Germania, Romanitas and Belgitude

Borders and Border Issues

[JOEP LEERSSEN]

The story's been well-known in Germany since the '50s: when the then Federal Chancellor, Konrad Adenaur, had to go to Berlin he took the train from Cologne – of which he had been mayor until the rise of the Third Reich. Over the Hohenzollern Bridge, with its equestrian statues of the Prussian monarchs, the train crossed the Rhine leaving the silhouette of Cologne Cathedral behind it. Soon afterwards Adenauer pulled the curtains and remarked: 'Hier fängt Asien an' – Asia starts here.

A charged anecdote, but telling. The Catholic Rhinelander, Adenauer, who had never had much use for a Germany dominated by the shadow of Prussia, was well aware that Trier and Cologne had been important Roman cities and that Christianity had taken root there right back in the days of the Roman Empire – not much later than in Lyon or Tarragona. For Adenauer – and for others, like Heinrich Böll, the German Rhineland was part of Romanitas, and lay on the 'good' side of the oldest and most important border in Europe, the Roman *limes*, the dividing line between the *pax augusta* and the barbarians. To a certain extent it was a romantic vision, an idealised self-image. But it also explains Adenauer's powerful rejection of Nazism in the years 1933-45, facilitated his easy relationship with De Gaulle, and was eventually an important motive for embedding the Federal Republic in Western Europe, with its capital not in Frankfurt, Hamburg or Munich but in Bonn.

The anecdote also shows that we construct borders in our minds according to conceptual patterns of identification. *Die wahren Grenzen sind im Kopf.* Adenauer's identification of a Romano-Christian westward-looking Rhineland was counter to the dominant view. That view had the demarcation between Germanic and Romanic Europe run not along cultural historical borders but along linguistic lines – the border between the Romance and Germanic language groups. In that view language was the characteristic that had most influence on the character of a person or people; language was, indeed, the whole people. Whether you speak a Germanic or a Romance language is like whether an engine runs on diesel or petrol, or a computer with Windows or Linux. In the course of the nineteenth century this identification between language and 'the whole people' became so loaded that it turned into a quasi-anthropological dogma. On the Romanic side a language with linear syntax, simple grammar

and a way of thinking that was correspondingly aimed at clarity and lucidity (*ce qui n'est pas clair n'est pas français* – if it's not clear, it's not French); on the Germanic side a language with a complex grammar and syntax (*Schachtelsätze* - sentences structured like matryoshka dolls) and, correspondingly, a way of thinking that was aimed at perspicacity and profundity. On the Romanic side concepts such as esprit and civilisation, and on the Germanic side concepts such as *Geist* and *Kultur*.

A stereotype no less simplistic and silly than that of the frugal Scots, un-fathomable Chinese or dumb blondes, but nonetheless one with a widespread, centuries-long grip on European thought.

Wit and judgement

It is characteristic of stereotypes like this that they are seductive systems in which everything - but everything - can be accommodated and categorised. The magnificence and splendour of Catholicism and the showy protocol of monarchism are referred to as Romanic from that viewpoint, while the sense of political and religious responsibility demonstrated by republicanism and Protestantism are supposedly Germanic – as typified by the Swiss cantons, the Scandinavian countries or the Dutch Republic of William of Orange and Hugo Grotius. They contrast totally with the southern European mentality recognised in the Semana santa of Seville or the veneration of the saints by Neapolitans

Left: Oudenaarde. Bridge over the river Schelde. 'Atten-tion. You are now leaving the French Kingdom'. Installation by Johan Van Geluwe

Right: Oudenaarde. Bridge over the river Schelde. 'Atten-tion. You are now leaving the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation'. Installation by Johan Van Geluwe

or Sicilians. Everyone will feel tempted to nod in acknowledgement: '*tiens*, indeed'. Lucrative 'intercultural management' courses comprise little more than a string of this sort of 'Ah-ha' effect revelation. Because of it we neglect to ask: what about the formal hierarchy of the Prussian, Protestant monarchy, the fervent shock and awe ceremonial of Hitler's Nuremberg party days? Do they speak German in that citadel of the European Reformation, Geneva? Is Europe not bursting with counterexamples?

