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## The politics of anti-racism in Belgium

*A qualitative analysis of the discourse of the anti-racist movement Hand in Hand in the 1990s*

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**ABSTRACT** In the present environment of advanced industrial society and post-war migration to Europe it is impossible to ignore the role of ideas about immigration, national identity and 'race' in shaping social and political relations. Although there is a public commitment in terms of official policies to the promotion of anti-racism and a multicultural society, racist movements and ideas are increasingly part of the public political debate. The question of what can be done to counter the influence of racist ideologies and extreme right-wing political parties is at the heart of contemporary concerns. Yet, there is considerable confusion of what is meant by anti-racism and the policies and practices associated with it in different national contexts. Moreover, there are a variety of theoretical approaches and political perspectives about what kind of arguments and mobilizations are necessary to curb the growth of racism. In Belgium, the anti-racist movement, Hand in Hand, has developed a diverse range of strategies to answer the issue of everyday racism and intolerance, to counter right-extremist ideas and to limit its political influence. In this article, the focus will be on the political rhetoric developed by the anti-racist movement in the 1990s, at the times of the national demonstrations against racism, triggered by the electoral score of the extreme right-wing party, Vlaams Blok, in 1991. The results of a qualitative analysis of the information campaigns and media coverage of the anti-racist demonstrations of 1992, 1994, 1998 and 2002 when 100,000 people marched in the streets of Brussels claiming equal rights and opposing racism and discrimination, should offer insights into how the racialization of social and political relations is shaped by both discourses on racism and anti-racism.

**KEYWORDS** antiracism ● multiculturalism ● racism ● right-extremism ● social protest

## INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, 'race' and racism have become a key issue in political debates across Europe. New cultural and political spaces have opened up and hegemonic national identities and structures have been unchained. The shift of the terms around which national identities had sedimented, the structural and cultural marginalization of migrant communities, the rise and consolidation of right-extremism in several countries (Belgium, France, Austria, Italy), and the lack of progress in stemming the growth of racism, has set a difficult task to theories and practices of multiculturalism and anti-racism. Existing notions of national identity, diversity, solidarity and social cohesion have been challenged and appear as core elements of contested political discourses and practices. Not only this, there is also much debate within European democratic societies about the way that cultural differences may be negotiated and transcended politically (Werbner, 1997: 261). There are no clear answers available to the question as to what measures are necessary to tackle forms of discrimination and exclusion suffered by racialized minority communities. Additionally, there is an ongoing debate across Europe about the need for common anti-discrimination policies (Solomos and Back, 1996: 77; Anthias and Lloyd, 2002: 19).

As racist movements and new forms of racism and xenophobia have become increasingly part of a globalizing society, it is impossible to ignore the role of ideas about immigration, 'race' and identity in shaping social and political relations. At the same time, official and popular views about immigration, national identity and racism have also been structured by contemporary discourses of anti-racism and multiculturalism (Solomos and Back, 1996: 104). From different ideological perspectives, the immigration issue has become a symbol for basic values to be defended and political options to be taken. The immigrant theme can be considered as a trigger to the broader question of what society should look like. In a time and space haunted by the problems of immigration and integration, insight into the interpretative frames offered by discourses of racism and anti-racism are therefore important (Solomos and Back, 1996: Chapter 5). An adequate analysis of the racist phenomenon by anti-racist movements seems a precondition to develop efficient counter-strategies and propose concrete solutions. In other words, one needs to identify the range of social practices that could be defined as racism, and that have to be tackled accordingly (Anthias and Lloyd, 2002: 8).

The changing morphology of racial ideas and practices in western societies urges for new ways of thinking about anti-racism that can provide more efficient tools for anti-racist political practice.<sup>1</sup> Across Europe we have seen the rise of a diverse body of ideas, social movements and organizations that project themselves as anti-racist (Solomos and Back, 1996; Rea,

1998; Anthias and Lloyd, 2002). It is clear that there is no shared notion of what is meant by anti-racism or by the concepts of equality and multiculturalism, either at the level of ideology or political practice (Solomos and Back, 1996: 104). Anti-racism and multiculturalism are 'contested frames of reference for thinking about the quotidian cohesion of western civil societies uncertain about their national and ethnic features' (Hesse, 2000: 1).

Different forms of anti-racism often operate with different definitions of what racism is (Bonnett, 2000: 4) and reflect the ambivalent field in which anti-racism is situated, caught between universalism and particularism (Wieviorka, 1998; Lloyd, 2002: 69). Clearly, there is much confusion about the objectives of public policy and practices against discrimination at different moments and in different contexts. Often anti-racism is formulated as a negative category, defined in opposition to racism (Bonnett: 2000: 4). Controversy about the valorization of cultural differences and the conceptual status of 'race' and 'ethnicity' is central in debates on anti-racism and multiculturalism. However, anti-racism is more than a response to racism; it is a social force that has a positive dynamic of its own (Lloyd, 1998: 2, 29). Anthias and Lloyd suggest that 'anti-racism constitutes a set of polycentric, overlapping discourses and practices which combine a response to racism(s) with the construction of a positive project about the kind of society in which people can live together in harmony and mutual respect' (2002: 16).

The different approaches to anti-racism in Europe – in terms of the mobilizing potential of ideas and values and the strategic aspects of the political practices linked to it – indicate that anti-racism is a multifaceted and contingent social force (Lloyd, 2002: 76). Discussing models of anti-racism or 'national traditions of anti-racism' is a hazardous undertaking (Bonnett, 2000: 53). Anti-racist movements not only diverge on a rhetorical level – which can in large be linked to a particular political culture and climate in which they develop. They also differ in their degree of organization, their capability to create alliances, the possibilities to provide a coherent and mass basis of political mobilization against racism, their role and effectiveness as a pressure group and their relationship with policy-makers. Moreover, anti-racism operates in a wide arena through public policy and legislation, within institutionalized structures, in civil society and social movements (Lloyd, 2002: 61).

In order to understand what exactly it is one fights for in multicultural and/or anti-racist politics (Cohen, 1992: 62), one needs to situate these projects in their specific historical and political context and link anti-racism to the wider debates about the nature of democracy and society. The following is an attempt to contribute to such an exercise. The article offers a study of some of the core ideas on anti-racism that operated in the political context of Flanders in the 1990s. It investigates the discourses of the alliance between anti-racist associations, trade unions and other social movements within the Hand in Hand (HiH) network and studies how anti-racism was

linked to wider debates on discrimination, equality and social cohesion. The primary focus is the relationship between public discourses on racism and the rhetoric developed by HiH at the times of the mass demonstrations. The analysis should offer insight into the ideological foundations of the anti-racist movement and reveal how notions of racism and multiculturalism are constructed throughout the anti-racist discourse. What is meant by the notion of anti-racism? What kind of discourses does the anti-racist movement employ? What are the political slogans and claims made in the name of the anti-racist movement? Which are the key notions and policy objectives proposed? What is the political agenda articulated around the label of anti-racism? In other words, how has the HiH movement tried to popularize anti-racist ideas to audiences that might in one way or another be attracted to racist ideas and attempted to establish a mass basis of political mobilization against racism?

The article is neither offering explanations for racism, nor solutions to combat the phenomenon. Moreover, other social movements that were/are active on the anti-racist front remain beyond our focus. Neither will we pay attention to the anti-racism developed within the arena of public institutions.<sup>2</sup> Despite these limitations, the article offers a detailed, empirically grounded study of one of the main anti-racist organizations in Flanders and tries to highlight the difficulties of the alliance in formulating a precise, political anti-racist message. As such, the following is an attempt to contribute to a better understanding of the features of anti-racism in a particular place and time.

## **RACISM AND CRISIS: ATTEMPTS TO EXPLAIN THE SUCCESS OF RIGHT-EXTREMISM**

The parliamentary elections on 24 November 1991 caused a political shock in democratic Belgium. With more than 10 percent of the votes, the extreme right-wing party Vlaams Blok proved to be able to gain substantial support among the Flemish electorate for its racist, radically Flemish nationalist and anti-democratic programme. The right-extremist party articulated feelings of insecurity, and exploited the presence of non-European immigrants, to warn against the destabilization of cultural values, and fulminated against the socioeconomic competition between Belgium's 'own' and the foreign population. Vlaams Blok in particular envisaged the presence of Turkish and Moroccan immigrants and their children as a problem. In the social construction of the 'immigrant problem' the issue was reduced to a problem with Muslims. Furthermore, the party set out the mental frame and turned the 'immigrant issue' into a major problem in society (Billiet and De Witte, 1995; Swyngedouw et al., 1998). Vlaams Blok successfully promoted a

programme based on ultra-conservative, authoritarian and antidemocratic principles. It situated Flanders on the map of political racism that appeared in the 1980s and confronted European democracies with their own ambiguities and structural inequalities.

