

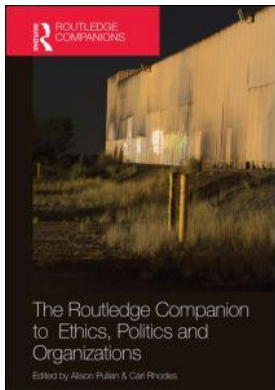
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Marketing an extremist ideology

The Vlaams Belang's nationalist discourse

Mona Moufahim and Michael Humphreys

Consumption is now established, through the influence of marketing thinking, as a “dominant force in society” (Brownlie et al., 1999; Dermody and Scullion, 2001: 1087). This force extends beyond the commercial realm into other spheres of human society and the “discourses of marketisation and commodification are increasingly intruding into new realms of life such as relationships, politics and family” (Hackley, 2003: 1328). Business models and commercial discourses have become more pervasive in political and social contexts (Sabato, 1981; O’Shaughnessy, 1990; Scammell, 1995; Brownlie, 1997; Chilton and Schaffner, 1997; Hertz, 2001; Norris, 2004). The application of marketing techniques in political practice seems widespread and substantial sums of money are spent each year in political advertising, much of which goes to organizations and through channels very familiar to mainstream marketing scholars and practitioners (see e.g. Newman, 1994; Scammell, 1996). As marketing has increasingly been adopted by political parties (O’Shaughnessy, 1990), it has moved beyond influencing only tactical matters of communication and presentation, towards playing a significant role in policy formulation and long-term direction (Butler and Collins, 1996). We are particularly interested in the impact of marketing on politics, and how political parties deploy a marketing toolkit to achieve success at the polls. As a focus for our argument we have chosen to study the extreme right. The apparent success of traditionally marginal, extreme right parties across Europe has raised concerns because of their radical stance, blatant xenophobia, their growing popular acceptance and their participation in legitimate governing institutions.

Accordingly, in this chapter we focus on how controversial issues are framed and normalized in extreme right parties’ marketing communications. We have chosen the Vlaams Blok/Vlaams Belang (VB) as our case study, as it is “one of the most significant far-right movements in Western Europe” (Davies and Lynch, 2002: 355; see also, Mudde, 2000; Swyngedouw, 2000). Through a critical discourse analysis of the party’s communication material, we seek to deconstruct and understand the persuasive and rhetorical processes at play when communicating politically controversial stances. We consider our chapter to be a useful step in understanding the processes at the intersection of consumer culture, politics and morality. We show that through discourse, the VB have constructed a moral identity using two strategies: first by refuting accusations of xenophobia and racism (what we refer to as a ‘moral inversion’ strategy) and, second, using framing to displace the whole issue of morality in a discourse claiming that self-defence and self-preservation justify discrimination against and rejection of the ‘other’.

Our argument begins with the premise that political parties and politicians use marketing to achieve their political goals and connect with voters but, in doing so, appear to borrow tools and concepts in an ad hoc and instrumental fashion. One dimension where political marketing has replaced traditional forms of policy development is in the use of survey devices and focus groups to find out how the electorate responds to various issues and to devise policies that would fit the “existing patterns of evaluation” (Palmer, 2002: 353). In other words, the political marketer tries to find out who is persuadable, and on what grounds (Maarek, 1992). Newman (1994) reflects on whether it is conceivable for a candidate *not* to adopt a marketing perspective in contemporary politics. Indeed, some scholars have argued that marketing practice within the political realm is inevitable. For example, O’Cass (1996: 38) states that “the very essence of a candidate and political party’s interface with the electorate is a marketing one and marketing cannot be avoided”. For Butler and Collins (1994: 30), “political marketing is a continuous process which cannot be divorced from all other public aspects of politics”.

It should also be noted that the discourse of marketing serves to embed the importance, even the primacy, of markets as a solution to all social, economic and political concerns (Wring and Savigny, 2008: 8). Ideas about marketing have thus become institutionalized and naturalized, as the conventional norms from which there is no alternative, and the ‘common sense’ way for politics to proceed (Wring and Savigny, 2008: 70). We have shown elsewhere that marketing discourse is mainly used strategically by parties to make their speech ‘voter-friendly’ and encourage the consumption of their political ‘product’ (Moufahim et al., 2007). Of course this is part of a broader discourse of neoliberalism that makes the ideas and language of marketing intelligible and acceptable (Wring and Savigny, 2008: 74). Hence marketing is used as a form of legitimating discourse to make politics accessible to people who have been socialized in, and by, a consumer society. Thus, studying the VB from a marketing perspective, using critical discourse analysis of their campaign material, sheds light on the powerful discursive processes which place issues of moral and political discourse in sharp contrast.

