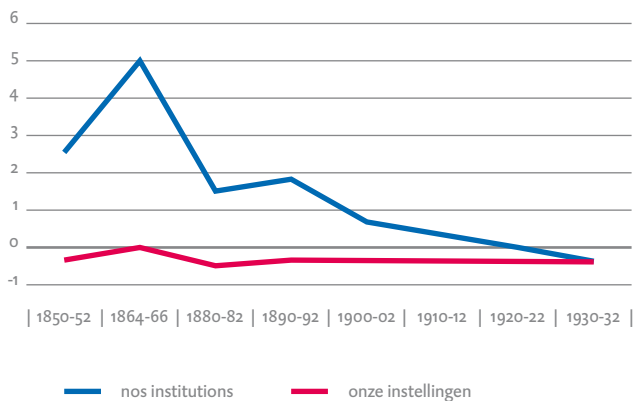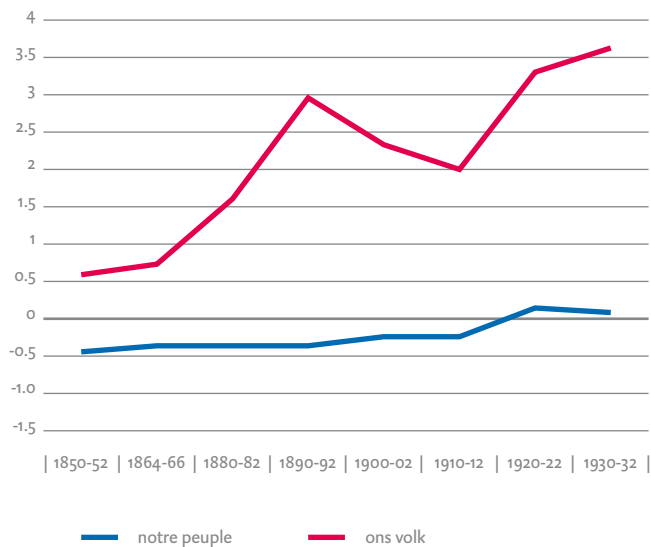# A Higher Form of Hermeneutics?

The Digital Humanities in Political Historiography

MARNIX BEYEN

Rens Bod's optimism with regard to digital research tools also seems to be justified for the field of political history. In particular, these tools will enable us to ask questions that were hitherto unthinkable, and try to answer them on an unenvisaged scale. Unlike that which Bod suggests, however, this development will not bring us closer to revealing some alleged universal patterns in history and therefore herald a new era of Positivism. On the contrary, the digital research tools will show us manifold differences, both diachronic and synchronic, in the way (groups of) political actors identified themselves and gave meaning to the world surrounding them. Moreover, they will enable us to relate these differences to a broad range of social variables. If we really want to test the validity of these relationships however, we will have to actually interpret the texts and read them hermeneutically in their precise historical contexts.

| 1850-52 | 1864-66 | 1880-82 | 1890-92 | 1900-02 | 1910-12 | 1920-22 | 1930-32 |

nos institutions   onze instellingen

| 1850-52 | 1864-66 | 1880-82 | 1890-92 | 1900-02 | 1910-12 | 1920-22 | 1930-32 |

▬ notre peuple   ▬ ons volk

For an historian who so far has never used a single chart in any of his publications, starting an article with two charts can rightly be seen as a statement. Indeed, in spite of my traditionally hermeneutic and narrativist credentials, I am a believer in the enormous possibilities that the digital humanities open up for the field of political history – as they do for probably any field of history. Does that also make me an adherent of the optimistic prospects that are sketched in Rens Bod's inaugural lecture?[1] The answer to that question is dependent on what he means by his rather enigmatic humanities 3.0 (sorry, I missed the crash course). However that may be, I am not convinced by the fact that political historiography should pass through what Bod himself describes as humanities 2.0. I am not sure whether I even feel the urge to leave his humanities 1.0.

In order to make that point, I will start by situating and analysing the charts. They are based on the digital versions of the Proceedings of the Belgian Chamber of Representatives (to be consulted on http://www.plenum.be) and of the Dutch Second Chamber of the Estates-General (to be found on http://www.statengeneraal.nl). They compare the frequency, between 1850 and 1932, of the bigrams 'nos institutions' [our institutions] and 'notre peuple' [our people] in the discourse of the Belgian House with that of 'onze instellingen' and 'ons volk' in that of its Dutch counterpart. Obviously, not their absolute frequency is shown, but their so-called z-scores or standard-scores, that is

1   This article is a reply to Rens Bod's inaugural
     address *Het einde van de geesteswetenschappen 1.0*
     [*The End of the Humanities 1.0*] (December 2012).

to say their deviation from the average frequency of the 100 most popular bigrams starting with respectively 'onze' or 'ons', 'nos' or 'notre'. Admittedly, I did not calculate these z-scores myself (I would not even know how to do it), but my student Kaspar Beelen. His PhD thesis on the use of the first person plural in nineteenth-century parliamentary discourse will be defended more or less simultaneously with the appearance of this contribution, and will contain many more of these charts. It is not only a sense of intellectual honesty which compels me to mention this, but also my awareness that it is symptomatic of the huge knowledge gap growing between the digital wizzkids and the traditional (political) historians. In that sense, the encounter between humanities and technology enthusiastically welcomed by Bod has not yet taken place in political historiography. However I do agree with him that this encounter should take place. If hermeneutically oriented historians like myself do not become at least acquainted with the basic statistical methods and digital tools of analysis we will become dramatically dependent upon technocrats when trying to analyse somewhat larger corpora of sources. On the other hand, if we leave the analysis of digital databases to the computer freaks, the past might end up severely ill-interpreted.