The steady progress of *Vlaams Blok* and important concentrations of votes in certain areas such as the city of Antwerp, highlighted that the everyday racism in society had found a political translation, which would haunt traditional politics in Belgium throughout the 1990s.<sup>3</sup> Subsequent to the success of *Vlaams Blok*, an active debate in politics and public opinion emerged. The causes and consequences of the appeal of right-extremist ideas were the subject of the debate. Equally, the discussion concerned the possible strategies to defy the right-extremist party. In addition, the issue of integration became a key matter on the agenda. The discourse of integration included multiple objectives: to limit the electoral rise of *Vlaams Blok*, to remedy the marginal position of the immigrant population and to resolve the negative feelings that seemed to push parts of the Flemish electorate to vote for the right-extremist party (Deslé, 1997).

Since the electoral success of *Vlaams Blok* went along with a questioning of the legitimacy of traditional politics, insight into the causes for its success appeared to be urgent. A diverse range of explanations has been suggested, pointing to socioeconomic factors, political reasons and sociopsychological motives, for example: the economic recession; the need for flexibility and the restructuring of the job market; the dualization of society and the marginalization of parts of the population; a foreign presence that stimulated feelings of competition for social goods; the inefficiency of the political system and the dysfunctions of democracy; the loss of traditional social and political networks; secularization; the crisis of the national welfare state in a context of European integration and globalization; the search for order and security; the protest of the most vulnerable parts of the population against a system that seemed to abandon them; the sensationalism of the media in their coverage of the immigrant issue (Piryns, 1992).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the extreme-right ideology seemed to flourish in an atmosphere of crisis and political scandals in Belgium that stimulated a climate of anti-political feelings and attitudes.

All these explanations are grounded in the idea that right-extremism and racism are phenomena linked to a society in crisis. However, such accounts have reduced these realities to their most observable aspects and seem to neglect the complexity of it. Racism has been narrowed down to one of its most apparent faces: the (verbal and electoral) expression of negative feelings about 'the other'. What is more, the crisis-racism link is presented as a quasi-automatic one (Doom, 1992).<sup>5</sup> Clearly, such an interpretation allows associating racism and racist feelings with vulnerable individuals who seem to state their frustration and fear in irrational and extreme behaviour. A question that has not been resolved in this analysis is why

feelings of insecurity are expressed in xenophobic attitudes against well-defined 'others' (Deslé, 1992). Moreover, it remains unclear how conventional ideas about citizenship, (national) identity and participation have played a part in xenophobic and racist tendencies.<sup>6</sup>

Also, the racism-crisis link allows one to locate the phenomenon outside 'normal' political business. Consequently, racism seems to have entered the political arena due to a manipulation of xenophobic and ethnocentric feelings of parts of the population by Vlaams Blok. The party is identified as the ultimate and the only responsible party for the political success of racist ideas and propositions (Deslé, 1992). This has never prevented the democratic political parties, however, from turning the presence of immigrants in society into a major problem; allowing them to question their 'ability' to integrate, to deny these populations (up until the 1970s, non-nationals in general, after that, more noticeably, non-Europeans) equal positions in society and equal political rights, and to imply repressive measures in order to address these concerns (Blommaert and Verschueren, 1998; Martens and Caestecker, 2001).

It seems that the (partial) explanations that have been presented have the advantage of offering quite evident solutions to the so-called causes of racism and to remedy its electoral consequences: developing a more efficient policy against socioeconomic dualization, strengthening the link between politics and civil society, reinforcing the role of social and political networks, acquiring more transparency in the decision-making process, investing in security, etc. None of these options is directly linked to the phenomenon of racism and to the particular ways in which a general dissatisfaction, on which it would be grounded, has been expressed (Deslé, 1992). One can doubt the adequacy of the proposed solutions to stop the rise of right-extremism and the popularity of racist ideas. The setting in which extreme right answers develop, the growing legitimacy of certain of its ideas and the difficulty of defining and distinguishing racism in all its forms and expressions, seem to explain the problem of developing efficient democratic remedies. As more electoral successes for Vlaams Blok have followed, the question of what can be done to counter the influence of racist ideologies and extreme right-wing political parties is still at the heart of contemporary concerns (Van Donselaer, 1995).

## **ANTI-RACISM AS A RESPONSE TO THE ELECTORAL SUCCESS OF RIGHT-EXTREMIST IDEAS**

Since 1991, democratic forces and social organizations in Flanders have searched for answers and experimented with different approaches to the message of the extreme right-wing party and have tried to find ways of

countering the motives and xenophobic feelings of its electorate. A multitude of anti-racist initiatives have been undertaken, mostly on a local level, as an answer to the electoral success of right-extremism. On the national level, several new social movements were born out of the first 'Black Sunday' – as the electoral breakthrough of Vlaams Blok was called – Charta 91, Objectief 479.917 and HiH. These have obtained an important place in the public debate.<sup>7</sup> HiH and its francophone counterpart, Avec Vous, were launched as a broad initiative of mass mobilization and of sensitizing actions, and developed out of the collaboration between trade unions, youth associations, migrant associations, the peace and third-world movements. The latter network became the most popular and most mediatized initiative in terms of anti-racism in Flanders.

The HiH network has developed a diverse range of strategies to answer the issue of everyday racism and intolerance, to counter right-extremist ideas and to limit their political influence.<sup>8</sup> First of all, the initiatives of mass mobilization were meant to sensitize and influence public opinion with regard to the immigration issue. They were considered as a means to affirm 'the limits of democratic tolerance'. Second, the HiH coalition aimed to reinforce civil society and develop an anti-racist dynamic on a local level. Third, the anti-racist movement wanted to pressure political actors in order to influence the policy on socioeconomic integration, political participation and international immigration. Finally, the HiH movement engaged in a political struggle against Vlaams Blok, supporting the 'cordon sanitaire' strategy of confrontation and political isolation.<sup>9</sup>

In the sections that follow, the results of a qualitative analysis of the information and mobilization campaigns and media coverage of the HiH demonstrations are presented. The purpose of the analysis is a modest one: to offer a critical reflection on the social construction of racism and cultural diversity in the anti-racist discourse of HiH. I hereby build on the understanding of racism and anti-racism as discourses or *interpretative frames*, which allow us to make sense of and evaluate the social reality and define our position within it (Van Dijk, 1992; Wetherell and Potter, 1992). Interpretative frames are a set of *commonsense* concepts and notions that are used to define reality, which orient our perspective, and trace the limits in which social positions and relationships develop and are judged. In other words, these discourses produce particular representations of reality and generate particular, historically grounded and dynamic constructions of social identities and social relations in society (Fairclough, 1993; Torfing, 1999).

Insight into the ideological message of the anti-racist network is offered, based on an interpretive study of the HiH platform texts and information campaigns at times of the mass mobilizations of March 1992, 1994, 1998 and 2002 – when 100,000 people marched in the streets of Brussels claiming equal rights and opposing racism and discrimination. Before going into this,



I examine the option taken by the HiH coalition in favour of mass demonstrations as a means to provide a mass basis of political support against racism. Then, for each instance, the demands of the network will be described: what are the main points in its analysis, what are the values and the worldview defended by the HiH anti-racist network? How is the anti-racist message translated to public opinion and how can changes in focus points be explained? Finally I comment on the specificity of the case and conclude by evaluating the possibilities and limits of anti-racism as a political ideology and as a set of policy objectives.

## **HAND IN HAND AND THE DISCOURSE OF ANTI-RACISM**

One of the most remarked activities of the HiH anti-racist movement is the mobilization of public opinion in mass demonstrations. The anti-racist mobilizations of the 1990s can be seen as a product of a particular climate. HiH started as an initiative taken up in December 1991 by a broad range of associations that launched the proposition of organizing popular protest within their ranks.<sup>10</sup> By mobilizing public opinion, the HiH network aimed to stimulate a vigilant counter-discourse to racism and right-extremism in Belgian society. The purpose after the 1991 elections was to present a powerful signal of 'concerned citizens' towards the political actors, focused on two axes: democracy and tolerance. As I will show, these axes have determined the actions of HiH throughout the 1990s and have been made concrete in more or (often) less explicitly formulated political demands. One of the main preoccupations was to reinforce democracy by promoting the basic values of solidarity, equality and tolerance among public opinion.