Critical discourse analysis

A critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework provides tools to analyse the nature of political marketing and its web of ideology and power relations. Discourse analysis (DA) is considered particularly appropriate to explore the relationships between texts and context (Fairclough, 1992; Phillips and Hardy, 2002). Through the analysis of the historical and social context, DA helps to understand how meanings are constructed and how a broader social reality is constructed, maintained and experienced by people (Phillips and Hardy, 2002). Social actors constitute knowledge, situations, social roles as well as identities and interpersonal relations through discourse (de Cillia et al., 1999). According to Wodak (2001: 66), “discourses as linguistic social practices can be seen as constituting nondiscursive and discursive social practices and, at the same time, as being constituted by them”. CDA also reveals that discourses are not only expressions of social practice (Jäger, 2001), but are also ideological (Wodak, 2001). CDA seeks to unveil the hidden web of domination, power, discrimination and control existing in language (Wodak, 2001), which is conceptualized as a medium of domination and social force (Habermas, 1977). For example, it is through language that power relations are legitimized (Wodak, 2001).

Our use of the discourse–historical approach to CDA focuses on three interrelated dimensions, which are: (a) the semantic elements of discourse (i.e. the content or the topic); (b) the strategies adopted to achieve determined aims; and (c) the linguistic means and forms of syntax used in the text (de Cillia et al., 1999). The three analytical dimensions (semantic, strategic and linguistic) are systematically and recursively related to the totality of contextual knowledge

(Titscher et al., 2000: 153). The procedure of discourse–historical method is hermeneutic and interpretative (Wodak et al., 1999: 53). In addition to being interpretative, CDA is explanatory. In analysis, texts are deconstructed and embedded in their social conditions, linking them to ideologies and power relationships. In order to interpret political discourse, critical analysts rely on systematic procedures and methodology, and reflections on their experience as researchers (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997). However, the analyst’s own experience of the phenomenon is only a minor part of the whole picture. The analysis is completed by a systematic in-depth investigation that goes beyond ordinary experience, to be informed by social theories and theories of language (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997: 281). Data reported in this chapter were collected between 2004 and 2007, from the publications and websites of the Vlaams Blok and the Vlaams Belang, as part of a larger research project into the party’s political marketing practices and rhetorical strategies (see e.g. Moufahim, 2007; Moufahim et al., 2007; Moufahim et al., 2015). For illustration purposes, we focus on the discursive strategies deployed by the VB to construct its own brand of moral discourse and identity.

The Vlaams Blok/Vlaams Belang (VB)

The VB was currently an electoral force to be reckoned with in the Belgian political landscape; in less than 30 years the party has reached a prominent position in Flanders. The VB has experienced a series of successful elections since it was founded in 1978 and according to Mudde (2000) and Swyngedouw (1998) is one of the most successful extreme right parties in western Europe. The Vlaams Blok was created from the merger of two small nationalist parties run by radical dissidents of the Volksunie which was then the most important Flemish nationalist post-war party (Camus, 2003; Faniel, 2003). The VB’s political programme is articulated around three major themes: first, the incompetence and dishonesty of the other mainstream political parties; second, the denunciation of foreigners; and, third, Flemish nationalism and independence (Faniel, 2003). Filip Dewinter, a leading party official, published in 1992 an infamous pamphlet entitled ‘Immigration: the Solution. 70 Propositions for the Resolution of the Foreigners’ Issue’. He argued that what was needed for the protection of Flemish identity was a halt to immigration and the accelerated repatriation of foreigners, along with harsher regulations against illegal immigrants (Coffé, 2005). This pamphlet, summarizing the Vlaams Blok’s policies on immigration, served as the justification for the creation by mainstream political parties of the *cordon sanitaire*, or quarantine, which has been effectively isolating and excluding the Vlaams Blok (and subsequently the Vlaams Belang) from political power at any level of Belgian politics.

While the independence of Flanders was the original founding principle underlying the Vlaams Blok’s creation, the anti-immigrant/anti-immigration position has become the most salient theme and the most effective vote-gatherer for the party. Filip Dewinter was the first to recognize the electoral potential of an anti-immigrant stance,¹ inspired by the success of the French Front National (FN). For example, the FN’s ‘*Les Français d’abord*’ (‘The French first’) inspired the VB’s ‘*Eigen Volk Eerst*’ (‘Our own people first’) (Coffé, 2004). In 1987, the party conducted its first fierce anti-immigrant campaign in the parliamentary elections, which got them two seats in Parliament and one seat in the Belgian Senate. However it is really from the beginning of the 1990s that the VB appeared to become an electoral force. In 1991, at what is still known in Belgium as Black Sunday, 10.3 per cent of Flemish voters and 25 per cent of voters in Antwerp supported the Vlaams Blok party (Coffé, 2004). In 1994, the VB became the largest party on the city council of Antwerp, and was consequently entitled to take part in the city’s administration. However, the *cordon sanitaire* excluded the VB from entering any governing coalition (Swyngedouw, 1998; Mudde, 2000). In the 2000 legislative elections, the Vlaams Blok scored

33 per cent of the votes in Antwerp, an increase on its previous 28 per cent, becoming the city's largest party with 19 out of 54 seats (Van Der Brink, 2003). On 13 June 2004, one in four Flemings voted for the VB. The rising trend continued until 2006, when the party registered 33.5 per cent of the votes in Antwerp – a slight increase compared to its result in 2000 – but did not win any additional seats in Flanders. This was then considered as a major victory for the mainstream political parties, because for the first time the progression of the extreme right had been stopped. However, the Vlaams Belang still claimed victory, because the party had managed to achieve 20.6 per cent (i.e. an increase of 5.6 per cent) in the whole Flemish Region suggesting that the VB had consolidated its position across Flanders and beyond its Antwerp stronghold (*Metro*, 9 October 2006).