The putative, imaginary border between Germanic and Romanic Europe is, like any cultural generalisation, a nice *jeu d'esprit*. In the terminology of John Locke's philosophy of learning it belongs to the faculty of 'wit', that lively ingenuity that allows us to see the similarities between things that are diverse; but what is lacking is Locke's complementary concept of 'judgement', the ability to recognise differences and contradictions and form balanced opinions about them. Such stereotypes are successful because of their wit, but are lacking in any real reliability because of their lack of judgement, and those who base their decisions or actions on them build on sand.

However, that is just what a great many people have been doing indefatigably over the last two centuries. Since 1648 the major political conflicts have occurred around the external borders of France and Germany, and where they have clashed with each other the rhetoric raged that the characters of Germanic and Romanic peoples were irreconcilable, indeed that there was even a sort of hereditary enmity between them. It began with Louis XIV's claims to the Duchy of Brabant, Lorraine and the Alsace. Acquiring the Rhine as the eastern border of France originated as one of the megalomaniac Sun King's dynastic delusions that was translated into a pragmatic geopolitical policy by his military right hand, Vauban. Since then it has remained an ideal of French foreign policy despite all the regime changes. In spite of their very diverse political backgrounds and constitutional positions, Danton, Napoleon, Thiers, Clemenceau and de Gaulle all revealed the ambition to obtain a natural border on the north-eastern side of the French hexagon, along the Rhine. That would be an effective solution to the fear of encirclement by the Habsburg realms that had haunted France since the days of Francis I and Charles V.

So it comes down to pragmatic geopolitics, comparable to the Russian drive for ice-free sea ports. Culture had nothing to do with it, and the fact that non-Romance languages were spoken along the Rhine did not worry the French leaders one iota. If Basques and Bretons could share the blessings of French government, why should not Flemings and Alsatians?

After the conquest of Strasbourg by the French, we see that this French expansion was sharply censured on the German side - and with cultural arguments at that, especially as important German intellectuals such as Herder and the young student, Goethe, had lived there for a time on the eve of the Romantic period. Strasbourg Cathedral was seen as a living sign of the genuine German DNA of the city (as if Gothic architecture were not equally at home in Chartres and Rheims!). Against France's geopolitical, pragmatic arguments about power, German romantics brought ideals and cultural and historic arguments into the fray. That happened repeatedly in the course of the nineteenth century: during the Congress of Vienna, during the Rhine crisis in 1840 and with the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine in 1871. Thanks to Talleyrand's subtle diplomacy, France was able to keep its grip on the Alsace and on Strasbourg

Moresnet

in 1813-1815, despite being the loser in the Napoleonic wars, which provoked Ernst Moritz Arndt's resounding pamphlet *Der Rhein, Deutschlands Strom, nicht Deutschlands Grenze*. In exchange for the French grip on Strasbourg the Cologne-Trier area, later Adenauer's *Heimat*, was brought under Prussian rule – much against the will of the population.

'Europe's Grand Canyon'

Germany's Rhineland hackles were raised again in 1830, when Belgium became an independent, Paris-oriented state, and in 1840 battle songs were once more being written, like *Die Wacht am Rhein* ('Lieb' Vaterland, magst ruhig sein, treu steht und fest die Wacht am Rhein') and the *Rheinlied* ('Sie werden ihn nicht haben, den freien deutschen Rhein'). After the Franco-German war in 1870-1871

Borderstone (now between Belgium and France) from 1819 with N(etherlands) on one side and F(rance) on the other
© Michiel Hendryckx

Germany was able to restore honour to the German Empire (under Prussian leadership now) and add Alsace-Lorraine to it, in one go, a so-called final restoration of the 'natural' situation that had been disrupted by Louis XIV. Like the people of the Rhineland, when it was annexed by the Prussians in 1815, the population of Alsace-Lorraine endured this change in 1871 with very mixed feelings.

Why go into all this detail? For two reasons. Firstly the tug-of-war between an expansionist France and a no less expansionist Prussian Germany is the real reason why the Germanic-Romanic antithesis was able to develop from an informal cultural *jeu d'esprit* into such a fierce and dominant ideology about a 'Europe's Grand Canyon'. This Germanic-Romanic split came about somewhere between 1805 and 1815. It pretends, it is true, to refer to a much older pattern, but that is deceptive. Nationalism invokes a long memory but actually has a rather short history.