A wide variety of instruments has been used to bring the messages of the movement to the public: advertising in newspapers and magazines, television and radio spots on public and commercial broadcasting channels, information spots in cinemas, the development of flyers and posters, street advertising, press conferences, etc. In every campaign, the anti-racist movement used media personalities to bring its message out into the open. The movement also invested in professional campaigns that played on the emotional register to denounce intolerance and racism. The anti-racist message was thus backed up by an attractive, popular and famous voice, declaring its support and reinforcing the legitimacy of anti-racist actions. Though not much information is available on the impact of the media-campaigns, the use of personalities is an eye catcher and made it easier to pass the HiH message through to these layers of the population that have no particular strong opinion about the whole issue of immigrants, racism and extreme right politics. It is these broad layers of the population that are the target population for the anti-racist movement. Besides those factions

that already support the anti-racist objectives and are engaged in the movement, the group of undecided people might be convinced by the message and should be motivated to sustain the popular front against extremism.

Informing, sensitizing and marching along in big numbers are believed to be effective instruments in the struggle against everyday racism and racist stereotypes. First, the strategy is seen as an expression of the normative choices of society. It is a way to make clear that racist claims and acts are rejected by public opinion. The anti-racist coalition was convinced that the mobilization of important numbers of citizens would prove that the extreme right-wing parties are not the 'spokespersons' for the 'silent majority' in the population, as they often claim to be. On the contrary, mass mobilization would show that large parts of the population refuse extremism and racism. Second, such demonstrations are seen as a confirmation of the basic principles of democracy, solidarity and tolerance. As such, they contribute to an environment where racism and discrimination are rejected. Third, mass demonstrations are considered as a means to put pressure on the political decision makers. The pressure becomes more important as more people are prepared to participate. Also, the political significance amplifies when a diverse range of influential associations and pressure groups are mobilizing support for a clearly defined manifesto of demands and claims.

### ***The 1992 demonstration***

***Massive mobilization*** When HiH came into being in December 1991, it first of all wanted to be an emotional reaction of civil society to the electoral success of Vlaams Blok. As mentioned, a diverse range of social movements agreed to invest in a large-scale demonstration and called their members and supporters to mass mobilization. For HiH, the real strength of the action was to prove that many 'ordinary citizens' were prepared to engage in the struggle for a stronger democracy.

At the first HiH demonstration on 22 March 1992 between 120,000 and 150,000 people were mobilized by the participating organizations of trade unions, youth associations, the peace and third world movement, migrant associations, etc. The demonstration was presented as a celebration of democracy and tolerance, a colourful gathering and a testimony to the diversity in society.<sup>11</sup> Besides the massive presence of ordinary citizens, the plural composition of the anti-racist movement has been put to the fore as an element of strength. The national character of the mobilization was another important factor – especially in the context of the federal state, haunted by 'communitarian frictions' between Flemish and francophones.<sup>12</sup> One believed that the dynamic of an extensive coalition would prove the large support of the anti-racist message within the population. Clearly the

'argumentation of numbers' allowed the anti-racist movement to demonstrate its vigilance and to confirm the legitimacy of its ideology in the confrontation with racist and anti-democratic forces in society.

The climate of anti-politics in which racism and right-extremism seemed to be grounded explains why the anti-racist movement distanced itself from the established political system and its actors. Considerable efforts were made to present the HiH message as a manifesto of the people. HiH insisted on being a social organization, a movement of citizens, a social force that had to be situated outside politics. In its communication strategy, the HiH network promoted the profile of being a popular, pluralist and broad movement of ordinary citizens. As such, it wanted to take up the tasks of launching political signals, confirming basic values in society, acting as a voice of many citizens and presenting a counter-discourse to right-extremist tendencies. In the next section I will explore the basic elements of the anti-racist discourse, as this developed subsequent to the 1991 political shock.

***In favour of a new political culture*** The platform text of March 1992 was more a statement of principles than a bundle of concrete political demands. The official message of the demonstration can be classified as a triple one: a statement in favour of democracy, a plea for tolerance, and a reaffirmation of the principle of solidarity. The basic values of a democratic society were confirmed without, however, offering a precise answer as to what these really mean in a changing and multicultural society, where some people are categorized as non-citizens and legally treated as different. Instead, the anti-racist network concentrated on formulating answers to a particular climate in society that seems to push parts of the population to racist attitudes and that makes people vulnerable to a manipulation by right-extremist groups. It offered an analysis of the causes and problems that had (not so suddenly) come to the fore. The anti-racist movement hereby mainly reproduced a dominant and one-dimensional approach to racism and its causes.

The problem of everyday racism was not explicitly mentioned. The concept of racism even seemed a taboo word. The term was barred in order not to disturb public opinion. Instead, 'intolerance' and 'insecurity', the terms used to highlight the problem, were defined as core matters. These were considered as the consequences of a failing policy and a weakened democratic system. Next, the 'immigrant issue' and the problem of international immigration were explained as part of a much broader problem of inequality. Consequently, the analyses of the anti-racist movement focused on the need for another way of governing. The coalition demanded a different policy on social issues, welfare, immigration and international cooperation.

As an answer to extremism, the anti-racist network claimed a radical new

way of 'doing politics'. Both the style and the content of Belgian politics needed revision. A new political culture had to be characterized by efficiency and transparency. It implied new structures, new priorities, a more democratic functioning of society on all levels and in all aspects of life. The political system had to become one in which everyone would be involved and feel responsible. Therefore, politics needed to be less bureaucratic and complex, less abstract and more concerned with the 'real needs' and the everyday problems of the people.

The debate about what kind of alternative policy one wanted to fight for resulted in a platform text that gave expression to the main sensibilities of the anti-racist partners. The HiH message was first of all an attempt to formulate an answer to the endeavours of the multicultural society – though the concept was not explicitly used. In order to be able to deal with the permanent presence of a migrant population, the anti-racist network demanded a more human policy that would establish a more egalitarian, more democratic and more tolerant society, both on a national and international level. Equal rights and equal chances, an equal access to major domains in society, and mutual respect and openness towards differences were identified as necessary requirements. The platform did not offer any answers to the question of how to realize these objectives and made no clear distinction between the political, structural expressions of racism and individual attitudes. Vaguely formulated solutions on a political and individual level were advanced.<sup>13</sup> The platform text demanded a more balanced distribution of welfare and equal access to education, jobs, housing and social security. These were deemed necessary to resolve the many problems of marginalization and deprivation that were indicated as a cause of intolerance.

In other words, the anti-racist movement identified racism as the problem of a deficient political system and a weak political culture. The coalition thus accepted the dominant explanation: that of the existence of an anti-political climate in which right-extremism could flourish. It recognized the crisis–racism link as the dominant frame to understand the negative and racist feelings for which right-extremist populists had found a political translation. As a consequence, solutions were presented mainly in terms of reinforcing social-economic policy and political efficiency. The message implied the need for a 'new political culture' in which the citizen would feel respected and engaged and where the gap between the political elite and civil society would be resolved. From a more international perspective, a different policy in matters of immigration was put on the agenda and more investment was demanded in development policy and in international welfare and peace. The general claim was thus one in favour of a global politics against a dual society.

The continuous fight for more democracy and tolerance was expressed as a concern of all citizens. Here, the main argument was the dependency

and mutual interest of all in a solidarist and tolerant society. The population was solicited to change its attitude and to be more tolerant. At the same time, the anti-racist movement linked its call for tolerance to a message of 'understanding'. The anti-racist movement argued the need to 'comprehend' that a general feeling of dissatisfaction made people more sensitive to the populist discourse and the demagoguery of the extreme right.<sup>14</sup> However, the message affirmed that an attitude of egoism ('Me first') was morally unacceptable and dangerous for society.

Furthermore, the HiH manifesto agreed that the tolerance that was demanded of Belgium's 'own' population needed to go together with 'integration efforts' by the migrant population. Integration is a typical political concept in migration policy – which has been thoroughly questioned in academic circles and which was fiercely rejected by members of the concerned migrant communities.<sup>15</sup> The concept of integration has a problematic nature and one should definitely question its relevance as an instrument in the struggle against racism (Talhouai, 1997). However, the anti-racist network advanced integration as a two-way track, a continuous process of mutual understanding.