In November 2004, the Belgian *Cour de Cassation* condemned the three not-for-profit foundations funding the Vlaams Blok, following a legal suit by anti-racism organizations. This decision effectively rendered the Vlaams Blok unable to function (Kundnani, 2012). As a consequence, the Vlaams Blok had to disband. The Vlaams Belang was immediately founded, with the same leaders and same structures as the Vlaams Blok (*De Tijd*, 13 September 2004). The continuity of leadership, ideology and programme has been emphasized by its party leaders.² For example, Frank Vanhecke, the then Vlaams Belang's president, said: "we are changing our name, but not our stripes" (in Coffé, 2005: 217). The Vlaams Belang is now aiming to have the status of a nationalist right-wing party, which still has immigration, security and anti-establishment policies as its driving force, but which has cut ties with its unsavoury past (Coffé, 2005). However, if the party seems to have softened some of its (legally) problematic stances, it still adopts a very clear view regarding immigrants and immigration. For example, in 2005 Filip Dewinter said that: "multiculturalism leads to multi-criminality" (Annual Report 2005 on Human Rights in Belgium). Filip Dewinter leaves no ambiguity about the Vlaams Belang's Islamophobic orientation with his statement that "any Muslim woman wearing the headscarf will thereby sign the warrant for her repatriation" (Buitenhof 2004). When the Vlaams Belang was created, it capitalized on the strengths of the Vlaams Blok. This is an understandable – and very pragmatic – choice, because the Vlaams Blok in marketing terms had managed to build a strong brand with a significantly loyal following.

The VB, xenophobia and marketing

The extreme right movement is characterized by its xenophobia and, for some, racism. Western extreme right parties share a common claim of national unity and national preference (Mudde, 2000). They advocate the exclusive granting of political, economic and social rights to nationals (with a restricted definition of who qualifies as a national). This xenophobic stance implies that people are discriminated against on the basis of their religion, ethnic origin or physical appearance. The rise of such xenophobia has been attributed to the fear of a loss of national identity which is itself constructed by liberal globalization and waves of immigration (Hainsworth, 2000). An example of this is the hostility demonstrated by extreme right parties towards European integration and particularly the recent expansion to include Eastern European countries and possibly Turkey. Extreme right parties conceive of a homogeneous society, where national identity is rooted in 'blood' and heredity (Camus, 2003; Hainsworth, 2000). Hence, everything that is international, multinational or global is seen by the extreme right as a threat to the cultural identity and integrity of the nation. Factors in this threat include Third World immigration, Islam, communism, multiculturalism and globalization (Hainsworth, 2000).

Xenophobia and more recently Islamophobia are characteristic features of the Vlaams Blok/Vlaams Belang. Filip Dewinter (as one of the party's leading figures) sparked considerable

controversy by saying: “‘Xenophobia’ is not the word I would use. If it absolutely must be a ‘phobia’ let it be ‘Islamophobia’” (*Jewish Week*, 28 October 2005),³ and “Islamophobia is not merely a phenomena of unparalleled fear, but it is the duty of every one who wants to safeguard Europe’s future” (Dewinter, 2008).

The Vlaams Belang, as did the Vlaams Blok before, uses strong and provocative communication and visuals, integrated marketing and precise targeting. Along with the ‘softening’ of their policies, these controlled outbursts might have been intended to avoid the alienation of the existing loyal voters of the former Vlaams Blok. The party leaders made it clear that the new party is not a toned-down version of the late Vlaams Blok. Filip Dewinter stated (in TV programme *Dag Allemaal3*): “we don’t need a Vlaams Blok Light’ or a ‘Vlaams Blok Ultra’, but a ‘Vlaams Blok Plus!’ Indeed, our programme is not changing at all”. The seemingly paradoxical stances between xenophobic statements and a right-wing conservative rebirth, and the subsequent ambiguity, lead to the need for a careful segmentation of the voters’ market and sound positioning of the party. By adopting what seems like paradoxical approaches, the Vlaams Belang seems to be aiming at both attracting a larger audience (which might be interested in its tough approach on criminality, or in its call for a greater autonomy for Flanders), and at the same time reassuring the voters of the former Vlaams Blok (who were not shy of voting for an anti-immigrant party) that the party had not changed and would continue defending the nation and identity of its people.