Secondly the Germanic-Romanic divide creates a life-size problem in the fracture area between the two sides' claims. Alsace and the German Rhineland were not the only objects of the Prussian and French craving for annexation; the Low Countries were also claimed by both parties – by Napoleon as 'deposits left by French rivers' and by Arndt and his followers as part of the Rhine basin, which ought to be German from Basle to Rotterdam. Belgium's East Cantons know all about it; Luxembourg, too, and to a lesser extent even the Dutch province of Limburg (Belgian from 1830 to 1839, Dutch-German from 1839 to 1867).

Throughout the whole of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the history of the Low Countries was a balancing act on the slack wire of the Germanic-Romanic rhetoric. The language struggle in Belgium was seen as a reflection in miniature of the larger confrontation. The Flemish Movement was saddled with the sympathy of its German brethren as an 'outpost' (fateful concept) in the anti-French struggle. The Belgian communal debates followed the

lines of the Germanic-Romanic pattern: Francophones used the smug rhetoric of pragmatic hegemonism, the Flemish on the other hand countered with shrill cultural-historical arguments about descent and tradition. This left the Flemish emancipation movement exposed to the accusation of German-style ethnic essentialism. That accusation was all too often justified (and that should give Flemings pause for thought); but it is also all too often used as a debating trick to obscure real grievances from view caused by overbearing Francophone superciliousness. *Plus ça change...*

Belgitude

Round 1900 Henri Pirenne introduced the notion of *belgitude*, which was characterised by the fact that since time immemorial the Southern Netherlands have formed an interface between *Germania* and the old Roman Empire. In the preface to his *Histoire de la Belgique* Pirenne makes a virtue out of necessity. That Belgium has no natural borders, nor one common language, nor a history of political unity, just happens to be the essence of the country. It is a crossroads, open on all sides, with the old Roman trade route from Cologne to Boulogne as its aorta, later the line along which the language border would crystalize. That way of looking at things is really a matter of convenience and Pirenne's penchant for discerning deep anthropological structures behind the historical events seems outdated nowadays. But it does enable Pirenne to make the present Belgian state the subject of great history, which stretches back well before 1830, and to extract the country from the dilemma of the all-dominant Germanic-Romanic divide. Because that is what Pirenne realized quite clearly: language borders and former Roman borders are not absolute fixities. They crack, overlap, and shift – and they form the areas of cultural exchange and cross-pollination that make Europe worthwhile. In that respect Pirenne is a precursor of Adenauer; both refused to be pinned down to Romanic-Germanic Procrustean beds.

Borderstone (now between Belgium and France) from the 18th century with the French Lilies
© Michiel Hendryckx

The most moving and edifying example of this sort of position can be found on the German border near the outskirts of Aachen. There was a small area there, which, owing to its rich deposits of zinc ore, was kept out of the geopolitical carve-up at the Congress of Vienna. From 1815 to 1914 Moresnet was a neutral condominium, a microcosm of the Low Countries, as the Low Countries are a microcosm of Europe. The residents there decided round 1900 to declare themselves the first Esperanto-speaking community in the world, under the name 'Amikejo', land of friends.

Obviously that was not enough to turn the tide of world history. In August 1914 it was precisely there, near Gemmenich, that the German armies crossed the Belgian border, not far from the Voerstreek, which was to remain an obstacle in Belgian communal politics until well into the twentieth century. But one hundred years later, the touching idealism of the inhabitants of Amikejo, their deconstruction of the Germanic-Romanic dilemma, offers people of the 21st century more inspiration than the muscular language of Jules Destrée or Hugo Verriest.

Those who draw borders create borderline cases. It is characteristic of Europe that, given the multiplicity of languages on this continent, its territory is criss-crossed by a veritable web of linguistic and cultural borders - *un enchevêtrement de frontières*, as Paul Hazard (born in Noordpeene) called it. Most Europeans know what it means to live near a border, and in the proximity of foreigners and/or people who speak a different language. Those who want to tighten up the borders or totalize them (like Louis XIV, or the architects of the Germanic-Romanic divide or their followers, the fantasts who want to split Belgium up between the Netherlands and France) impoverish the seed-bed of Europe's cultural wealth. The best Europeans are those who know how to live with borders and in border areas, and who realise that we should demand intercultural tolerance not only of other people, but especially of ourselves. ■

Translated by Lindsay Edwards