The Vlaams Belang: the Rhetoric of Organizational Identity

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Abstract

In this paper we combine work on rhetorical strategies with that of organizational identity theory. We highlight the relationship between organizational identity and the deployment of discursive resources at the societal level by organizations seeking to influence such identities. We analyse the way in which an extreme right political organization, the *Vlaams Belang*, has used rhetorical framing and strategies to construct a collective identity. This framing is aimed at persuading potential supporters of the organization to identify themselves with it. We argue that these frames derive their characteristic form and power from broader social and political processes that are given insufficient attention in published work on identity in organizations. We discuss the implications of our study for organizational theory, particularly the political and ethical questions raised by the use of potentially manipulative strategies. We conclude with a discussion of the ethical problems that arise when an organization's managers attempt to direct identity formation by exploiting a persistent desire for stability and continuity in a world where it becomes ever more elusive.

Keywords

Organization identity, rhetoric, rhetorical strategies, extreme right politics.

Introduction

Organizational identity (OI) has been influential in organizational studies since Albert and Whetten (1985) defined it as that which is central, distinctive and enduring about an organization for its members. Organizational identity has since become a significant issue in organizational studies (see AMR, 2000; Brown, 1997; Brown & Humphreys, 2006; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Gioia, Schultz & Corley, 2000; Whetten & Godfrey, 1998, for examples). Despite the application of the OI concept to a wide range of organizations, there is currently little literature (though see Sillince, 2006 and Sillince & Brown, 2009, for exceptions) that examines the role of rhetorical strategies in persuading organizational stakeholders to 'buy into' a particular organizational identity. Additionally, OI has rarely been linked to politics and political organizations (Alvesson, Aschcraft, & Thomas, 2008) beyond some attention to micro-politics (e.g. Nkomo, 1992; Thomas & Davies, 2005).

These omissions are significant as they restrict our understanding of how organizational identity and rhetorical strategies interact, particularly the political and ethical implications of this interaction. We were motivated to use our case study when redressing this omission because it emphasises what are, for us, serious issues that arise when organizational leaders seek to influence the identity projects of others. Consequently, we examine how a political organization uses rhetoric to mobilise support, developing the concept of rhetorical frames to stress the interconnections between broader social and historical change and attempts to influence collective identities by organizational leaders. By rhetorical frames we mean constellations of different discursive elements that together form a 'common sense' taken for granted view of the world for a given social group. We argue that current work on OI pays insufficient attention to the complex interactions of the political, cultural and historical

resources available for organizational identity construction and that utilising rhetorical frame analysis brings these to the fore.

We address the following questions: which rhetorical frames, devices and strategies are deployed to construct an organizational identity and so represent our case study organization in a positive manner? How are these rhetorical resources used to construct such an identity? What does a study of such an organization tell us about the organizational identity concept in general? Our broad contribution is thus a better understanding of the processes by which organizations seek to construct and maintain their identities. More particularly, we seek to open up a debate on the underlying ethics and politics of the rhetorical processes involved, particularly the construction of a 'we' based upon the exclusion and marginalisation of the other, an aspect of the power-laden nature of the rhetorical management of identity (Brown, Ainsworth, & Grant, 2012). We are thus responding to Brown's (2008) call for a more critical perspective on organizational identity.

We undertake a detailed analysis of the rhetorical frames and strategies utilised by one Flemish political organization, the *Vlaams Belang* (VB), usually described as an extreme right political organization (Coffé, 2005; Erk, 2005; Faniel, 2003; Mudde, 2000). Our case illustrates the central role of rhetorical frames and strategies as the organization was provoked into an intensive period of self-reinvention when it was forced to react [1] to the disbanding of its original incarnation, the *Vlaams Blok*. It had to rapidly construct a new and persuasive organizational identity in order to survive and so positioned itself as a mainstream alternative party to an increasingly alienated white-working/lower middle class constituency (Coffé, 2004, 2005; Moufahim, Humphreys, Mitussis, & Fitchet, 2007; Nollet, 2000). We use the concepts of rhetorical frames and strategies to analyse how the VB drew upon historically

and culturally persistent identity discourses based upon nationality, religion and ethnicity. We trace how the party seeks to re-invent such discourses in order to delegitimize alternative interpretations of them, particularly the cosmopolitan frame that, we argue, underlies many attempts at constructing organizational identities within work organizations.

The remainder of our paper is structured as follows. First we expand upon our understanding of how collective identity is shaped and influenced within its broader social context and relate this to work on organizational identity. We proceed to outline our conceptualisation of the rhetorical frames and strategies deployed by organizations in the construction of collective identities. Following this, we consider our case study, beginning with an explanation of our methodology before presenting our reading of how the VB has sought to persuade its target supporters to identify themselves with its aims. In our discussion we draw parallels with the way that other organizations attempt to shape the identities of their members and the ethical and political implications of these attempts.

Collective and Organizational Identity

We begin by proposing that it is primarily through rhetoric that organizational leaders seek to persuade individuals to align their selves with the organization and so to create an organizational identity. In this sense organizational identity can be thought of as a specific type of purposeful collective identity and throughout the paper we use the latter term to denote this broader category of identity. Although our focus here is on collective identities, it is important to acknowledge that they are interwoven with individual identity projects (Watson, 2008). We define such projects as a continuous, precarious process of constructing a story of the self out of the discursive resources made available by the broader social context, a conceptualisation used widely elsewhere within organization studies (see Boje,

2001; Czarniawska, 1998; and Cunliffe, Luhman, & Boje, 2004 for example). The pursuit of stable and coherent self-narratives is not an easy task (Giddens, 1991), and has been argued to be an essentially competitive enterprise (Alvesson et al., 2008; Rose, 2000) that can be extraordinarily precarious and anxiety ridden (Collinson, 2003; Sennett, 1998).