Since 1991, the party has employed the service of professionals to develop its advertising campaigns and create memorable slogans associated with recognizable symbols (Bossemans, 2001; Vander Velpen, 1992). There were, for example: in 1991, boxing gloves and a “Self-defence” slogan; in 1999, a family and “Boss in one’s land”, a broom and “Big Cleaning up”, and a young child with the “At Home” tagline. These slogans have always been used in combination with the well-known party tagline “Eigen Volk Eerst” (“Our own people first”). The Vlaams Belang has recently run a campaign called “Women against Islamization”, featuring Filip Dewinter’s 19-year-old daughter posing in a niqab and a bikini (Kundnani, 2012: 26).

In 2004, Filip Dewinter announced that:

I am the head of a campaign group of 13 people. Among them, there are 3 employees of well-known advertising agencies, who are members of our party, and have helped for free to set up campaigns. Who they are, I can’t say. It would cost them their jobs.

(in *Het Belang van Limburg*,⁴ 17 March 2004: 4)

Throughout the last few years’ campaigns, the party leaders have adopted an ambiguous position on the issue of marketing. Although party leaders have *internally* advocated the use of political marketing to their local candidates, they have *publicly* adopted an attitude of distaste for the use of ‘spin doctors’ by other political parties. Nevertheless, their adherence to marketing is assumed, based on the following quotation by Filip Dewinter,⁵ which unambiguously illustrates the Vlaams Blok’s active marketing orientation:

Marketing comes from the study of the needs of consumers, and from this follows the production of resources which could satisfy those needs. A company must study first the needs of its consumers and adapt its production according to those needs. Political marketing broadly follows the same line of thought.

This definition comes from a brochure distributed to local VB candidates, advising them on the best way to lead a political campaign. In the same brochure, Filip Dewinter justifies the utilization of marketing strategy by stating that:

Political marketing is a global project with which the candidate can organize well his/her political activities. The VB is choosing without a doubt an anti-demagogic practice, with which we have so often tried to be the voice of the people.

Here, the VB stresses the importance of marketing as political instrument, and at the same time rejects the accusation of manipulation, spin and demagogic practices that could be associated with the use of marketing in politics (Baines and Egan, 2001; Scammell, 1995, in Harris, 2001; Newman, 1994; Sabato, 1981). With marketing, the VB proposes a well-crafted product that manages to attract voters' support (its constant electoral support being the evidence), notwithstanding its xenophobic nature.

The pragmatism of the party leaders is also evident in their recruitment of communication professionals (Bossemans, 2001; Vander Velpen, 1992). The VB was rewarded for its consistent positioning and clear, recognizable communications: the party has been winning votes at every single election (thirteenth win, the VB claims, as in October 2006). In less than 30 years, the VB has become one of the most popular political parties in Flanders. No Belgian citizen could currently ignore or confuse the party's core themes with those of the other political parties. The main themes of the VB have even become the party's *chasse gardée*, i.e. the party can claim 'issue ownership' over these themes (Coffé, 2004), or the 'unique selling proposition' (Olins, 2000) of the VB brand.⁶ Any other party calling for a clampdown on immigration or a tougher stance on crime would merely look like a pale imitation of the VB. The stance on immigration became their distinguishable points of difference (POD) at the start of the 1987 campaign. The party was successful in raising the perceived importance of immigration during the 1987 elections and since then. Butler and Collins (1996) also argue that anticipating the preferences of the electorate can be useful for challengers. If a policy can be 'branded' before its appeal is widely recognized, a party can steal a march on its opponents (Butler and Collins, 1996). Butler and Collins (1996) also note that the difficulty with this strategy, however, is retaining ownership of the idea once it is popular.

The VB has clearly managed to claim ownership of some key issues (Coffé, 2004) and, in doing so, developed other PODs on crime, immigration, Flemish autonomy and, more recently, the independence of Flanders and the end of Belgium ("the euthanasia of Belgium" *dixit* Filip Dewinter, Press Conference, 19 August 2007). In fact, one of the most significant achievements of the VB, we argue here, is the spreading of its views and rhetoric in mainstream politics. Indeed, through the medium of language, the Vlaams Blok's discourse has become powerful enough to influence the main political agenda in Belgium. The separation of Flanders from Wallonia is no longer a taboo, voiced only by the Vlaams Blok/Vlaams Belang, but is echoed by other more mainstream parties. For instance, Jeanine Leduc, the president of the Flemish liberal party (VLD),⁷ expressed racist comments in Parliament, and no one protested.⁸ Kundnani (2012) notes that Islamophobic rhetoric can routinely be found even in quality newspapers. For example, Wim van Rooy, author of the bestseller 'The Malaise of Multiculturalism, wrote in *De Standaard* that "Muslims are people like non-Muslims, but they are conditioned to hostility towards non-Muslims by the ideology that Mohammed captures in the Qu'ran'" (Van Rooy, 2009).