The anti-racist movement thus refrained from a critical approach to the dominant frame of reference that constructs nationals and non-nationals as oppositional categories. It is a discourse that produces 'citizens' and 'foreigners' and makes it difficult to counter the differential legal status, rights and treatment that follow from this distinction. The anti-racist network did not offer an alternative framework to deal with the changing dynamics in society and to break out of the dominant, national and by consequence homogeneous interpretation of society (Blommaert, 1996). Far from offering precise remedies and policy answers, the anti-racist network identified major domains of action, listed under the key term of a 'new political culture'. Hereby the network linked its struggle to the deficiencies of modern democratic institutions. Obviously, it acted upon the political sensitivity of the moment. In the 1990s, the idea of creating a new political culture would be a true baseline in the discourse of the political parties. These all tried to reform and reposition themselves in order to 'reconnect' to the civil society.

***Anti-racism: Consensus and confusion*** The 1991 elections had a remarkable effect on politics. The breakthrough of Vlaams Blok has led to an explicit condemnation of racism by all traditional political parties. Many politicians and all the democratic parties promoted anti-racism as a cause for support. Yet the content and implications of an adherence to anti-racism varied widely.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the government proclaimed anti-racism as one of their objectives in order to solve the 'migrant problem'. When HiH was launched, the government explicitly declared its support for the anti-racist network in its actions. At the same time, the government pointed to the

responsibility of all 'positive' actors in society – employers, trade unions, sociocultural associations and the whole of the population – to collaborate and work together in a sphere of openness and tolerance. To succeed in creating a more open and tolerant society, responsibility and burden sharing thus seemed a prerequisite. The government declaration also included a quite ambivalent message. The need to respect the law and to accept that rights and duties are two sides of the same coin sounded as a warning to the immigrant population, who claimed equal rights. No doubt, the message was a way of comforting critical voices in regard to the equal rights issue. Although 1991 stimulated a public commitment in terms of official policies for the promotion of anti-racism and a multicultural society, the political will to reduce structural inequalities and tackle racist practices would in the following years prove to be quite limited (Martens and Caestecker, 2001). This is not the only ambiguity that can be found in anti-racist declarations.

One of the main ambivalences of political and social actors in developing an efficient strategy against racism in Belgium is due to the difficulty of making a strong principled statement against it. The confusion about what is exactly understood as racism, on which level the phenomenon is situated and the discussion on what society can tolerate and accept, explains part of this problem. In general, the issue is reduced to clear-cut forms and blatant expressions of racism. It is interpreted as an exceptional thing, as a deviation by extremist groups and powerless, frustrated individuals. How then to reject racism and extremism without rejecting the feelings and opinions of, or accusing, the people who feel attracted by (parts of) the anti-immigrant message of the extreme right parties?

At the same time, there is no shared notion of what is meant by the concept of a multicultural society. Not only is there no clear vision on how to develop a political practice that articulates new ways of recognizing cultural differences, neither is there a clear view on the consequences of developing new conceptions of democracy, tolerance and solidarity. Consequently, in order to attract as many people as possible for its actions, the anti-racist network consciously opted for a general declaration of principles instead of a more polarizing bundle of political demands. That the official pamphlet of the HiH network remained rather general was without any doubt also a necessary requirement to be able to quickly mobilize the support of a diversity of associations and pressure groups in both sides of the country (Flemish and francophone). The broad coalition explains the need for compromise and for a discourse aiming at the largest common denominator in the anti-racist struggle.

This contrasted with the statements made by the main participating organizations in their own publications and in press articles produced concerning the initiative. Obviously, the message towards their own specific public was more concrete and contained a stronger political profile. The

trade unions, for example, offered a more political analysis to explain the climate of insecurity and intolerance. The unions referred to the historical struggle of the labour class against the conservative world in order to obtain democratic rights and social and economic security. They underlined the importance of the continuous struggle of the workers in favour of a democratic system based on the principles of equality, solidarity, tolerance and participation. Democracy was presented as a direct result of the workers' struggle and the solidarity of the workers' movement was identified as a condition for social progress. In pointing to the causes for the actual crisis and offering solutions, the ideological divergences between the unions become more obvious.

The socialist trade union focused in particular on a critique of neo-liberalism. The pressure on the democratic system and the problems of the 1990s were explained as a consequence of the neoliberal policy of the 1980s that had encouraged a climate of egoism. This policy option had led to an erosion of the role of the state, a shrinking investment in social welfare and a climate in which economic benefit became an end in itself. The socialist union claimed a radically new – and more socially inspired – policy, a reinforcement of the role of the state and of the democratic principles to counter the neoliberal climate in which extreme right tendencies could flourish.

The Christian labour movement remained more vague and concentrated on the analyses of a growing distance between the political world and the wider population. The union insisted on its role as part of civil society. The importance of social networks in creating and sustaining a sense of community and participation has played a big part in the Christian union's discourse. It underlined its tradition to act against all forms of exclusion, referred to its historical role in the social struggle and reinterpreted its basic values (peace, tolerance, democracy, solidarity) in favour of a multicultural society where 'races do not divide us'. The Christian union, traditionally strongly rooted in the catholic Flanders, even referred to openness as a typical feature of the Flemish character that had to be defended. Contrary to the analyses of its socialist counterpart, the Christian movement thus saw a solution more in terms of strengthening the position of civil society and stimulating the role of social movements.

Though all along the trade unions have been important actors in the anti-racist coalition, they have in particular been confronted with the difficulty of conveying principled statements of equal rights and solidarity with immigrants without upsetting their affiliates. Though on an ideological level the trade unions clearly reject every form of racism, intolerance and xenophobia definitely reign in its ranks and seem to limit the possibilities of concrete action (De Witte, 1994; Caer, 1994).

### **The 1994 demonstration**

**Equal rights for all** The 1991 HiH demonstration was first and foremost a reaction to a political event – the electoral breakthrough of the extreme right party. The mobilization of 1994 had a clearly different character from the first demonstration. The mass demonstration aimed to reinforce the democratic climate in preparation for the forthcoming elections. Also, the action was more intended to be an instrument for lobbying and for trying to influence the political decisions that were to be taken. HiH chose to defend a more engaged platform text that included the demands for political rights for foreigners, for concrete measures in terms of employment and a reinforcement of democracy.

The 1994 platform invited people to ‘choose for democracy and tolerance in their commune and in the whole of Europe’.<sup>17</sup> This message insisted on making a democratic choice in view of the upcoming local and European elections. Moreover, it is interesting to see how the general motto of the demonstration was adapted to the political sensitivities in the northern and southern parts of the country. The francophone partners in the HiH network made the strategic choice to march ‘In favour of a democracy without exclusion’. The absence of a strong extreme-right actor in Wallonia, the more republican/universal rhetoric towards foreigners and the poor socioeconomic condition in the southern part of the country seemed to influence this choice.

The slogans used reveal not only the political opportunities and concerns of the moment, but also the preoccupation of the most influential actors in the network. Though the principles stated during the first demonstration were confirmed, a more concrete platform of demands was launched. To start with, the issue of political rights for foreigners became a priority and the platform text suggested some key measures to put into practice its basic values. More democracy was first and foremost translated as equal rights for everyone. In its analysis of what democracy signified, the anti-racist movement linked poverty and economic and social marginalization to political powerlessness. Claims for equal opportunities and equal chances consequently referred to equal rights for everyone, including political rights for foreigners. One believed that granting voting rights to foreigners would confirm their presence as an equal part of the population. It would articulate their acceptance as citizens. The anti-racist movement inserted the demand of political rights in a universalistic human rights approach, and committed itself to a general rejection of any form of discrimination. Not only the objective was framed in explicit terms; the anti-racist coalition also agreed on the modalities to realize the claim: a residence of five years in the country was proposed as a criterion to obtain political rights, including the right to vote.<sup>18</sup>

The claim ‘Same duties, same rights’ positioned the anti-racist action in



the middle of the ongoing political debate. The anti-racist movement made its option clear: political rights needed to be based on citizenship instead of nationality. The political actuality of the time served as an extra argument in the debate. The Maastricht Treaty of 1992 had already installed the notion of European citizenship. As a consequence, all European residents staying in one of the member states of the European Union would be attributed voting rights in the European and local elections. Since political rights were granted exclusively to people with a Belgian nationality, the Belgian constitution needed to be changed in order to be able to apply this rule. In view of the constitutional reform, the conditions that would be attached to obtaining political rights were fiercely debated. On the one hand, one could decide to grant voting rights to European citizens only. On the other hand, one could open it up to all citizens (including non-Europeans) on the basis of their residence period.