One way of reducing this anxiety is to look to ready-to-hand widely accepted collective identities (Ybema, 2010). Collective (or social) identities promise a sense of belonging and security based upon perceived shared characteristics (Watson, 2008). These characteristics may be relatively ascriptive ones, including class, sex, nationality, or more freely chosen ones such as musical taste, political affiliation, sports team support and so on (Giddens, 1991; Craib, 1998). When such characteristics are combined into 'common sense', unexamined ways of seeing the world they may be described as frames, which often form the focus of rhetorical struggle and conflict (what should the term 'European' mean and whose interests would be served by one interpretation of it rather than another, for example). We utilise multiple collective identities and combine them in different ways into an individual identity narrative (Essers, 2009). Such choices are influenced by others seeking to mobilise our support and action as a means towards various organizational and institutional ends (Humphreys & Brown, 2002).

For many of us, work and its associated organizational membership may be considered a highly significant collective identity and is often a target for managerial intervention. It is argued that organizational identity may enhance loyalty and commitment, 'creating a sense of belonging and providing an anchor in turbulent times that organizational members not only become attached to but will go to some lengths to defend' (Driver, 2009, p.60). Organizational identity may, therefore, be considered a particular instance of a managed

collective identity based upon organizational membership and identification. For example, Sveningson and Larsson (2006) suggest that leadership may be used as a collective identity that fosters managerial aims. Clegg, Rhodes and Kornberger (2007) focus on legitimation as the primary way in which identification might be achieved. Others stress the role of image (Gioia & Thomas, 1996) or culture (Hatch & Schultz, 2002). These attempts increasingly parallel those of various political and social movements, sometimes but not always via formal organizations (Reger, 2008; Saunders, 2008). Indeed some social theorists see attempts to manage selfhood for organizational ends as the predominant political struggle of the contemporary age (Bieler, 2011; Pickerill, 2009; Spicer & Böhm, 2007). Thus attempts to manage organizational identity in pursuit of managerial aims are not the ostensibly neutral activities that they are sometimes presented as (Sillince, 2006). Rather, such attempts involve a complex matrix of struggles at the symbolic level between various collective identities, where rhetorical strategies and counter-strategies are deployed in order to capture the subjectivity of individuals (Rodrigues & Child, 2008).

Morrill, Zald and Rao (2003) have argued that organizations, including social movements and political institutions, increasingly rely on organizational identity to hold them together and attract support. All may thus be seen as engaging in a competitive market for the identities of their followers/members. It is here that rhetoric plays a key role as organizations seeking to capture the identities of their stakeholders become 'entrepreneurs who trade in the business of identity politics' (Cruz, 2000, p.279). The aim of such rhetoric is to not only establish itself but also to dis-establish the many counter-rhetorics aimed at its audience. We proceed now to a more detailed account of how rhetoric is utilised by such entrepreneurs in the market for collective identities.

Rhetorical Frames and Strategies

Rhetoric refers to the persuasive discourse used by organizational leaders in their interactions with each other and outsiders (Golant & Sillince, 2007). Rhetorical strategies are the means adopted to persuade actors to respond in a desired manner and this may well involve the undermining of competing rhetorical strategies (Symon, 2005). Rhetorical and discursive analyses have contributed greatly to research in the field of management communication (e.g. Cheney, 1983; Heath, 1994; Kinsella, 1999; Livesey, 2002), business studies (Amernic & Craig, 2004; Hyland, 1998), marketing (Ewald & Vann, 2003; Martin, 2007), organizational discourse (Heracleous, 2006) and individual identity and organizations (Linstead, 2005).

Ornatowski has suggested that, for rhetorical strategies to succeed, they must address the following questions: 'who are 'we'; where are we; where do we come from; how do we relate to each other and to our other; what values; and what purposes we share'? (2011, p. 297). Rhetorical frames are invoked by rhetorical strategies in order to provide ready-made answers to these questions. Analysing an organization's rhetorical strategies and associated frames provides a way of exploring the persuasion processes aimed at collective identity construction and so, in turn, of examining the 'collective of voices, in chorus, which help to construct the persona of the organization' (McMillan, 1987, p.38). Such analysis stresses that there is a political dimension to identity (Symon, 2005), as leaders within organizations attempt to legitimate particular viewpoints and counter others, producing a variety of identities as a result. Political organizations, including the VB, engage in persuasion processes with the general public, party members and other political parties. They do this via symbolic rhetoric contained in published articles, broadcasts, advertisements, websites, photographs, cartoons, and branded merchandise.

Rhetorical Frames

We follow Cruz in defining a rhetorical frame as:

> a discursive structure that articulates in accessible ways the fundamental notions a
> group holds intersubjectively about itself in the world and that allows or disallows
> specific strategies of persuasion on the basis of their presumptive realism and
> normative sway (2000, p.277).

In other words, rhetorical frames represent a dominant interpretive framework that renders commonsensical a particular way of seeing the world. The concept provides a link between different rhetorical strategies and the underlying societally legitimated discourses upon which they draw. In our case study, a rhetorical frame of 'Christian Europe' is reinvented through the strategies of myth-making and nostalgia for a lost golden age recoverable through support of the VB's policies. The concept highlights the political nature of constructing collective identities as there is always a struggle between competing rhetorical frames or to re-define meanings within a single rhetorical frame. The organizational identity literature often tends to view such identities as relatively self-enclosed and disconnected from wider historical and societal discourses (Oliver & Roos, 2007; Pedersen & Dobbin, 2006). The result is to present organizational identity construction as ethically neutral and apolitical (Rodrigues & Child, 2008). However, by examining the rhetorical frames within which organizational leaders' rhetorical strategies operate, a highly political and contested view of identity formation is revealed.