The New-Vlaams Alliantie (NVA), or New Flemish Alliance, a centre-right Flemish independentist party, has gained prominence in recent years (winning the 2009 elections in Flanders and Belgium). The NVA is said to have benefited from the 'groundwork' the VB has been undertaking for years on the Flemish independence agenda, but the NVA does not feature outright racist policies. Kundnani (2012) argues that the VB, faced by the increased competition from the NVA, has actually intensified its militant and provocative campaigns against a so-called jihadist

Islam presence in the west. We argue that this is a clever marketing strategy to significantly singularize the VB's offering, and reinforce its positioning in the Belgian political landscape.

Outcomes of the analysis

In Belgium, laws protect citizens against discrimination based on their gender, sexual orientation, religion or race, in a variety of contexts, from employment, to access to accommodation. The Vlaams Blok has already experienced the brunt of the law, when it was found guilty of breaching the anti-racism law. More than ever, it became imperative for the VB to protect its image and identity. Our analysis has identified two broad strategies used by the party to present itself and its political agenda in a positive light.

On the one hand, the party refutes the accusations set against it. In other words, the party fights on the same 'moral plane' as its adversaries. This is done mainly through a 'moral inversion' strategy. On the other hand, the party presents its thesis of what is right, what it stands for, and what should be (i.e. problematizing existing frames of references related to norms and values). This is illustrated through the defence of western and Flemish values and identity, through the denunciation of corruption of its political competitors and through rejecting what they see as the damaging ideology of multiculturalism.⁹

Moral inversion strategy

They [the media and political leaders] are co-responsible for the climate of intolerance in which Haider, Le Pen and Dewinter are presented as a threat to democracy and therefore a legitimate target. To prevent further tragedies I call on politicians and journalists to stop demonizing the Vlaams Blok.

(www.vlaamsblok.be/index.shtml)

The argument put forward here is that there is a political will to undermine VB's credibility and legitimacy by branding the party as racist. Hence, the real victim of this situation becomes the VB, as reinforced by the next quote: "The understanding of racism is used today as a term of abuse to seal the mouth of political opponents" (<http://vlaamsblok.be/afdrukken/afdrukken.php>). Van Dijk (1993, 1991; see also, Bonilla-Silva and Forman, 2000; Condor et al., 2006) indicates that such types of 'reversal strategies' or 'moral inversion' are typical in anti-anti-racist theories, where those who fight intolerance and discrimination are themselves accused of being intolerant and against 'freedom of speech'. For example, in the Frequently Asked Questions section of the Vlaams Blok website (see <http://vlaamsblok.be/afdrukken/afdrukken.php>), in answer to the question 'is the VB racist?' the party replies: "The VB is certainly not a racist party; we have been branded [racist] by the traditional parties and their friends from the media, and they blocked us in a political monster trial" (<http://vlaamsblok.be/afdrukken/afdrukken.php>).

The role of victim and attacker is constantly reversed throughout the Vlaams Blok/Vlaams Belang's discourse. For example, in the following quotation, the party is referring to the long legal battle it faced, and its condemnation for racism by a High Court in 2004: "Have we ever condoned discrimination on the basis of race? No, but that did not matter to the Belgian establishment and its political courts" (http://vlaamsblok.be/site_engels_index.shtml). By condemning the condemners, definitions of racism and discrimination are therefore refuted and reframed as being political tools used to limit VB's freedom of speech. Sometimes VB

moves further to claim that it is actually the anti-racists themselves who are at the basis of the so-called opposition between the western world and ‘others’ (i.e. in this case so-called ‘Muslim fundamentalists’):

Opinion makers and professional ‘anti-racists’ should maybe ask themselves whether their exaggerated and non-founded reports about ‘discrimination’ and ‘racism’ – using the words of our friends from De Morgen – do not offer the ‘soil’ in which Muslim fundamentalists’ and terrorists’ hate seeds towards the West will easily root. Don’t people claiming themselves being ‘anti-racists’ voluntarily offer the soil and the arguments terrorist networks need in order to recruit young non-natives in their Holy War against the West?

(www.vlaamsbelang.org/index.php?p=6&id=16)

In sum, the issue of racism and its responsibility has been consistently turned around in a reversal strategy where there is a moral inversion. The party stance should, they argue, be understood not as racism, but as a form of self-defence against abuse and injustice against ‘native’ Flemings, as the next section illustrates.

The people’s champion: the defence of Flanders and western values

In this particular strategy, the VB shows that its opposition to multiculturalism is justified by the identification of a conflict between democratic and ‘other’ western values, and cultural relativism. The debate is thus shifted from racism and xenophobia to the criticism of multiculturalism. The party argues that multiculturalism (and the abuse it necessarily brings) is at odds with, and would inevitably cause the high cost of violating ‘shared’ western values. Similarly, Vanhecke links Flemish identity to the party’s struggle for political existence.