HiH used the network to set the issue of an 'open constitutional reform' on the political agenda. It was hoped that the popular mobilization would be a means of pressurizing the political decision makers. Because the demand for full equality between all inhabitants regardless of their nationality was formulated in such precise terms, the anti-racist network received considerable criticism. It lost the official support of most political formations, except for the ecology parties, who were in favour of the citizenship option. The political establishment insisted on the nationality rule for non-Europeans to obtain political rights. However, within the parties, voices were diverse and individual politicians did express their opinion in favour of voting rights.

Also, the demand for 'more democracy' was made concrete in the claim of 'Jobs for everyone'. With this demand the trade unions put their mark on the anti-racist message. The anti-racist discourse referred to the negative tendencies of the 1980s: a dualization of society characterized by a growing underclass of unemployed and excluded people. The structural unemployment and the liberal attacks on the system of social security and solidarity were highlighted as causes of egoism, growing nationalism and racism. Instead, the right to work and to have a secure income needed to be guaranteed. Democracy, equality and tolerance thus required more state regulation. State intervention was deemed necessary to counter the consequences of industrial decline and of technological advancement. Moreover, as an answer to the negative impact of a globalizing economy, a stronger social policy was demanded, both on a national and on a European level.

From a broader perspective, the issue of tolerance also concerned the rights of asylum seekers. Since other possibilities for legal immigration to Belgium have been closed down since 1974, the asylum procedure had become a prominent channel for immigration. A rise in the numbers of asylum seekers made the issue visible on the political agenda of the 1990s as a prominent political problem. Moreover, Vlaams Blok did not hesitate

to profile itself on the asylum question. The concept of ‘asylum seeker’ acquired a mainly negative, fraudulent connotation in the public discourse. The anti-racist movement hoped to correct the corrupted interpretation by Vlaams Blok by framing the issue as a problem of unequal relations with third-world countries, demanding respect for human rights and pointing to the need to invest in development. The real problems, it was said, were a failing policy and a climate of collective egoism that characterized the western countries.

Lastly, the anti-racist network demanded more efficient legal means in the struggle against racism and right-extremism. A strict application of the legal instruments against racism was on the anti-racist agenda, as well as the development of a code against discrimination in all sectors of society.

The platform text of 1994 clearly is much more political. The demands put to the fore express a broader, structural view of the problems of a society in which racism and right-extremism could grow and flourish. Moreover, the problems of racism and political extremism were denounced in a more explicit way than was the case in HiH’s first demonstration. However, the association between socioeconomic insecurity, intolerance and racism remained the core of the anti-racist analysis. The focus hereby was mainly on clear-cut expressions of racism. The target of the anti-racist struggle was thus the racism of Vlaams Blok. Anti-racism thereby focused on those expressions of the phenomenon that clearly disturb commonsense views of ‘our democratic society’. It is these extreme racisms that can be labelled in terms of a disease, ‘a cancer that we must combat’. The mass mobilization was thereby presented as just one stage on a long road of struggle. This demonstration resembled the first one: a massive presence, important delegations of youngsters and immigrants, a strong input by the trade unions, the support of many and diverse pressure groups and a positive response in the media.

***Anti-racism: A long-term battle*** For the anti-racist network, the policy question remained: how to go beyond defensive reactions and instant messages of tolerance and solidarity? Did the country need a permanent and pluralistic anti-racist movement? How could such a movement go beyond symbolism and translate its demands into concrete political engagement? Would it be more effective to insert anti-racist action as a core business within the action-radius of existing social organizations and pressure groups with a more militant and concrete political profile? The choice to be made seemed, in other words, to be the following: continuing a broad anti-racist coalition directed towards public opinion and focused on strong symbolic actions or, developing a genuine anti-racist lobby that could function as a political watchdog and effectively pressure the political decision-making process.<sup>19</sup>

In the following years, the partners of the anti-racist coalition would act

in a more dispersed way: local and smaller-scale demonstrations, petitions and multicultural happenings, debates and concerts, media campaigns, actions concerning the cordon sanitaire. The dynamism and coherence of the movement seemed to be lost and the main partner associations became sceptical towards the idea of mass mobilization. The risk of failure – in terms of convincing important numbers of people or mobilizing only very specific segments within the population – was not unthinkable. Failure would signify the defeat of the progressive movements and prove the weakness of the anti-racist coalition. Moreover, the demands of 1994 had not found a translation into adequate political measures and the general climate was one in favour of more conservative, right-wing ideas and policy options. The efficiency of mass demonstrations was put into question and it seemed that such actions were mainly ‘preaching to those already convinced’.

### ***1998: Dealing with a multicultural society***

Following the above-mentioned hesitation and a period of immobility, the youth movements and the Brussels’ anti-racist network, Brussels Gekleurd, insisted on reactivating the anti-racist coalition. VAKA-Hand in Hand, the trade unions, youth associations, Objectief, Charta and Brussels Gekleurd agreed to organize a new national demonstration in March 1998. This time, the anti-racist coalition would march under the umbrella of a new temporary network called Initiatief. More than 100 organizations and pressure groups finally subscribed to the platform in order to try once more to influence the political agenda concerning voting rights for foreigners. The problem of political rights had not been resolved. In order to settle the issue for European citizens in relation to the Maastricht Treaty, it would be forced onto the agenda of the government. ‘The right to vote’ was repeated as the main demand of the platform. However, compared to the former demonstration, the anti-racist coalition seemed unable to agree on concrete strategies to obtain political participation and equality. The political climate with regard to the immigrant issue was rather negative: anti-immigrant feelings appeared to be strong, the Vlaams Blok had managed to determine the political agenda on this issue, the government had been confronted with the problem of rising numbers of asylum seekers and people without legal papers staying in the country and most political formations opted for more or less repressive options concerning the immigration issue.

In such a negative, xenophobic climate, it was a preoccupation of the anti-racist coalition to make sure that the mass demonstration would be a success in terms of numbers. The amount of public support that could be mobilized would be used to measure the credibility of the anti-racist movement. Obviously, the success of the demonstration depended on the political significance of the organizations and pressure groups that adhered

to it and on the number of citizens that would prove their loyalty to the anti-racist message. A reasonable impact on the political decision-making process could be expected if important numbers could be mobilized. Yet, a more concrete bundle of demands would polarize public opinion. Furthermore, the network of social movements could not agree on minimal or maximal positions concerning voting rights and disagreement also related to the terms used to state certain issues. The option was thus one in favour of pragmatism. As a consequence, the anti-racist movement deployed an extremely vague argumentation and the manifesto of 1998 was little more than a bundle of principal objectives over which there was a broad consensus. The national demonstration against racism and discrimination of 1998 wanted 'A voice, the right to vote' (*Une Voix, des Droits* in the francophone version). The slogans on the Flemish side demanded 'Equal rights, democracy and solidarity, no racism or discrimination'.

The anti-racist network reformulated the demands of 1994 to combat racism and discrimination and to stimulate solidarity. Equality, fairness and solidarity formed the core concepts in the demand for a better democracy. The message included a plea to accept people as full citizens and to opt for a politics of equal rights. How the concept of citizenship could be defined and through which concrete political actions full citizenship would become a reality remained open to interpretation.

Basically, the platform insisted on equal rights in terms of political participation. The argumentation drew attention to the rights of all workers in Belgium in the social elections.<sup>20</sup> The anti-racist movement referred to equality in the social elections as an example in the struggle in favour of equal rights in the social, economic and political sphere. The impact of the trade unions in reformulating this demand is without question. The trade unions are among the more influential actors in the anti-racist coalition. They have played an important role in the historical struggle for social rights and have been defending political participation since the 1970s. It was obvious that a non-attribution of voting rights to the many non-European immigrants that had been living in the country for many years would – once more – be a defeat of the principles of true democracy. Moreover, a negative decision would install a hierarchy within the immigrant population. One would distinguish European immigrants with political rights from non-European immigrants without political rights.

The principle of equality in political matters was launched as an objective. Yet, in terms of strategy the platform text remained silent. This time, the anti-racist network did not pronounce itself in favour of the residence rule, or of the citizenship option. The network also remained silent on other possibilities: a more easy attribution of the Belgian nationality as a precondition for political rights and equal chances. The partner associations were more precise in their demands, but the broad coalition left the question 'how to get there' unspoken. This was a step backwards compared

to the 1994 platform. Apparently the affiliating associations were hesitant about the support of their members for a more pronounced objective. It is not very clear in what way the rise of xenophobic tendencies – as expressed in the electoral success of Vlaams Blok – had influenced the anti-racist actors in this matter.

