

## "THE HISTORY IN DEBATE" SERIES BRUSSELS, A EUROPEAN CAPITAL?

On 19 June 2019, the House of European History proposed a debate on the status of Brussels as a capital for Europe from a historical point of view. Invited speakers included both historians like Chloé Deligne (ULB- Université libre de Bruxelles) and Roel Jacobs (author), and people involved in the creative arts, such as Grażyna Plebanek (writer, playwright and chronicler) and Dirk Snauwaert (director of Wiels). The debate was moderated by Christine Dupont, Curator at the House of European History.

The idea behind this debate, organized in collaboration with the Coudenberg Palace, is born of our common desire to approach Europe and its history by means of what brings us together, thus making history a tool for dialogue and opening us up to each other.

The mission of the House of European History is to promote the understanding of European history in all its complexity. The museum presents the history of Europe in a transnational way, and thus seeks to make the public aware of the diversity of perspectives and interpretations. The Coudenberg Palace is an archaeological site and museum located in the royal district, on the Mont des Arts. This palace was that of the dukes of Burgundy in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, then of the Habsburgs of Spain and Austria in the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. By its nature as a centre of power for centuries, this "international" history pre-dating the creation of nation states, offers an opportunity to address issues related to our shared history, over a long period. It seemed appropriate to explore the older periods of the past and to confront these with the innovative approach of the House of European History, in order to offer a multiplicity of points of view on Brussels and to shake up a story that is sometimes too bound by tradition.

Did the city become a European capital with the development of a high-level court back in the 15<sup>th</sup> century? How has this international role developed over the centuries? How should we define Brussels as a European capital today? What implications does this have for its inhabitants? Many such questions were discussed by the speakers.

### **Brussels "European capital", is it "city marketing" before the concept arose?**

Chloé Deligne emphasizes that History is above all a story; it has been forged into a scientific, academic discipline to make it a science but is above all a tale which is told. Historical narrative is formed from the power of imagery and storytelling.

Using the term "capital" to mean a major city within a nation, a country or a federation of nations, is relatively new. In French, the word "capital" appears in the 16<sup>th</sup> century as designating a city of reference. This epoch sees the genesis of the modern state which will culminate in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the creation of nation states each with their own capital. The word "capital" to designate a city, the principal seat of institutions, is therefore a word that appears with the progressive creation of the state. For earlier periods, this word does not have much meaning. We can talk about the city of residence of the court, we can talk about the main economic nucleus (many in northwestern Europe) but when we talk about our regions (the former Southern Netherlands) the idea of a centralised state, of a nation state, is a process that will be even slower to develop than in other parts of Europe (creation of Belgium in 1830).

This notion of "capital" is therefore very recent in Belgium.

The notion of "centrality" is more meaningful for Brussels; first within the former Netherlands and later, within Belgium itself, and finally, with regard to Europe. Centrality places a great deal of importance on the discourses and images that are conveyed. If you want to be the centre of something, you have to show yourself as and claim to be the centre of that something. Since the 12<sup>th</sup>

-13<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Brussels elite have cultivated this centrality through images intended to promote their city. The centrality of Brussels, for example, was imposed against the city of Louvain, from which the first dynasty to rule Brabant reigned; it was also proclaimed over Antwerp, which had a major economic role in its favour. Several times, Brussels has been able to regain the upper hand, to the point of creating a certain continuity.

Over a lengthy period, the centrality of Brussels was forged by the construction of stories and images rather than by its recognition by the institutions as capital; it was also built by default because it could be considered an outsider compared to others whose claims might seem more obvious.

### **Can we say that Charles V led to the European destiny of Brussels?**

By the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Brussels was a princely state, a "Princelijke Stadt" that is to say, the regular residence of a princely power. The city is part of the urban network of the former Low Countries which included modern Benelux and part of northern France. Roel Jacobs states that power was then in the hands of a hereditary military elite which was constantly moving around; there were places where power stayed more often than elsewhere and Brussels had managed to acquire this status between the 13<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries and to maintain it. The reign of Charles V (1515 - 1555) is a crucial period in European history; he is a key figure in understanding it - but with critical and global implications. The 1560s were to have major implications throughout Europe and these historical events took place in Brussels.

