⁵ The most important students' protest in Belgium took place in 1966-1968 at the Catholic University of Louvain. What happened to the institute is strikingly similar as the turmoil at Berkeley, the Sorbonne or the Freie Universität Berlin. But the students' contestation in Flanders also largely thrived on a different dynamics that were directly related to the cultural-political battle of the (Dutch-speaking) Flemings against the predominately Francophone establishment ever since the Belgian independence in 1831. This community matter is fairly complicated and cannot be explained within the scope of this lecture.

⁶Weverbergh himself did little to hide his sympathy for the Dutch Provo's either: 'The only magazine in the entire Dutch-speaking region that I read at one sitting; the only magazine in the entire Dutch-speaking region that has anything meaningful to say from the first to the very last page; the only magazine in the entire Dutch-speaking region that really makes sense, alas, all you poets and writers: PROVO.' [Weverbergh 1966: u] In his recently published memoirs Weverbergh once more situates his magazine activities in the sixties' counterculture: '*Boek* was really born in the smother of the anarchistic tendencies that flickered since the early sixties and that in the Netherlands would give shape to Provo in July 1965.' And further: 'An echo of the first germs of these mutations in cultural history resounded in the spirit of *Boek*. *Boek* appeared to be rather an exponent of a revolution rather than a revolution itself.' [Weverbergh 2005: 129]

⁷ Whenever and wherever he could, Herman Claeys cried out that Belgium was 'a police state' where '[a]ll forces, left- as well as right-wing, have [...] conspired to silence those who express their own opinion, and to paralyze those who do not toe in line.' [Claus 1966]

⁸ It takes a crash course in Belgian law to follow my further line of thinking: since 1831 Belgium has a liberal constitution in which both freedom of speech (article 19) and the freedom of press (article 25) are guaranteed. This means that neither the government nor any other instance (e.g. the Church) is allowed to preventively censor in any way. However, freedom of speech is not absolute and has certain restrictions. Printing crimes like slander and defamation or public offences against common decency can be persecuted and punished according to the clauses of the Belgian Criminal Code. Article 383 of the Belgian Criminal Code defines public indecency as follows: 'He who exhibits, sells or spreads songs, leaflets or other writings, printed or not, depictions or pictures that contravene common decency, will receive a prison sentence from eight days to six months and will be fined twenty-six to five hundred francs.' In practice the persecution of writings that are thought to go against common decency was always a difficult matter in Belgium – which explains why in the nineteenth century people like Karl Marx, Victor Hugo and Proudhon came to Belgium to write and publish there. Moreover, in 1930 it was decreed that the 'moral orientation' of texts had to be evaluated by a people's jury. In other words, processes had to be taken to the Assize Court, which is a complex and expensive procedure with a limited chance of conviction.

⁹ Letter of H.J. Claeys to the Minister of Culture, d.d. May 12th 1969, AMVC-Letterenhuis.

¹⁰ Interview Daniël van Hecke, d.d. May 14th 2004, L.P. Boon-documentatiecentrum.