The lack of popular support is one of those tricky arguments, often advanced by the political establishment in order to explain its reluctance to open up the political field to non-nationals. The negative feelings of a part of the population towards immigrants and the pressure of the political extreme right seem to paralyse the established parties to push democratic participation beyond the limits of the national framework. Even the political participation of European citizens appeared to be problematic, mainly because of communitarian arguments between Flemish and francophones.<sup>21</sup> The whole question had been delayed several times and both voices in favour of and against opening up political rights – with or without new limitations in terms of nationality – were formulated in the ranks of the political establishment. In February 1998, the government finally took the decision to change the constitution in order to allow European citizens to participate in the communal elections in Belgium in 2000. This change was obligatory in order to comply with the Maastricht Treaty, where the principle in favour of political rights for citizens of the European member states had been accepted (Foubert, 1998). Political rights for non-European foreigners were postponed once again and a possible solution would not be on the agenda before 2001. This would not allow political participation before the local elections of 2006.

The political resistance to changing the conditions for obtaining political rights has thus been a major one and the Belgian decision was a late one, creating a duality between European and non-European citizens residing in the country. An important opportunity was thus missed to make clear that the members of the non-European immigrant population were accepted as full citizens. Instead, the government had chosen to confirm the legal division between locals and foreigners; the former including Europeans, the latter referring to non-Europeans.

### ***2002: Anti-racism from an international perspective***

The core issues of democracy and equality have been on the agenda of the anti-racist mobilization of March 2002. But the latest demonstration had its own accents in response to actual developments. Behind the general slogan of 'equal chances to everyone' one could read a clear message in favour of a multicultural society. Never before has the anti-racist movement so explicitly defended 'multiculturalism' as a reality which society simply has to deal with. The changing character of society was defined as a challenge. Not the issue of diversity, but discrimination and racism were identified as

the real problems of democracy. It is these enemies of the democratic system that needed to be fought by a politics of equal chances. The message of equality indicated the main domains of action: equal rights and equal chances were demanded in education, employment, and with regard to political participation.

Except for the classical anti-racist demands, the platform stressed the broader international context in which anti-racism needed to develop further. A global perspective on the problem of immigration was used to denounce the evolution towards a dual society, to talk of the problem of international solidarity and to put the issue of unequal chances between north and south on the agenda. Clearly, the European debate on asylum policy and the option in favour of a more repressive politics in immigration matters pushed the anti-racist movement to highlight the structural causes for international migration. An answer to worldwide poverty, war, the violation of human rights and other push factors to migration would include measures such as fair trade, international cooperation, more investment in development projects, an embargo on the trade of arms, a Tobin-tax, etc. The anti-racist coalition hereby stressed the international roots of the whole migration and asylum issue. Clearly, its analysis was strongly influenced by the NGO-sector and the anti-globalist movement that had come to the fore. At the same time, as an answer to racism and xenophobia, the coalition launched a plea for a more humane approach towards asylum seekers and immigrants on a national and European level.

In sum, the movement confirmed its core values but positioned itself less fiercely in the struggle against racism, discrimination and right-extremism. The core of the 2002 platform was the concept of equal chances and respect for human rights, both on a national and an international level. However, in respect of multiculturalism and equal chances in the country, the accents on the Flemish and francophone sides differed thoroughly (Rea, 2000). On the francophone side, the asylum issue got particular attention. Granting a residence permit to people without legal papers was a principal demand, as well as putting a stop to a politics of *refoulement*, that sent 'illegals' back home. On the Flemish side, the main point of action concerned – once again – the attribution of political rights for non-European foreigners. The anti-racist coalition wanted to put pressure on the decision that would be taken by Parliament on this account some days after the planned demonstration. Though the issue had not been included in the government declaration, all parties on the francophone side were in principle in favour of political rights for non-European citizens, except the extreme right. The political resistance to voting rights has been particularly strong in Flanders and the propositions of law on this account could not find a majority in the Parliament because of the negative votes on the Flemish side.

The anti-racist network hoped nevertheless to influence the outcome of the vote in the senate. The movement managed to get the support of some

famous personalities for the action and succeeded in attracting a positive response from several political parties (ecologists, socialists, francophone Christian democrats and extreme left) towards its demands. In this crucial political moment, the anti-racist network had well timed its action and once more applied the strategy of being present in the media. Its message was presented as one backed up by many ordinary citizens who believed in a multicultural society. Though expectations were more limited, the demonstration brought 10,000 to 15,000 people to Brussels. In a difficult context of conservatism and repressive ideas, this was considered a major success and a strong signal towards the political establishment.

Nevertheless, the main demand of political participation was – once more – not realized. Together with Vlaams Blok, the Flemish right-wing liberal party – eventually supported by its French counterpart MR, who agreed to vote against the bill – and the Flemish Christian democrats put a veto on political participation on the basis of residence. The Flemish opposition parties thereby used the argument that public opinion in Flanders was not in favour of political rights for non-European foreigners. Also, it was said that such a decision would reinforce the right-extremist party. True, the electoral strength of Vlaams Blok has grown steadily and the reservoir of racism and xenophobia seems stronger than one had imagined. A negative attitude towards foreigners has appeared to be the strongest motivation to vote for Vlaams Blok. Its political programme has focused on anti-immigrant options and combined racism, nationalism, and authoritarian points of view with a strong apolitical attitude. The aversion to the political establishment and its identification as ‘the party of the people’ seemed to make its success even stronger. It is, however, very unlikely that giving in to this is a good option for fight racism and right-extremism in Belgian society. One thing is sure, that it kept the foreign population voiceless.<sup>22</sup>

## **A FUTURE FOR THE ANTI-RACIST MOVEMENT?**

In the anti-political climate of the 1990s the anti-racist network has presented itself as a broad, plural movement of concerned citizens. The objective of the mass demonstrations was to inform, sensitize and mobilize public opinion in the struggle against everyday racism; to create a counter-movement and to offer an alternative discourse to the right-extremist ideology. As I have shown, the question that constituted the core business of anti-racist rhetoric was how to change a climate in society that would push parts of the population to racist attitudes and make them vulnerable to a manipulation by right-extremist groups. The anti-racist demands that were communicated at the mass demonstrations of 1992, 1994, 1998 and

2002 have shown a continuous preoccupation of the anti-racist network with democracy and equality. Everyday racism and political extremism have been presented as excesses of a system that needs to be defended. As a consequence, the anti-racist struggle appeared in its essence to be a struggle for the promotion of basic democratic values in society: solidarity, equality and tolerance. However, how these principles can be put into practice in the changed reality of a multicultural society that excludes part of the population was not on the agenda of anti-racism. The anti-racist message revealed itself to be a rather vague declaration of principles, sometimes backed up by more concrete political demands.

Nevertheless, all through its actions the anti-racist network has concentrated on formulating possible solutions to the causes of racism and right-extremist electoral successes. In the aftermath of the 1991 elections, the anti-racist demand was mainly one in favour of another way of doing politics. A new political culture was proposed as a remedy to the growing cleavage between politics and public opinion. Politics needed to be more transparent and efficient, more human and more social. The anti-racist coalition thus focused on a revision of both the structures of the political system and the content of politics. Later on, the dominating paradigm was one in which anti-racist action was linked to the need for a stronger social policy in order to equilibrate socioeconomic imbalances in society.

This article has distinguished a major focus in the anti-racist discourse on socioeconomic causes and individual expressions of racism. Equal rights and equal chances, tolerance and solidarity became key notions in its message. On the one hand, anti-racism was defined as the need for a changing attitude and mentality. The population had to learn to 'accept' the cultural others and these latter had to 'integrate'. In this sense, the anti-racist movement reproduced the dominant view that the challenge of a multicultural society is a problem of culturally different groups that have to learn and live together. On the other hand, the solution to racism was seen in a policy in favour of equal rights and equal chances for all citizens on the social, economic and political level. This supposed a redistribution of economic welfare, a more balanced distribution of social goods and equal access to education, jobs, housing and social security.