The urban elites played a major role in the destiny of Brussels as the prince's city of residence. When the king needed money, he appealed to the merchants, the craftsmen, that is to say, the population of the cities. The nobility having the monopoly of military power, exerted pressure in order to obtain payment and, in most cases, the contributors negotiated fiercely in order to pay as little as possible. Brussels merchants had a different approach: they were willing to pay more than they were asked for. It is they, for example, who finance the Aula Magna / Great State Hall for Philip the Good - Duke of Burgundy, at the Coudenberg Palace (1452-1460). The reason for this is that Brussels' residents expected economic benefits from having the court in Brussels. In the Middle Ages, no one was more expensive than the Duke of Burgundy and his court. To celebrate a treaty, a birth, a wedding, they organised sumptuous parties where the money was literally thrown out the doors and windows. This clientele can afford the most priceless product of the time: the tapestry made with gold and silver threads. Brussels was about to establish itself as the centre of production of this luxury tapestry. The interaction of a voluntarist policy of investing in order to become a princely residential centre associated with luxury production was successful for Brussels.

If Brussels obtained an important political position, becoming a city of princely residence and then a capital, it was not by imposing itself in confrontational fashion. There are similarities between the arrival of the Burgundians in Brussels and that of the European institutions; similarities that relate to the spirit of Brussels which is illustrated in the choice of symbols for the city. In this, it is interesting to compare Antwerp and Brussels in order to understand this urban spirit (Manneken-Pis for Brussels, a Roman soldier who defeated a giant for Antwerp).

### **Is there a European "bubble" today in Brussels?**

Are there different communities in Brussels who live without contact or interaction with each other? Does this European Community have a feeling of belonging to Brussels? What is the attitude of a writer to the city?

Grażyna Plebanek, in her novel "Illegal Liaison" featuring Eurocrats, says they have their own jargon as if they lived in a world apart. There is certainly a Eurocrat Bubble in Brussels but it is not the only one. Other bubbles related to nationality and / or generations are also present.

The Polish community of Brussels, for example, forms a bubble in its own right; they have come here to work, they return to Poland after some time without integrating and have little contact with the city and its inhabitants. You also have the Bubble of the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> generation of immigrants from Morocco or the Congo. These have more interactions with the city. If we look at the sociology of the city, we can notice that its areas are not really mixed. Initiatives by some cultural institutions to foster community encounters by hosting artists from different backgrounds (such as KVS or the Theatre National for example) are particularly important. So far, the audience remains mostly Belgian but things are changing. In some cultural centers such as Pianofabriek in Saint Gilles different nationalities are already mixed. Grażyna Plebanek has lived in Brussels for almost 15 years. Michel Dufranne (RTBF), encountered with regard to one of his books, told her that she was a "zinneke" which in popular language means someone who lives in Brussels, has several cultural identities and values this diversity of attachment. This term "zinneke" gives a "status" to the individual. One can live in and love Brussels but also simultaneously feel Polish from Warsaw. "Zinneke" are numerous in Brussels.

Roel Jacobs specifies that the ethnic native of Brussels is the "ketje" and the one who has roots elsewhere is the "zinneke". These two notions are positive and together form the identity of an urban community. The city needs to interact with the outside world (we import, we transform and we export). This is the antithesis of nationalism. Cities have been aware of this for a long time; they write their story both from the inside and from the outside.

This is not a peculiarity of Brussels: take Antwerp in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The largest printer in Antwerp (and Antwerp had a key role in printing and translation), was the French printer Plantin. The biggest speculator of the time, who doubled the area of the city of Antwerp by creating the "Nieuwstraat", was from Liège.

Another example: the Flemish primitives. The main characteristics of the artists called "Flemish primitives" is that they were neither primitive nor indeed generally Flemish either. Roger "de la Pasture" is from Tournai, a French royal town in his day; he moved to Brussels because the Burgundian court was there and changed his name to Vander Weyden. His collaborator or pupil is called Memling (who comes from Memlingen near Mainz); his portraits are of court figures or financiers working for the court. Memling then worked in Bruges where he painted many portraits of Italian bankers and traders. In this international and open context, we leave the nationalist remarks and there is no need to wonder whether these people spoke French or Dutch.