Halsall (2009) argues that work organizations predominantly draw on what we term a 'cosmopolitan' rhetorical frame for their members, i.e. one characterised by a 'detachment from existing cultural identities and loyalties in the name of the adoption of a universalist perspective' (Halsall, 2009, p.136). This frame is apparent in corporate projects of replacing the nation (or other traditional sources of identity) with the workplace (Ohmae, 1990) and is involved in a struggle with social and political movements that rely on reviving and reinventing just such traditional cultural loyalties (Castells, 2004; Herriot & Scott-Jackson, 2002). The subsequent undermining of this frame may have serious implications for the basis of organizational identities in the future as we discuss below.

The concept of rhetorical frames enables us to respond to authors such as, Driver (2009), Jack and Lorbiecki (2007), and Motion and Leitch (2009) who call for more consideration of the politics and ethics of organizational identification. In our case we examine the detailed rhetorical processes that compete with managerial attempts to construct appealing organizational identities. We uncover the complex, contested and political dimensions of attempts to influence identity construction by examining the underlying framing that legitimates certain rhetorical appeals. A rhetorical analysis assumes that human knowledge exists in the probable, as that around which most people can be persuaded to believe (Zachry, 2009), thus rhetoric constructs social reality. Through rhetorical framing, strategies and practices, certain ideas and ways of thinking are privileged in society while others are perceived as abnormal, heterodox and even illogical. Examining such uses of language thus enables us to trace the emergence of, and struggles between, different rhetorical frames; in our case the strategies of mythmaking and nostalgia were particularly significant.

Rhetorical Strategies: Myths and Nostalgia

We understand myth as being 'a cognitive device based on social cues that creates meaning and significance and can easily serve as a basis for flawed but appealing reasoning' (Esch 2010, p. 360). Myths (other authors use the terms 'narratives' or 'extended metaphors' (Brown, 1994)) are rhetorical devices, whose power frequently rests on their ubiquity. They are taken-for-granted narratives that resonate with individual identities without conscious examination of their basis (Edelman, 1975; Esch, 2010).The implicit and unquestioned quality of myths and their ability to influence basic perceptions of the world (Esch, 2010) allow for the construction and consolidation of a dominant version of reality. Myths frame people's perception of the world, provide social cues for how to interpret problems, and how to act upon them (Bottici & Challand, 2006; Esch, 2010, p. 361). Myths are created in a particular culture from its repertoire of images, symbols, characters and modes of action (De Neufville & Barton, 1987).

When organizations adapt or construct their own myths they seek to legitimate their privileged power relations and actions, and guarantee their continued successful existence (Brown, 1994). Myth-making frequently rests on the invocation of rhetorical frames: in our case, the notion of a long historical tradition of 'Christian Europe' defending itself against Muslim invaders. This is one instance of myth construction that has the aim of providing legitimacy as 'a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system' (Suchman, 1995, p. 574).

Nostalgia may be seen as a particular form of 'mythologization' (Gabriel, 1993, p. 131). The nostalgic recalling of a golden past can provide a powerful emotional resource for rhetorical

practice and enable long-term identity construction projects (Davis, 1979; Gabriel, 1993; Wilson, 1999). In our case it is used to maintain a collective sense of socio-historic continuity, as a form of resistance to the hegemony of elites, and as a defence against anxiety (Brown & Humphreys, 2002). Nostalgia also contributes to processes of individual-group identification (and distinctiveness from out-groups), by providing the organization members with a source of pride and affiliation (Brown & Humphreys, 2002). Together, the concepts of rhetorical frames and strategies, give us a powerful set of conceptual tools which can be used to analyse in detail the attempt by our case study organization to influence the identification of its target followers.

Research Design

The *Vlaams Belang* (or 'Flemish Interest') party was created in November 2004, after its precursor, the *Vlaams Blok* was outlawed for racism (Erk, 2005). The *Vlaams Blok* drew on pre-existing Flemish nationalist movements (Art, 2006), calling for the independence of Flanders and an amnesty for ex-WWII collaborators. It combined this nationalism with an anti-immigration stance (Faniel, 2003; Swyngedouw, 1998). The *Vlaams Blok* became an electoral force from the beginning of the 1990s and, by 2003, had become the predominant Flemish party in Brussels, with even French-speaking Belgians voting for them (Delwit, 2003). In the June 2004 regional elections, more than one Fleming out of five voted for the *Vlaams Blok*. However, in November 2004, the *Vlaams Blok* had to disband in order to avoid prosecution for racism, and the *Vlaams Belang* was created, with the same leaders, programme and structure as the *Vlaams Blok* - given this similarity we refer to both as the VB.

Dataset and analysis

Our analysis is based upon our reading and interpretation of a wide range of material published by the VB. Analysis was a multi-stage 'iterative process in which ideas were used to make sense of data, and data used to change ideas' (Hammersley & Atkinson 2007, p.158). We reviewed *all* the VB's communication and propaganda material over a period of almost 4 years between early 2004 and December 2007. The material reviewed included websites, the party's weekly newsletters, leaflets, themed brochures, election publicity, campaign brochures and press coverage, amounting to several thousand pages. During the period, two of the authors also subscribed to the quarterly *Flemish Republic* newsletter in English, and to the party's weekly e-newsletter which provided a digest of international and national events and a party commentary. The first author, fluent in Dutch, French and English (the main languages used by the party in its communications), was able to review all of this material. Inevitably, as much of the published material was repetitive, she was able to distil the data down to some 250 pages or around 70 000 words. The three authors then scanned and reviewed this material together in group discussion and argument choosing or rejecting data based upon our 'interpretive sensitivities' (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 75). We came to an agreement that our most interesting data (found in a total of 52 of these pages) occurred in the election campaign brochures and online material published by the party in 2004 and at the beginning of 2006. This was the crisis period in which the *Vlaams Blok* was suppressed and re-emerged as the *Vlaams Belang*. This material was then subjected to an inductive in-depth rhetorical analysis - a multi-layered process which focused on both the textual and visual dimensions of the data. The material was initially examined for broad categories and then coded in a more detailed process of seeking themes from our interpretation of the data.