The claim for a more equal politics was formulated as a remedy to the problems of exclusion. On the one hand, equal access to housing, education, social security and politics were advanced as a main instrument to include immigrants in society and remedy their marginal position. On the other hand, a politics of equality was considered as a main instrument in the struggle against racist feelings and attitudes in public opinion. In a vision whereby poverty and racism seem to go together, fighting racism implies developing measures to improve socioeconomic positions and to ensure equality. Such explanations are quite comforting, as they allow for 'understanding' racist attitudes caused by 'frustration' and 'manipulation' and to



offer some solutions to cure society from racism. The anti-racist movement thus seemed to expect that a policy against poverty would remove the basis on which racism grows. The discourse suggests that changing peoples' concrete conditions would in the long run change their opinions and attitudes and remove the grounds that lead to a right-extremist vote. As such, the anti-racist movement has adopted the dominant definition of racism and its causes. However, the correlation between poverty, intolerance and racism seems all too simple. The dominant frame that stresses the 'crisis-racism' link is not answering the question as to why certain parts of the population express their frustration by a right-extremist vote and why they apparently see no other options to their feelings of insecurity and powerlessness (Deslé, 1992). Moreover, there is no reason to believe that racist ideas and opinions will really disappear, that people will no longer vote for extremist parties or that diversity in society will suddenly become unproblematic.

While anti-racist demands have remained fairly stable in terms of the values and principles to be defended, the main issues formulated and the rhetoric used in the platform texts has proved to be variable. A 'new political culture' was the key term in the 1992 mobilization but disappeared from the platform text two years later. In the run up to the 1994 elections, 'equal rights' dominated the discourse, as well as the concept of 'solidarity' and the objective to fight against all forms of racism and right-extremism. In the third HiH demonstration, the demands were limited to a reaffirmation of traditional anti-racist principles but affirmed that the 'multicultural society' was a positive thing to deal with. Equal rights, democracy, and solidarity were joined by a strong appeal for unity in society. Clearly, the anti-racist discourses wanted to oppose the politics of division proposed by right-extremist ideology. The anti-racist movement accepted multiculturalism as a fact and insisted that diversity in itself was not a problem. The real challenge for society was framed as the quest to eliminate all forms of inequality, intolerance and racism. During the last demonstration in 2002, the dominant claims were phrased in terms of 'equal chances' in a multicultural society and the anti-racist movement adopted a clear international perspective to approach international immigration. In other words, the anti-racist messages have shown themselves to be products of the actuality of the time and of a dominant frame of thinking. Multiculturalism has been affirmed with more conviction all through the 1990s, parallel to an official political choice in favour of a multicultural society, and racism has been named more explicitly as a danger to democracy than it was the case at the start of HiH. The HiH movement also gradually adapted a more international perspective in order to talk about equality and solidarity. In the most recent actions, classical anti-racist claims have been placed in a more global perspective and solidarity now also refers to solidarity with the poor in third-world countries.

The policy objectives proposed and the political strategies to be deployed have in general not been very detailed in the anti-racist platforms. HiH only referred to major domains of action. The movement primarily wanted to contribute to a climate in which anti-racism and anti-extremism are part of the public consensus. The official manifests of the HiH network thus remained rather general. This was without any doubt also a necessary requirement to be able to quickly mobilize the support of a diversity of associations and pressure groups on both sides of the country (Flemish and francophone). The broad coalition explains the need for compromise and for a discourse aimed at the largest common denominator in the anti-racist struggle.

At the same time, there seems to be considerable confusion about what should be understood as the ideology and politics of anti-racism. There is no shared notion of what is meant by the concept of a multicultural society, no clear vision on how to develop a political practice that articulates new ways of recognizing cultural differences, or on the consequences of developing new conceptions of democracy, tolerance and solidarity in a globalizing world. Contrary to the ideology of right-extremism, which offers precise answers to the question of how society should look and which values need to be defended, the anti-racist message has remained vague and fragmented. Anti-racism comprises no concrete and coherent worldview, and offers no clear-cut vision of how to deal with inequality and diversity in society.

This is in no way unique to the HiH coalition. Evidence shows that most anti-racist movements operate in an ambivalent field: at one level they appeal to universal values and defend anti-racism as the struggle for human equality and social justice; at the other level, where they oppose discrimination and call for tolerance and solidarity in the multicultural society, they are dealing with notions of difference and working within a particularistic agenda (Lloyd, 2002: 69). Although the ideology of anti-racism is complex and multifaceted, the HiH case seems to share some features with anti-racist movements across Europe: anti-racists work with changing conceptions of discrimination and exclusion, attempt to represent racialized minorities and develop solidarity actions. Underlying these themes is a wider social project about social justice, equality and social cohesion (Lloyd, 2002: 76). Moreover, in the broader framework of international migration and globalization, many anti-racist mobilizations have broadened their concerns to include the issue of asylum seekers and to think about the broader application of anti-racist ideas.

Also, in the framework of explanations offered by the anti-racist organizations, there is commonly a clear lack of understanding about the specific ways in which mainstream politics has prepared the grounds for racist political programmes. What is the impact of a legal framework in which the division between categories of citizens and non-citizens has been

institutionalized? How to understand the consequences of a democratic society that claims equality and at the same time legitimates a politics in which some categories of people are attributed more rights than others?<sup>23</sup> In order to develop effective counter-strategies to racism, an analysis that addresses these thorny questions seems necessary. Also, a better understanding of the impact of the marginalized position of immigrants in society on stereotypes within the dominant population is required if one wants to overcome the problem of developing effective alternatives to racist opinions.

In sum, the anti-racist discourse seems to be situated on one side of the apparent dilemma of racism or democracy. The fact that anti-racism has merely focused on explanations at an individual level, that it concentrated on the more visible political expressions of racism, and positioned itself as a counter-movement to right-extremist electoral successes, might indicate why anti-racism has been locked up in a defensive discourse. As long as the anti-racist movement is not taking into account why extreme-right answers gain popularity, how to understand the impact of regular politics in institutionalizing and legitimating (cultural and ethnic) divisions in society, and how anti-racism can formulate a positive social project, it seems very unlikely that effective alternatives and practices will develop.<sup>24</sup>

As to the question of the possibilities of anti-racism as an ideology and as a set of policy objectives, the efficiency of the activities and strategies deployed by the anti-racist network have been proved relative. Although the anti-racist network in Belgium has deployed a great dynamic and has launched important signals to politics and public opinion, it has not been able to really affect the general social and political climate and to enforce its demands on the political agenda. The rise of intolerance, negative feelings towards immigrants and racist expressions has not been blocked by anti-racist sensitizing actions or mobilizations of public opinion. What is more, the political translation of such feelings and attitudes by *Vlaams Blok* has become more legitimate and acceptable throughout the 1990s. There is, in other words, no such counter-weight to *Vlaams Blok*, which as a popular opposition party, has managed to influence the political agenda and determine the terms of the mainstream debate on foreigners within Belgium. The presence of an efficient anti-racist watchdog is still to be awaited and, contrary to the racist ideology, the anti-racist answers have not been very precise and anti-racism has not yet found a particularly strong political translation.

## Notes

- 1 Studies on the role of anti-racist social movements, and the ideologies they articulate, have led to a controversy about the relative failure of these movements. Not only have ideas about anti-racism been criticized; the capacity

of anti-racist organizations to mobilize mass support and to ensure the development of effective public policies against racial discrimination has also been questioned. Attempts to identify reasons for the 'failure' of anti-racism has been commented by Lloyd, 1998; also Gilroy, 1992. For an overview of the criticism on anti-racism, see Bonnett, 2000: 147–168.

- 2 In order to draw a complete picture of anti-racism in Belgium, it would be useful to study other anti-racist organizations in their discourse and structures and to look at the francophone anti-racist associations such as MRAX and Ligue des Droits de L'homme. Also, the activities developed by the Centre For Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism deserve attention. This centre was founded in 1993 as a governmental organization, responsible for the application of the Belgian law against racism of 1981. The centre studies complaints on racism; it can start a judicial procedure when the law has been violated and is entitled to advise the federal government on matters concerning immigration, nationality acquisition, racial equality, etc. Some of its recommendations have been translated into legislation. Moreover, the centre developed a programme of information and education concerning immigration and racism for public administration officers (Cornil, 1998). However, the focus of this contribution does not permit us to go into these matters.
- 3 There is no equivalent to Vlaams Blok in Wallonia. The extreme-right parties Front National and Agir are electorally insignificant and structurally weak. Moreover, Wallonia stands officially closer to the French tradition. Consequently, there has been a stronger political tendency to avoid racializing the population and recognizing the presence of immigrant communities as 'ethnic groups'. This is not to imply that racism is not present in the southern part of the country. However, for historical and political-philosophical reasons, extreme-right political formations have not been able to mobilize and organize racist currents in Wallonia.
- 4 A vote for Vlaams Blok has initially been explained mainly as a 'protest' vote, which has to be seen, not as a choice *in favour of* the extreme right-wing party and its programme, but as a choice *against* all the other political parties. A rejection of 'politics as usual' by parts of the electorate and the so-called 'crisis' of the traditional political system is a central element in this explanation. In its campaigning, Vlaams Blok has often profiled itself as an 'anti-system' party, which has reinforced this explanation. However, motives to vote for the party have appeared to be more complex. Although feelings of political apathy and powerlessness influence the electoral decision in favour of Vlaams Blok, De Witte (1992) has shown that such a choice is not only a protest vote, but appears to be stimulated by the anti-immigrant and nationalist programme.
- 5 Doom (1992) warns not to restrict reality to the problem definition that has been advanced by right-extremism. Moreover, whether socioeconomic deprivation and the presence of immigrants in society are *the* triggering factors to racism is still to be confirmed. The anti-immigrant votes for Vlaams Blok appear by now not to be limited to defavorized groups in society and urban areas where problems of 'living together' might occur (Billiet and De Witte, 2001).
- 6 Growing diversity and globalization have put pressure on the established structures of society. These developments reveal the tension that exists between