Our democracy and our western values are too valuable for us to offer it to the altar of multiculturalism – and frequently – unilateral tolerance.

(<http://vlaamsblok.be/afdrukken/afdrukken.php>)

[about the creation of the new party, the Vlaams Belang] the establishment of a new party to defend the political priorities that the Vlaams Blok has always fought for: an independent and democratic Republic of Flanders; the traditional moral values of western civilization; and the right of the Flemings to protect their national identity and their Dutch language and culture.

(<http://vlaamsblok.be/afdrukken/afdrukken.php>)

The superiority of western or Flemish values over others is here represented as a ‘fact’, explicitly stated in earlier party material. The construction of the superiority of a culture, race, values, etc. from one group over others’ is certainly not a new phenomenon. For example, imperialist and colonialist discourses have been studied in great depth (see Said, 1978; Inden, 1986; Falola, 2005; Adu Boahen, 1987; Bonsu, 2009). The rhetoric of difference serves to strengthen the subjugating colonial discourse (both the colonizer and the colonized are encouraged to adopt the worldview of the colonizer), but dress it in more ‘acceptable’ clothes: civilizing mission (Rodney, 1981), charitable responsibility/philanthropy, progress and, more recently, the liberatory globalization rhetoric of equity and democracy (Bonsu, 2009). The VB constructs difference as highly problematic: the ‘us’ and ‘them’ groups are simply incompatible, making inclusion or even coexistence undesirable. In other words, the party assumes all

European people (should) share common history and ancestry, and notes the political, cultural, historical and religious differences between foreigners/Muslims and the rest of the western world as too significant to be ignored. It is worth stressing that the notion of cultural difference and cultural distinctiveness, also called ‘cultural fundamentalism’ (Stolcke, 1995), has replaced the discourse of racism in many modern extreme right parties (Modood, 1997; Amin, 2004). This is also evident in the VB’s discourse.

The VB defines its role as: (1) denouncing society’s ills, and (2) defending Flemish people (who have been wronged by mainstream politicians and by ‘scroungers’, foreigners who do not respect Flemish culture). The party takes on the role of the people’s champion:

The Vlaams Blok will continue, no matter what, to say what the silent majority of our country thinks. For the 13th June elections, we ask the Brussels’ inhabitants to emit a clear signal: choose freedom of speech, for democracy, for the Vlaams Blok.

(Vlaams Blok, May 2004)

The VB often claims to be representing the voice of the ‘silent majority’ and moves to defend it. This is a popular theme of the VB, the so-called *vox populi*, or the claim that the party represents the silent majority, i.e. ‘we say out loud what you think’ could be the party motto:

we are the democratic voice of an ever growing number of Flemings.

(http://vlaamsblok.be/site_engels_index.shtml)

The majority of the population does not believe in [multiculturalism] and does not want to know about it. It is only among a small group of politicians and opinion makers that the ‘multicultural’ thought is kept alive, and they want to force it on us.

(<http://vlaamsblok.be/afdrukken/afdrukken.php>)

Speaking of what the majority thinks is a way of claiming legitimacy, as it relates to consensual viewpoints, underpinned by shared or conventional norms and values (surely, all these people cannot be wrong or immoral). It also creates a community of like-minded individuals forming the ‘us-group’ versus the ‘out-group’ (i.e. the foreigners, the politicians, the proponents of multiculturalism). This way of creating opposition between groups and providing a positive depiction of the in-group is, according to van Dijk (1993), a common feature of racist discourse.

The party also claims the higher moral ground by adopting a resolutely democratic stance, and intransigent position against compromises that would jeopardize ‘national’ or Flemish interests:

We refuse any Flemish concession. We refuse to put water in our wine. We refuse to sell our programme for a ministry portfolio. We refuse to sell our principles for anything. Do you want a real opposition on each point? Vote for the Vlaams Blok.

(Dillen, 1991; in Spruyt, 2000)

The advantages of defending higher ‘national’ values are twofold. First, the VB presents itself as the people’s party and, second, it also allows the party to extrapolate from the content of the silent majority’s thoughts. The previous quotations contain a clear refutation of the accusation of being a racist party, and a justification of the party’s stance of defending people’s interests. The VB places itself in the vanguard of the defence of the Flemings (consistent with the ‘Our own people first’ oft-used slogan): “The fact that the VB takes a stance against the model of

the multicultural society has nothing to do with racism, as it has been usually presented” (<http://vlaamsblok.be/afdrukken/afdrukken.php>).

The VB shows that once again the party has been ‘demonized’ by political opponents, somewhat viewing itself as more ‘acted upon’ rather than acting on racism matters. In the next quote the party deflects the responsibility of xenophobia and racism to some of its followers:

Question [from *Jewish Week’s* journalist]: It is said that your party was founded by Nazi collaborators and Holocaust deniers and that it still attracts Holocaust deniers. What is your reaction to them in your party and the fact that it was founded by Nazi collaborators?