During each of these stages of analysis we discussed emergent ideas and wrote a set of memos to record our analytical process. This eventually surfaced a set of themes in the strategies deployed by the VB which we have labelled dominant rhetorical frames (see below). In our interpretation of images we followed Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) who note that the visual component of a text is an independently organized and structured message, connected to the written component, but not necessarily dependent on it. Seventy images and pictures from the same brochures and websites analysed for their textual components, were analysed, not as evidence of the *who*, *where* and *what* they referred to, but as evidence of *how* their maker(s) had (re)constructed reality according to the party's ideologically-coloured interpretation (van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001).

Findings

In this section, we surface the most salient examples and illustrations of the rhetorical frames and strategies used by the party to construct its identity and represent itself to potential voters and party members. We identified five dominant rhetorical frames and associated strategies in VB's discourse which we have labelled: Populist Democracy; Flemish Nationalism; Multiculturalism/Cosmopolitanism (VB frequently refer to this frame in order to undermine it); Christian Europe; and Invasive Islam. The final two we combine in our findings under the heading 'The Clash of Civilizations', following VB's own rhetorical practice in this regard. We show that these five rhetorical frames are appealed to through a combination of rhetorical strategies (e.g. othering; victimization; mythologizing; appeal to emotions) and powerful contemporary discourses (e.g. the threat of a militant Islam; the invasion of Europe/Flanders; the corruption of political elites). We also show how the party, in order to construct a coherent identity narrative, combines these dominant frames in particular ways.

Populist Democracy

The semantic analysis of our dataset paints a rather gloomy picture of Belgian society in

which its various problems can be attributed to immigration and political corruption. The VB

adopts and combines various rhetorical frames in order to do this. The first of these to be

considered is an attempt to present the party as the *vox populi*, the voice of the so-called silent

majority, and the defender of Flemish identity and democracy.

> We are the democratic voice of an ever growing number of Flemings (Vlaams Blok website, 2004a)

> The Vlaams Blok will continue, no matter what, to say what the silent majority of our country thinks…we ask the Brusseleirs [original Brussels' inhabitants] to give a clear signal: choose freedom of speech, for democracy, for the Vlaams Blok. (Vlaams Blok, 2004, p.2)

Using this frame, the VB presents itself as both the champion of democracy and the victim of

the existing cosmopolitan political elite.

> Another scandal: the condemnation of the Vlaams Blok for 'racism'. The free expression of your opinions, in this country, is from now on strangled. The Vlaams Blok is not a racist party. It only defends the rights of the 'Brusseleirs' in a firm and decisive fashion, (Vlaams Blok, 2004c, p.3).

> All the parties, Flemish and French-speakers (except for the Vlaams Blok, of course), have voted for one modification of the law after another, in order to ban the Vlaams Blok and financially dry it out. The Constitution itself was modified for this sole purpose! A people's jury did not inspire confidence in the parties in power. Could you imagine that the Vlaams Blok benefits from too much sympathy or common sense from our people! (Vlaams Blok, 2004b, p.2)

This representation of the silent majority goes hand-in-hand, in the VB's rhetoric, with the

denunciation of the incompetence of the governing elite:

> The management by the old parties has made Brussels insecure, dirty and disconsolate. With impossible traffic jams, where residents feel like foreigners … (Vlaams Blok, 2004b, p 22)

Perceived problems associated with immigration can now be blamed on this corruption, for

example, giving the right to vote to non-citizens.

> The political world is paralysed by a foreign-born community which is growing bigger and bigger…the establishment of the right for vote for foreigners and the consequences of the fast

> track to Belgian nationality give an ever-increasing importance to this particular electoral group. (Vlaams Blok, 2004c, p.7)

> Those parties holding power do not want to 'disturb' their 'new electorate'. Consequently, there is a series of gross injustices, which put a category of 'citizens' above the law at the expense of others. (Vlaams Belang, 2004, p.10)

This 'plucky yet victimized voice of the people' rhetorical frame enables the party to both present itself as being unfairly discriminated against and to suggest that its target supporters are also heroic victims, struggling against the less favourable treatment given to them as opposed to 'foreigners'. The strategies of 'othering' (the construction of an 'us' over against various 'thems') and of mythologizing are evident here. Through the populist democracy frame, the VB aims at constructing identification with an 'in-group'. It seeks to strengthen this identification through the exclusion of out-groups (the political elite, foreigners). Another frame that is co-opted into this task is that of a re-invented Flemish nationalism.

Flemish Nationalism

The Flemish nationalist frame allows the party to counter negative framing by political opponents by drawing on a rhetorical repertoire that stresses 'acceptable' Flemish nationalist values derived from widely respected Flemish social movements. Consequently, the VB describes itself as:

> The establishment of a new party to defend the political priorities that the Vlaams Blok has always fought for: an independent and democratic Republic of Flanders; the traditional moral values of western civilisation; and the right of the Flemings to protect their national identity and their Dutch language and culture (Vlaams Blok website, 2004)

This 'respectable' rhetoric is then combined with an 'othering' strategy attaching an exclusive embattled meaning to Flemish nationalism by the identification of a set of enemies: (Walloons, foreigners, and a corrupt political elite):

> We live in a country where prosperity, employment and even the territory of the Flemish majority are fundamentally damaged by the political aggression of the Walloon minority, and in spite of this, there is not one single brave politician in the "traditional" parties who will challenge the cordon [political quarantine excluding the VB from power], a sanction which was rejected by 1 in 4 Flemish voters. (Vlaams Belang, 2006, p.2)

The VB thus positions itself as the only 'brave' party willing to defend the Flemish against aggression. The marginalisation of Flanders by the Walloons and financial transfers from Flanders to the less affluent Wallonia, are a recurrent theme in the VB's rhetoric.