the conception of a homogeneous national community as a normative ground for social solidarity in the welfare state and the heterogeneous social reality. Though the discussion has not yet penetrated public discourse, the presence of immigrants in society requires us to critically redefine the basic concepts of social and political life (Favell, 1997; Wimmer, 1997).

- 7 Charta 91 was initiated as a movement of progressive intellectuals, trying to develop an ideological front with democratic political forces against the extreme right-wing party. Charta 91 is mainly a think tank that reflects on racism and right-extremism from a broad perspective concerned with the functioning of democracy. Objectief 479.917, politically the most radical initiative, is an association basically claiming voting rights for foreigners and proposing the automatic attribution of Belgian nationality to anyone residing legally in the country for more than five years. Objectief developed out of a large petition action that wanted to present a symbolic counter-weight against extremism by collecting as many (and more!) signatures against extremism as Vlaams Blok had obtained votes.
- 8 The following analysis is mainly based on published manifests and internal documents found in the VAKA-archive in Antwerp.
- 9 In the run up to the 1994 demonstration and with the European and local elections in perspective, the HiH network acted together with Charta 91, in favour of a political strategy isolating Vlaams Blok. The idea of a 'Cordon sanitaire' is much contested – not in the least by the extreme right party itself – and is based on the agreement of democratic politicians not to collaborate with Vlaams Blok and not to sign political deals with this party. By doing so, the extremist party is prevented from governing power. It cannot take responsibilities and will not be in a position to effectuate its programme or parts of it. One of the key arguments of the anti-racist movement is that a democratic regime has the duty to protect itself from an assault by anti-democratic forces.
- 10 In the political context of the Cold War, the former peace movement VAKA-OCV had a tradition of bringing together old and new social movements to mobilize against cruise missiles. The movement recycled itself in the 1990s into an anti-racist movement. It became the logistic and administrative heart of the HiH coalition. The coalition was built upon more formal organizations that are active in diverse segments of civil society. The main partner organizations of the network are the socialist trade union ABVV and the Christian Workers Movement ACW/ACV. Other partners were the Third- and Fourth-World movement with organizations such as the Nationaal Centrum voor Ontwikkelingssamenwerking (NCOS), Broederlijk Delen, Artsen zonder Grenzen; the ecology movement represented by Bond Beter Leefmilieu, the women's movement (Vrouwenoverlegkomitee), organizations of seniors and the youth movement organized in the Katholieke Jeugdraad. The integration sector and the voice of ethnic minorities were represented by VCIM (later by the Vlaams Minderheden Centrum – VMC). An official body thus channelled the participation of the immigrant minorities. The question of representation by VCIM would become much disputed by the grassroots associations of immigrants that developed throughout the 1990s. These were not directly involved in the HiH-network – but some of these associations have signed the platform texts and mobilized their basis for the demonstrations.

- 11 The press coverage of the event is significant in this regard: comments pointed to the massive presence of ordinary citizens, to the great numbers of young people, the participation of immigrants, the involvement of a plurality of associations and the remarkable coalition of old and new social movements. The demonstration proved that 'The country of Hand in Hand' had become a reality (press articles in the VAKA-archive).
- 12 The HiH-network is mainly a Flemish movement, and the mass demonstrations mobilized primarily in Flanders, but the network has always tried to cooperate with francophone associations and anti-racist movements. Although the political relevance of racism is mainly situated in Flanders, the anti-racist network underlined that anti-racism is a concern of the whole country, Flemish and francophones. The national character of the demonstrations has been brought to the fore in the public statements of the network.
- 13 The necessity to develop a multilevel strategy against the cultural, structural and political expressions of racism has been underlined by De Witte et al. (1996).
- 14 In its communication strategy, Vlaams Blok seems to apply the tactic of 'two faces', one for external use towards a mass public, and another real (and extreme) one towards its militants. Consequently, the Vlaams Blok voters would in large part have been trapped and misled by a party that uses a populist strategy to attract the public and (wrongly) points to foreigners and migrants as scapegoats for all that goes wrong in society. The anti-racist discourse refers to this where it includes the warning that 'blaming the victim' might in the long run turn against (parts) of their 'own' population that the right-extremist party pretends to defend. This fits into the strategy of the anti-racist movement to reveal the 'true' face of right-extremism (Spruyt, 1994).
- 15 There has been a fierce debate on the failure of the integration policy in 2002, initiated by intellectuals and political actors rooted in the migrant communities. One of the more controversial spokespersons in this debate was Dyab Abou Jahjah, the leader of the Arab-European League (AEL). The AEL is a political movement that tries to mobilize the immigrant communities around a message of 'ethnic' pride and Muslim identity.
- 16 A broad range of issues related to anti-racism and to reflections about the multicultural society have instigated heated discussions between democratic (and self-declared anti-racist) political actors (the debates on immigration policy, asylum, nationality, integration, language acquisition, etc.). How to interpret equal rights and citizenship has been a major point of divergence. In these discussions, the use of racist and anti-racist arguments is often intermingled. This point has been illustrated by Jacobs in a study of the arguments used in the political debate on voting rights for non-European immigrants (Jacobs, 1998).
- 17 This time, the Belgian movement was part of a more global dynamic in terms of anti-racist action. The Belgian mass mobilization was an exponent of a European action that was undertaken in several European member states out of concern for the electoral success of extreme right parties. All over Europe (Bologna, Den Haag, Frankfurt, Helsinki, Lausanne, London, Luxemburg, Madrid, Stockholm and Vienna) people marched for a Europe of human rights, solidarity and tolerance.

- 18 The issue of granting political rights to non-nationals has a long history. Though this question dates from the 1960s and has been much debated, especially in the period 1982–98, the principle that voting rights should be linked to Belgian nationality remained fixed. Only in 1998, under pressure of the Maastricht Treaty, has the link between nationality and political rights been blurred (Alaluf, 1997; Hubeau and Foblets, 1997; Jacobs, 1998). It took until 18 November 2003 for non-European citizens to be granted the right to vote in local elections. This, however, does not include the right to be eligible.
- 19 Until 1995 the Christian labour movement and socialist labour movement, third-world movements, youth movements, the peace movement operated loosely together under the label HiH in a network without formal structures. In 1995, the network opted for a more permanent anti-racist movement and HiH became a formal association, VAKA-Hand in Hand, which brought more clarity in terms of decision-making power, more autonomy in defining the political points of view, the campaigns and actions, the financial resources. The focus remained, however, on anti-racist actions aimed at mobilizing a mass public.
- 20 Since the 1970s, all workers in Belgium have the right to vote and to be elected without any distinction based on nationality or origin (Vranken, 1990).
- 21 One feared that the vote of European citizens would be a vote for francophone lists. This could disturb the existing power relations between Flemish and francophones in Brussels. In the officially bilingual region of Brussels, the Flemish are a minority and the political representation of the Flemish community is a sensitive issue.
- 22 This makes up 9 percent of the total population in the country. Half of them have a non-European nationality.
- 23 N. Rätzzel goes into these questions, debating how German constructions of the nation have turned certain groups into foreigners. The French debate on ‘citoyenneté’ and ‘droit à la différence’ described by Lloyd touches upon the same issue (Lloyd, 2002; Rätzzel, 2002).
- 24 Wieviorka (1998) has commented on the defensive model of anti-racism in France, and similar remarks have been formulated in Bonnett (2000) and in Gilroy’s critique about the failure of anti-racism in Britain (1992).

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