Answer [from Filip Dewinter]: Do we attract Holocaust deniers or Nazi’s? Well, sometimes a decent woman attracts evil men, not because of her own deeds, but because her good name has been blackened by slander. This is our problem too: all Belgium governments have depicted us as Nazis in their propaganda. Of course some people believe this propaganda. And of course some youths with Nazi sympathies think we are their allies. But we are not. They are not welcome.

(www.filipdewinter.be/page.php?linkID=238)

Here, Filip Dewinter argues that it is not the party’s fault or responsibility if extremist Nazi sympathizers are attracted to the party. To make it clear that the VB has nothing to do with Nazism, he also adds that neo-Nazis hate the VB (see www.filipdewinter.be/page.php?linkID=238). In sum, if factors beyond the VB’s control are operating, no moral responsibility can be attributed to the political party (e.g. Velasquez, 2006).

The following quotes illustrate how far the VB is prepared to go to protect Flemish children (i.e. protecting Flanders’ future): through a segregated education system. The following quotation comes from the controversial ‘70 points programme’ that the party discarded in 2000 (Deweerd, 2001).

The growing number of foreign children in our education system poses a series of problems. The different cultures, the uprooting, the backwardness at school, and sometimes the different social classes are a danger for the quality of education provided to our own children. When we force foreign Muslim children to integrate and assimilate in our society, we are breaking in an authoritarian and artificial way the link with their own culture. This is why, it is necessary to organise a separated and independent education system for the foreign Muslim children. . . . The Vlaams Blok is convinced that the creation of such an education network, providing its adequate management and its integration in a general return plan [to the country of origin], will immediately greatly appeal to the targeted group.

(Dewinter, 1992)

The VB claims that the presence of foreign and Muslim children undermines the quality of education and suggests the creation of a separated education system for those ‘problematic’ children as a sensible solution. The denial of injury (or claim of benefit) occurs by framing this segregation as a proposal that fulfils everyone’s interests and needs. The VB stresses its conviction that even the ‘injured’ group will in fact benefit: Muslim and foreign children would have much to gain from such a formation as it will prepare them for the return to their (or their parents’) country of origin. The parallel with colonialist discourse here is striking. Bonsu (2009: 20), for example, explains how colonialism was justified in part by the colonizer’s claim to a moral obligation to impart a base level of European-descent civilization to the colonized. The inherent colonized’s

difference and savagery (see Bonsu, 2009) (or here, the Muslim children's 'backwardness') justify their separation, but, more importantly, the work of 'education' (civilization), before they are sent back to their home countries with useful (western) knowledge to benefit the rest of their compatriots/country. The superiority of our 'own children' is also stated, because their growth and progress is hindered by the Muslim children. This highlights a stereotypical psychology of the foreigners as inferior to the native children (this parallels Bonsu's (2009: 23) discussion of the North American socio-economic-cultural superiority over Africa's, in the media).

Discussion and conclusion

Our research focuses on race and, more specifically, on a particular discourse about race, xenophobia, and its concomitant prejudice and ethnic discrimination. Such discourse is not only an important aspect of western European politics, but also is insidiously permeating many aspects of modern life, e.g. the classroom (see Bonsu, 2009); the workplace (Zanoni and Janssens, 2004); media (Mastro et al., 2008; Samad, 1998); marketing communications (e.g. Borgerson and Schroeder, 2002, 2005; Maher et al., 2008) and consumer behaviour (Podoshen and Hunt, 2009; Rosenbaum, 2005).

Our findings indicate that the discourse of an extreme right political party can be a rich site for enquiry into marketing communications and persuasion mechanisms relating to problematic issues. The CDA of selected textual artefacts has highlighted the strategic use of rhetoric and linguistic devices. In particular, we focused on the ways the VB justifies its xenophobic stance and 'neutralizes' its morally questionable advocated policies; ultimately decreasing voters' resistance to what they may otherwise perceive as violation of conventional and accepted norms and values. At the same time, the VB presents what should be the 'correct' set of moral values: defending the Flemish people, nation and identity against multiculturalism, Islam, terrorism, corruption, etc. The analysis of the Vlaams Blok and the Vlaams Belang's marketing shows how a party can remarket itself and stay credible, especially in the eyes of its hard-core supporters, and also attract new consumers – voters less averse to the former racist discourse and imagery. Our case study shows how a political party has drawn on available repertoires of social and cultural narratives with a view to providing a more socially acceptable product for voters' consumption.