> In 2003, the Flemings paid 728 million to unemployed Walloons, and in 2004 there was a temporary record in payments of 840 million. There is no sign of any reduction, because the unemployed Walloons are never penalised. No problem, we, the Flemings, will always pay the bill (Vlaams Belang website, 2005)

The co-opting of this frame requires the undermining of potentially competing interpretations, as can be seen in the party's attacks on a unified Belgian identity. The VB thus argue that 'Belgium, established in 1830 by French revolutionaries, is an artificial construct' (Vlaams Blok website, 2004). In other words, there can be no 'historical' or affective links between Flanders and Wallonia since Belgium itself does not have any legitimate foundation as a state.

The rhetorical strategies of co-option of accepted collective identities, othering, and heroic victimization identified above are deployed in order to invoke the powerful identifications attached to rhetorical frames such as populist democracy and Flemish nationalism whilst simultaneously re-working them. These strategies also work to undermine the competing rhetorical frames represented by once dominant multicultural and cosmopolitan frames associated with post-War centrist European politics (and so associated with traditional centrist and left parties positioned as corrupt by the VB). The party associates its own alleged unfair treatment by the political elite with injustice against the Flemings, discursively tying together their common interests and destiny.

(Undermining) Multiculturalism and Cosmopolitanism

In our discussions above we outlined the dominant rhetorical frame of most managerial attempts at organizational identity construction as that of cosmopolitanism. An essential aspect of this frame is the abandonment of traditional sources of identity such as nationalism or ethnicity in favour of de-territorialized, usually corporate, affiliations. In wider society, the post war European project might be said to rely on it also, illustrated by policies of multiculturalism – designed to respect and celebrate difference as the key to the harmonious co-existence of different ethnic and religious groups. As a central tenet of the VB's programme is its anti-immigration policy, multiculturalism represents a counter-rhetoric to its separatist or, more recently, assimilationist policies (Coffé, 2005; Mudde, 2000) and so requires rhetorical delegitimizing.

The VB have, therefore, constructed a 'failure of multiculturalism' rhetorical frame in support of their call for a separatist homogenous Flemish state that can be achieved through the VB's immigration policies, as illustrated in the following quote which uses rhetorical strategies of 'othering' and irony to equate multiculturalism to Stalinism.

> Scientists have discovered that magnetic stimulation of the brain can be used to steer or adjust people's thinking or behaviour. 'Real manipulation of thought is not yet possible, but research is progressing very fast', says the philosopher Jan Verplaetse in De Morgen (10.20.2006). 'I predict that within six months, it will become possible to, for example, to get a member of VB to feel 'warm empathy' for immigrants. Imagine what this would mean for the polls.' Brainwashing as the final means to convert 'sour' and 'intolerant' Flemish people to a belief in multiculturalism. In certain left-wing circles, nostalgia for the Gulag is clearly very strong. (Vlaams Belang, 2006, p.4-5).

All the social and economic problems experienced by the VB's target supporters can now be blamed on these left-wing multiculturalists.

> They want to create targeted employment for the foreign-born, but remain paralysed when it comes to the massive arrival of illegal immigrants. They preach sacrosanct integration, but

encourage diversity and multiculturalism… we must recognise the failure of the multicultural myth (Vlaams Blok, 2004c, p.7).

De-legitimating multiculturalism enables the VB to call for the full assimilation of foreigners. By presenting integration as a solution to the failure of multiculturalism, the VB attempt to avoid the taint of racism.

> The fact that the VB takes a stance against the model of the multicultural society has nothing to do with racism. (Vlaams Blok website, n.d))

One can see here the rhetorical aim of their reframing and reversal strategy, a stance of 'self-defence' against the 'massive' presence of foreigners, is justified by the negative consequences they have caused. The VB combine frames of populist democracy and Western Europeanism to reinforce their argument that the multicultural model is a threat to both.

> Our democracy and our Western values are too valuable for us to offer them on the altars of multiculturalism and unilateral tolerance. (Vlaams Blok website, n.d).

Another rhetorical strategy used by the VB is that of emotionality, the direct appeal to feelings of anxiety, anger, loss and vulnerable pride to draw their readers into its narrative. Nostalgia, a particular emotion of longing for a lost but better past, also features prominently in VB's discourse. The party evokes a golden age when things were better, and promises to bring back those happy times:

> Making Brussels' streets safe and providing Brusseleirs with an agreeable living environment remain our main concern. Under the Vlaams Blok, we will be able to live again in our city in the way which is proper to us Brusseleirs (Vlaams Blok, 2004b, p.23).

Nostalgia has been widely deployed by the party in its use of images. In one idealised picture of Brussels featured in in a 2004 VB election campaign brochure, there is not a single identifiable 'foreign face'. The picture displays a flower market, quaint restaurants and historic buildings, which are recognisable trademarks of Brussels' *Grand Place*. In the foreground, there is an elderly couple taking a walk, others buy flowers. These images are in

soft focus, following the convention of representing dreams in photographs and movies, invoking a lost Brussels that may be restored by the VB. The party contrast such nostalgic photographs with ones representing the dereliction and dirtiness of neighbourhoods with high concentrations of minorities, under captions such as '*Multicultural Brussels?!*, expressing the essence of the party's identity: ethnic homogeneity, order, and 'what we are not' (immigrants, Muslims, disorderly). The nostalgic recalling of a better past, sharply contrasted with a bleak and sordid present, seems to be intended to raise levels of anxiety among the audience as opposed to Brown and Humphreys (2002)'s conceptualisation of nostalgia as a defence against such anxiety. The rhetorical strategies of othering, emotionality, nostalgia and myth-making are also powerfully invoked in the rhetorical framing of a historical conflict between incommensurable civilizations.