Cities whose success is based on their openness to the outside world can be considered as European hubs.

### **What is the impact on the city of the presence of European institutions and Eurocrats?**

Are Eurocrats the "new aristocrats"? To quote one of the visitors to the House of European History: The Bubble of Eurocrats can be seen as elitist because of their income, which is much higher than that of most other Brussels residents - even if the European institutions also employ contractors with precarious status and incomes. Chloé Deligne emphasizes that the cohabitation in the same space of communities with an unequal distribution of wealth causes palpable tensions. After a period of enthusiasm in the 70s, the 80s-90s incorporate the presence of European institutions in the city as a necessary evil.

Since the beginning of this century, there have been tensions between this very high-income population (which cannot be limited to Eurocrats alone) and other population groups. This situation reinforces injustices and resentment.

This raises the question: Brussels, capital of Europe, but for whom? Who benefits most?

The real estate dynamics induced by the establishment of the European institutions and the influx of new inhabitants from all countries, contribute to extreme tensions whether social, financial or

economic. These tensions have to be taken into account quickly to avoid seeing the situation get worse.

### **To what extent is Brussels an "artistic capital" at the moment?**

Is Brussels an inspiring city for creativity? What does the presence of artists represent in a city? What is an artistic capital? What does this presence of artists represent for the inhabitants? Is there a dialogue between them? This dialogue is one of the fields of action of Wiels.

For Dirk Snauwaert, the notion of "capital" has no place in the cultural and artistic sphere. Some cities have more importance in artistic creation or diffusion but it is not a question of functions related to those of a capital. With regard to the international presence of artists in Brussels, the examples are mainly in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries: Brussels was a host city for writers in exile (Karl Marx, Victor Hugo for example) or for colonies of artists from the Netherlands; the "La Monnaie" opera house is Wagnerian because Wagner's repertoire is banned in France. Brussels also had a period of intense artistic creation in the late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially with the Art Nouveau, which is also called Secessionism internationally.

At present, the peculiarity in the field of creation in Brussels (and this trend is growing) concerns practitioners' (in the sense of those who have an artistic practice, to replace the word artist) inventiveness and the interdisciplinary of which Brussels is incontestably the world centre. This phenomenon started 30 years ago, and thanks to the "Kunstenfestivaldesarts" these inter / transdisciplinary initiatives have been brought together. The Wiels has had a residency programme for a dozen years that not only welcomes European artists in the strict institutional sense but also in a more open and diasporic sense because the artistic practice in itself is European, regardless of the origin of the practitioner. Originally, there was the "Flemish wave" which appeared in the '80s in which artists from the world of dance, new media, music, theatre, literature and film, gathered and established interdisciplinary practices in Brussels (Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker, Wim Vandekeybus, Jan Fabre, Alain Platel...). At the same time, artists attracted by the exploration of new modes and areas of expression came to Brussels and eventually resided there. This was made possible by the relatively low cost of real estate and the availability of space.

Artists no longer able to live in Amsterdam, Paris, London or even Berlin, constitute our artistic bubble. Berlin remains however a major city mainly for Eastern Europe, Vienna speaks more about the "former Yugoslavia"; Brussels does not address anyone in particular but is a melting pot. Brussels should however make more efforts to consolidate this state of affairs.

### **Does the construction of Europe not make it possible to go beyond the notion of "capital"?**

Grażyna Plebanek believes that in this era of globalization, people also need local landmarks and symbols; she does not see another European city which embodies this dimension of a cosy and unpretentious city with an already very international population.

Dirk Snauwaert recalls that Brussels is most often cited as the seat of the European institutions but it is also the seat of NATO.

Chloé Deligne confirms that no official document says that Brussels is the capital of Europe; this term is used in common parlance, in the narrative. A distinction might be made between the notion of "seat" and "capital" to meet this need for symbols without falling into a reproduction of the nation-state.

The Belgian and Brussels identity being "light" identities, perhaps an approach could be that diversity becomes a constitutive element of this identity, proposes Roel Jacobs. This approach is unusual because we are still embroiled in the reflexes developed by the national states.

It would in any case be inappropriate for Europe to act as a new nation state.