For the reasons above, we conceptualize extreme right political offerings as problematic and it is clear that our stance is informed by our own liberal and cosmopolitan political values. We are however not the only ones to take such a position regarding racism and xenophobia. In many countries (e.g. Belgium), racism is condemned by law, and it is also widely accepted that racism, xenophobia and subsequent forms of discrimination are morally and arguably ethically wrong. In fact, several groups hold an ethical imperative to oppose racism and xenophobia. The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), for example, states in its Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice (1978: Article 2, no. 1) that:

any theory which involves the claim that racial or ethnic groups are inherently superior or inferior, thus implying that some would be entitled to dominate or eliminate others, presumed to be inferior, or which bases value judgements on racial differentiation has no scientific foundation and is contrary to the moral and ethical principles of humanity.

The particular form of identity however that is constructed by the VB is fixed, with clearly delineated borders, i.e. us versus the others. The VB's representations of the Muslim 'others',

of ‘multicultural society’ are particularly problematic, not least because they create a dichotomy within society, and this division might breed conflict. It is worth stressing that the notion of cultural difference and cultural distinctiveness, also called “cultural fundamentalism” (Stolcke, 1995), has replaced the discourse of ‘biological’ racism in many modern extreme right parties (Modood, 1997; Amin, 2004). Such cultural fundamentalism has provided the foundation for an expanding Islamophobic discourse. In the VB’s discourse, difference is not celebrated; it is presented as deviant and threatening. Nevertheless, such controversial political issues are somewhat softened by rhetorical strategies that ‘sanitize’ and reframe the otherwise ‘xenophobic’, ‘exclusionist’ and ‘prejudiced’ attributes of its core product. The party’s rhetorical strategies, which create moral inversion and present its offering as ‘morally’ right, have no doubt an effect on voters’ sense of political and self-identity (considering the ostracism attached to voting for the extreme-right and to adopting views which are sympathetic to racist and discriminatory politics). Further research should seek to directly focus on voters consuming this type of political product; it would be of great interest, but also present its own set of challenges.

Our reflections at the intersection of marketing, politics and ethics compel us to introspectively explore political marketing itself. Marketing has shaped and continues to shape the social sphere by defining the space within which social relations are constituted as social exchanges. Critical marketing research recognizes that marketers not only help provide for the physical needs of consumers; they also provide the symbolic material for their identity construction and expression. The commodification and marketization of politics has resulted in the adoption of a consumer model that conceptualizes citizens as consumers and where tools and techniques traditionally associated with the marketing of products and services are penetrating spheres of civic life (Shah et al., 2007). In a neoliberal milieu where consumer culture pervades, politics has become yet another arena for meaning creation and representations that shape individual and collective identity projects. Class, gender, ethnicity and race take centre stage in consumption research related to identity and culture. The gradual, but inexorable, intrusion of a corporate mindset into political marketing is hardly new, but is only now being critically acknowledged as a source of conceptual ‘contamination’ by scholars. In this sense, political marketing resembles what Kotler and Andreassen (1991: 42) have called the “mindset of consumer-centeredness” (in O’Cass, 1996) inside the organization.

Political marketing appears to construct citizens – in monolithic ways – as consumers of products and services, thus encouraging party–voter relationships which are commodified along the lines of the market; these, in turn, distort the genuine needs and aspirations of voters. We do question the ideological construction of the ‘market’ and ‘consumer’ as *discourses* which must be critically examined rather than assumed as ‘natural’, let alone desirable, for consumers. Is marketing used as a form of legitimating discourse to make politics accessible to people who have been socialized in a consumer society or is it a way of manufacturing ‘consensus’ in the public sphere? A reflexive introspection would also provide an alternative position to the largely accepted idea that political marketing is (a self-proclaimed) democracy enhancer (see Kotler and Kotler, 1999). A good starting point would be, for example, to recognize the reflexive power of the marketing discourse itself in perpetuating inequitable relations between voters and institutional forces, between groups of individuals and between governments with widely divergent, yet interconnected, agendas.

Notes

- 1 Dewinter’s ideological input is limited to the immigration theme (Mudde, 2000).
- 2 To stress this continuity, the acronym VB is used to refer both to the Vlaams Blok and the Vlaams Belang, unless stated otherwise.

- 3 See: www.filipdewinter.org/page.php?linkID=238
- 4 Local Flemish newspaper (in the Flemish province of Limburg).
- 5 Brochure: Politieke Communicatie-Technieken, Deel 1. De persoonlijke campagne van de kandidaat. Vlaams Blok Publications. (Translation: Political communication techniques: Part 1: The personal campaign of the candidate).
- 6 According to Keller (2003), good positioning of a brand requires the establishment of important points of difference (POD) over the competition at the same time as turning policies where disadvantaged into points of parity (POP), such as the economy where the VB advocates liberal policies. In the light of this argument the VB's decision to concentrate on immigration becomes more understandable.
- 7 The VLD is the main party constituting the governing coalition with the Liberals, Socialists and Ecologists.
- 8 Eric Corijn, sociologist and philosopher, co-founder of the "Charte 91" a movement against the VB (in Van Der Brink, 2003).
- 9 We are not suggesting here that the party adopts these two strategies separately, but for the sake of illustration, we are presenting the different strategies separately.

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