The Clash of Civilizations

> Christianity is one of the pillars of our European civilization, as well as among other things Greece and Rome, and the Enlightenment. However, there is a separation between the church and the state, and all the other religions may exist here. Islam has nothing to do with that. Why do the Turks demand that Europe does not remain a Christian club, yet it wants it to be a Muslim club? (Vlaams Belang 2005, p.7)

The above quotation illustrates the inter-dependent framing of a threatened and desirable Christian European civilization locked in a struggle with a barbaric, invasive Islam. This combination of oppositional frames rhetorically requires allegiances to be declared in a long 'historical' struggle, linked to contemporary events through a rhetorical construction of an 'enemy within'. In representing a militant threatening Islam in conflict with Western Judaeo-Christian civilization (both an ideological and physical threat), the party draws on a framing of the Islamic other that strongly recalls Said's (2003) orientalism. Islam is framed as a cruel, aggressive, degraded civilization almost impossible to understand (see Bawer, 2006).

It is the whole of Europe that is threatened as this excerpt from the VB's *Leefbaar*

Vlaanderen brochure, following riots in Paris, illustrates.

> The popular saying says: "when it is raining in Paris, you have raindrops in Brussels" this often happens to be true. It would be misleading to think that the situation in the ghetto-neighbourhoods of our big cities is less explosive than in France. The reality is that the atmosphere is as tense as it is in France (Vlaams Belang, 2006, p.16-17).

The alleged cruelty of Islam is illustrated through threats to European tolerance.

> Radical imams put Allah's law above ours, and call for homosexuals to be thrown from the top of buildings. (Vlaams Blok, 2004b, p.8)

In another quotation attributed to an elderly woman, featured in a campaign brochure, it is

anti-Semitism that does the same rhetorical work with the additional evocation of Nazi

barbarism:

> I am scared by the violent anti-Israeli demonstrations. All these calls for Jihad and the slogans saying 'Hamas, Hamas, all the Jews in the gas chambers'. I It is incredible. It makes me question foreigners' right to vote. (Vlaams Blok, 2004b, p.8).

This rhetoric of irreconcilable differences between the European and the oriental is reinforced

by the use of imagery. One frequently used image shows Muslims praying in a street (see for

example, the covers of the VB pamphlets *Stop Immigration!* (Vlaams Blok, 1999) and

Immigration: the bomb is ticking! (Vlaams Blok, 1992). People prostrating in prayer

emphasises religious difference suggesting that 'they do not pray like us-Christians' (Vlaams

Belang, 2005, p.3).

The juxtaposition of these two rhetorical frames in a clash-of-civilizations rhetoric reflects a

strategy of visceral appeal to certain emotions: anxiety (how to change this before it is too

late?), fear (the woman states that she is scared), and indignation (granting democratic rights

to unworthy people). The anxiety-reducing solution is voting for the VB, which proposes to

protect citizens, maintain Flemish identity and put an end to the 'take-over' by dangerous

Muslim foreigners.

The VB strengthen the clash of civilizations frame by combining it with two further frames,

Flemish nationalism and an exclusive form of Europeanism. The former rests on the notion

of the Judaeo-Christian foundations of European civilisation under threat from militant Islam.

For example, the party leader in an open letter to the Vatican wrote:

> Europe is rapidly Islamicising. The number of Muslims in Europe is increasing and they are increasingly radical, while churches are emptying, mosques are overflowing. In this the beginning of the 21st century, it has been more necessary than ever to defend the Christian foundations of our European civilisation…Europe stands synonymous with Rome, Greece, the Enlightenment and Judaeo-Christian roots of our civilisation. The Turkish civilisation has been in conflict, on many occasions, with these Christian, humanist values. (Dewinter, 2006).

The rhetorical strategies of myth and nostalgia are evident once more in the deployment of

these frames. European history is reinvented as peaceful and harmonious (therefore ignoring

de facto all the wars and armed conflicts that have frequently shaken the continent). In

describing this mythical Europe as a great civilisation, with foundations deeply rooted in

science and reason (the Enlightenment) and in humanist and Judaeo-Christian values, Islam is

positioned as its opposite. As Esch (2010, p.370) has shown, the 'civilisation vs. barbarism'

myth is a classic story of 'us versus them', that favours cultural or civilizational explanations

for conflict over political or economic ones. Any shared past with Islamic civilisation

(embodied by Turkey in VB's discourse) is characterised as difficult and often bloody:

> We have a part of history in common with Turkey. It's all about conflicts and military occupation of parts of Europe by the Turks. It was for example the invasion of Constantinople (today's Istanbul) in 1453, the battle of Lepanto in 1571, the Vienna Pact in 1526 and 1683. In 1974, the Turks invaded Northern Cyprus. This military occupation is still going on today (Vlaams Belang, 2005, p7).

The VB thus utilises stereotypical rhetorical framings of the past in an active rewriting/ reconstruction of history, stressing particular events, recalling a golden past, and silencing others in a powerful rhetorical legitimization of its own policies. One of the rhetorical moves hidden behind the ready-to-hand nature of the two frames juxtaposed is the adoption of a cultural essentialism (Stolcke, 1995), shared with other modern extreme right parties (Amin, 2004; Modood, 1997). Such a rhetorical move establishes that assumed cultural characteristics of ethnic/national groups are fixed over all history and part of their essential nature forming an inescapable collective identity, one that is constructed through simultaneous processes of convergence and differentiation (Rosoux, 2001). These processes act to tie individual identifications to powerful historical myths that exacerbate the differences between 'us' and the 'others' presenting the two groups as incompatible, making inclusion or co-existence undesirable.

Discussion

The VB Rhetoric

From a rhetorical perspective, the VB's discourse is a situated example of the efforts of a political organization to influence the understanding and construction of a particular audience's identity, and to motivate particular actions (e.g. voting, party membership and activism). Our findings show how the VB promote a combination of rhetorical frames based upon a construction of national and ethnic identity, one which legitimates the party's own identity and stance vis-à-vis a number of social and political issues (such as the independence of Flanders; restriction of immigration; granting of citizenship, membership of the EU and Islamophobia) thereby facilitating future actions by the party and the diffusion of its ideology.

The VB shapes its own and other actors' identities, by altering linguistic meanings and relationships (e.g. reframing the issue of racism and discrimination). It promotes a positive identification with itself through the othering of 'foreigners' and political opponents, who are negatively represented. Such an othering process clearly raises serious ethical issues, as it becomes a powerful rhetorical device promising a way for people to preserve and enhance their self-concepts via the pursuit of a past and future 'golden age' of ethnic and religious homogeneity (Bhattcharya & Elsbach, 2002).

External legitimacy (the legitimacy granted to organizations in their environments by stakeholders, (see Meyer &Rowan, 1977; Meyer & Scott, 1983; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991), and the positive portrayal of its identity are clearly core concerns for the VB in facing hostile opponents criticizing its anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim discourse (Coffé, 2005). The representational strategies of many far right political organizations in recent years have been to cultivate legitimacy by presenting themselves as similar to more mainstream political parties and attempting to distance themselves from the violent street politics previously associated with them (Goodwin, Ramalingam, & Briggs, 2012). The creation and presentation of a morally acceptable image with which party members (and voters) can identify are of critical importance for such organizations which have identities plagued by negative associations. They provide a resource for positive meaning-making and the enhancement of self-esteem (Brown & Toyoki, 2013). An organization's identity as perceived by its stakeholders is a key resource in its continuing quest for this legitimacy (Brown, 1997).

We have demonstrated that the manipulation of both *Hi*story, as a grand narrative that establishes the legitimacy of the VB's version of Flemish identity and the related *hi*story (of the party) is central to the VB's rhetorical strategies and the way it uses available rhetorical frames. The rewriting of the past helps reframe, deny, or ignore unappealing chapters of an organization's autobiography. The VB taps into a common 'History' to construct and legitimate its organizational identity, fusing the party, its purpose and its audience in a potent narrative. The frequently invoked notion of a long historical tradition of 'Christian Europe' defending itself against Muslim invaders, is just one such instance of myth construction that has the aim of providing legitimacy through a deeply felt but rarely consciously reflected-upon tradition.

The deployment of rhetorical frames plays an important role in establishing the legitimacy of collective identities including organizational identities. As we have shown the rhetorical reframing of historically persistent and culturally robust identity discourses has enabled a collective identity of the Christian European oppressed 'silent majority' to be constructed and sold to an increasing proportion of the VB's constituency. This collective identity is constructed against the 'other' of the Muslim immigrant as a threat to the survival of such a majority. In our analysis of the underlying rhetorical frames we have been able to trace the emergence of struggles between different and differently interpreted collective identities. What though, are the implications for the wide range of organizations that are of interest to organization scholars?

Implications for Organizational Identity

One major implication of the significance of rhetorical frames is that no attempt at influencing organizational identities is ethically or politically neutral. Whilst this is not a

wholly original observation it is one that (as we discuss above) is not recognised by a large proportion of work on organizational identity. A close analysis of the underlying but usually unexamined identity discourses embedded in rhetorical frames enables us to foreground exactly how others seek to exercise power over our narrative constructions in the pursuit of their own interests by appealing to widely held sets of societal discourses. It also reveals how these discourses are themselves the focus of struggle in the competition between organizations for the collective identifications of individuals.

The case of the VB highlights that rhetorical frames based upon constellations of historically persistent sources of collective identity such as ethnicity, nationalism, religion, and class still exert a powerful and seemingly growing appeal. The increased mainstreaming of the VB's rhetoric within political discourse and its electoral success[2] is evidence of the undermining of the 'cosmopolitan' frame, which underlies many rhetorics of managed organizational identities (Halsall, 2009). Not that we see cosmopolitanism as necessarily as an ethical good to be defended. In fact, its utilisation by corporations to persuade individuals to abandon all other affiliations for corporate loyalty raises its own ethical issues.

Rather, the VB foregrounds a fundamental question concerning the ethics of using rhetorical techniques to persuade a target audience to buy into a proffered collective identity. Much work reviewed above treats the use of such techniques as ethically unproblematic but our analysis demonstrates that this is not the case as there are strong parallels between the VB's rhetorical strategies and those found in work organizations. As Brown and Humphreys point out, managers in organizations frequently 'exert pervasive controls over other participants, colonizing them from the inside to create 'engineered' selves' (2006, p.235). The VB play upon the anxieties and uncertainties generated by the de-stabilising dynamism of modern life

and Brown (2001) has noted how organizational leaders seek to provide a similar sense of security in an increasingly fragmented, discontinuous and crisis-ridden world. As argued above, the VB illustrate the weakening of the rhetorical frame of cosmopolitanism upon which many managerial appeals for identification rest. Our analysis thus suggests that the rhetorical use of concepts such as career progression, meritocracy, team-working, diversity, rewards for effort and performance and so on would appear to have very little appeal to those who increasingly look to organizations such as the VB. Such individuals simply have too small a material and social stake in work organizations for these concepts to provide an adequate discursive resource for identity construction. Inequality and social deprivation within societies isolate those at the bottom from participating in more mainstream collective identities and provide the VB with an opportunity to construct their victimized exclusionary identities.

Chreim (2005) has noted the importance of stability to the maintenance of organizational identities and the importance of maintaining a sense of continuity with the past during periods of rapid change (Chreim, 2002). The cosmopolitan frame provided a set of consensual shared values for stable collective identity in the long post-war boom. However, with the end of this stability the prospects for inculcating enduring organizational identities appear to be diminishing, particularly when it comes to those at the lower end of organizational hierarchies and increasingly for other social groups (Garnett, 2007; Hobsbawm, 2007; Howlett, 1994). If organizations of all kinds fill these rhetorical gaps with reformulated discursive resources relying on the more ethically ambiguous rhetorical frames that appear to be growing in influence, what might be the result? The question is raised for work organizations therefore as to how inclusive their own identity projects are, and to what extent do they contribute to, rather than ameliorate, growing inequalities at the level of identity

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struggles? It also underlines the fact that work organizations are not isolated from the broader societal struggles over the framing of more or less desirable identifications.

Another similarity between the VB's rhetorical strategies and those of a wide range of other organizations is a potentially limiting essentialism. In other words they may not allow for heterogeneity, dissent or poly-vocality. Chreim (2002) argues that management often attempts to create a 'we' by resorting to appeals to unity against an outside threat. Ellis and Ybema observe that managers oscillate 'between an inclusive and exclusive 'us'' (2010, p. 279), concluding that this leads to the 'other' not merely being positioned as different but also 'less acceptable, less respectable and/or less powerful' (2010, p.280). McSweeney (2009) points out that much of the cultural diversity literature in organizational studies also relies on a form of stereotyping based on unreflexive assumptions that are oppressive in that they produce a 'cultural coherence' that 'allows no gaps, no ambiguities for individuals to engage with or exploit' (2009, p. 935). As Humphreys and Brown note; 'there is evidence of a concerted senior manager effort to reduce identity plurality, and to manage those identities which could not easily be eliminated' (2002, p. 424).

Another response to the decline in cosmopolitanism may be the appeal to the rhetorical frames of faith and spirituality. The revival of Christian fundamentalism as a political force, most obviously in the US but also in Europe suggests that this is a traditional source of identity that continues to exert a powerful hold on modern individuals. Worryingly for us, some of the proponents for 'spiritual' organizations (Tourish & Tourish, 2010) also appear to be utilising similar rhetorical frames to those invoked by the VB in order to construct an organizational identity (Bell, 2004).

To conclude this discussion, our analysis of the rhetorical practices of the VB using the related concepts of strategies and frames highlights how societal levels of discourse influence, and are influenced by, competing attempts to 'market' collective identities that will further the aims of various organizations. Work organizations are not exempt from the ensuing struggles over the interpretation and influence of the societal discursive frames and our discussion above reveals that there are a number of parallels to be drawn between the rhetorical practices of political movements and work organizations. Our analysis highlights the importance of considering the ethical and political implications of the situatedness of all organizations in these struggles, particularly as the cosmopolitan frame appears to be weakening its hold within contemporary society in favour of newly revived more traditional forms of affiliation.

Final Thoughts

In this paper we have sought to critique and extend existing writing on organizational identity within organization studies by focusing upon the associated rhetorical practices. We have developed the concepts of rhetorical frames and rhetorical strategies in order to stress the societal and historical embeddedness of such practices and the competitive and dynamic nature of the competition for identification. We have thus opened up a space for the consideration of the political and ethical dimension of managed organizational identities. We have shown how the encouragement of the attempted construction of unified organizational identities fails to recognise that such attempts may be based on exploiting the same anxieties and insecurities that the VB seek to make use of.

We have drawn attention to the potentially exclusionary nature of organizational identity projects, particularly for those at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy largely because

the material conditions of the employment relationship give them little real stake in the organization. We therefore conclude that future work on organizational identity should pay much greater attention to the problems inherent with its previous conceptualisations.

We propose that future development of the concept of organizational identity could usefully pay more attention to the rhetorical frames that are being utilised and to thus more realistically assess the likely appeal of associated rhetorical strategies. We argue that future research needs to take account of the complex interplay of change, continuity, social context, politics and history as well as the broader ethical implications of how we define ourselves and others in ever-more precarious times. It would be interesting in our own future research to make detailed empirical comparisons between the rhetorical strategies and framing of the VB and more mainstream political parties such as the New Vlaamse Alliantie NVA (New Flemish Alliance) - a Flemish centre-right party, part of the Flemish Movement which promotes a gradual secession of Flanders from Belgium.

Our emphasis on framing also highlights the largely unquestioned assumption that the discursive resources out of which organizational identities are constructed are internal to the organization and a managerial creation. This obscures the way in which the discursive resources out of which both individual and collective identities are built derive their characteristic form and power from broader social and political processes. The ahistorical tendency of many managerial perspectives with their emphasis on dynamic change and innovation (Parker, 2002) further tends to obscure the persistent and enduring influence of historically persistent identity categories such as nationalism, ethnicity, religion and class.

We finish with the thought that engagement with a broader range of organizations, despite their seeming distance from the more commonly studied business firm, may be a good way of generating new insights and a deeper understanding of the political factors that underlie the construction of organizational identities. In this paper we have argued that organization scholars must not neglect the role of broader historical and social contexts in identity formation. We have highlighted the issue that OI writing is seemingly unaware that powerful discourses of collective belonging and exclusion increasingly predominate in contemporary society and that these militate against any substantive social consensus within and beyond work organizations. We need to bring such complexity into focus in order to understand better how individuals shape their identity and how managerial attempts to persuade organizational participants to buy into an official organizational identity are likely to play out in practice.

End Notes

1 We use phrases such as 'the VB reacts' etc purely for convenience but we do not mean to imply the reification of the organization as a person, rather we are fully aware that it is the leadership of the party that actually make decisions and act in its name.

2 In 1991 the VB tripled its 1987 vote to 10.3% of Flemish voters (Coffé, 2004). In 1994, the VB became the largest party on the city council of Antwerp. By June 2004, one Fleming out of 4 voted for the VB. In 2006, the party registered 33.5% of the votes in Antwerp (Metro, 09/10/2006).

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