Again, the charts can illustrate this point. At first sight, each of them compares the entire discourse in the Second Chambers of two neighbouring countries. However, anyone who is acquainted with Belgian history will know that this is only true until the end of the nineteenth century. After the introduction of the General Male Suffrage in 1893 and of the Equality Law in 1899, the Belgian Chamber of Representatives gradually and hesitantly became a bilingual institution. In 1930, roundabout one-fifth of all the speeches were held in Dutch. Therefore from the start of the twentieth century onwards the charts do not reflect a comparison between the Dutch and the Belgian parliamentary discourse, but between the Dutch discourse and the Francophone part of the Belgian discourse. Moreover, a certain familiarity with Belgian political history is needed to know that this line of division does not simply run between two groups of speakers. Indeed, until the introduction of the simultaneous translation in 1936, a considerable group of Flemish MPs easily (and most often strategically) switched between the two languages. The charming clarity of the graphs might make us forget all these complexities of history and lure us into all too easy comparisons. One of the challenges of history education at both secondary and university level will be to train students in digital research methods and at the same time arm them against the digital fallacies by instilling them with a strong historical sense.

If the charts – and Beelen's PhD thesis more generally – support Bod's plea for closer connections between alfa- and bèta-oriented approaches, at first sight they also seem to corroborate his second, and arguably his most important point: they do seem to demonstrate that the digital humanities can bring back *the universal* into history. More specifically, they are charting the use of a semantic form unavoidably used by everyone more or less on a daily

basis, and which therefore can be considered to be an essential aspect of what it means to be human – a pronoun in the first person plural (here used in its possessive form, but elsewhere in Beelen's thesis also in other forms). For those historians who consider language to be an important aspect of social, cultural and political relations this is probably the most important gain of the digital approach: it enables them to analyse not only the low-frequent, but also the high-frequent features of language – thus getting much closer to its core. So far these historians have been scanning texts first of all in search of key-concepts, metaphors, stereotypical labels – all of them being linguistic features heavily charged with meaning, but at the same time occurring relatively rarely. Probably it is for that reason that these features – arguably the least 'linguistic' components of language – are relatively understudied by linguists. Instead, they focus on those features structuring everyday language – the use of tenses, of verbs of modality, of pronouns, and so on. The digital research tools enable contemporary historians to investigate the same features within large-scale textual databases, and hence to engage in intense interdisciplinary collaborations with the linguists. In that sense, these digital tools will allow the 'linguistic turn' – so often despised and rejected – to become finally really 'linguistic'.

Specifically with regard to political history, the implications of this development are anything but secondary. Certainly politics cannot be reduced to language, but it is mainly through language that collective interests are articulated and represented, that political identities are forged and deconstructed, and that claims to power are legitimised and countered. Again, these processes do not only happen through the use of explicitly political concepts and images. Interests, identity and the corollary power claims are often constructed in the least conspicuous, but most 'universal' aspects of language. Precisely for that reason it is worthwhile for political historians to study them – and the digital turn enables them to do so effectively.

Among these features, the use of the first person plural can be seen as one of the most pervasive and most inherently political ones: by using it, one claims to speak or write on behalf of a group, and thus contributes to the construction of imagined communities (both that to which one claims to belong and that of 'the others', 'the adversaries'). At the same time, however, the use of this form is always *also* fundamentally individual. It is necessarily expressed by an individual subject who gives meaning to the surrounding world and determines his or her position in it through processes of identification and appropriation. As such, the first person plural seems to be an object *par excellence* of a hermeneutical approach. The digital turn, in other words, does not have to lead us away from hermeneutics, but on the contrary can bring us back to it. Even at this point, I do not believe that Rens Bod would disagree. His humanities 2.0 is not directed against hermeneutics as such, but against what he calls its 'monomaniac', Diltheyan application. In his view, hermeneutics can and should be combined with a positivistic search

for universal patterns. Can a large-scale mapping of the use of the first-person plural in parliamentary discourses not be seen as a lucky example of such a cross-fertilisation?

No, it cannot. Once more, the charts immediately show why. If they do lay bare any patterns at all, those are anything but universal. Indeed, what the charts exhibit is not similarity or homogeneity, but difference, variety and inconstancy. Not only do MPs from different nations appropriate different objects (respectively 'institutions' and 'people') in different ways, how they do so also turns out to vary through time. The most general conclusions that seem to be warranted by a comparison between these charts is that in both Chambers, the relative importance of identifications with *le pays légal* declined in favour of those with *le pays réel*. In the Francophone discourses in Belgium this happened first of all through a waning of the formerly strong institutional identifications, in the Netherlands primarily through an increase of 'popular' identifications. However, instead of pointing towards some universal pattern of human behaviour, the graphs are begging for many more differentiations and comparisons. First of all, one cannot but wonder what the results would be if the Dutch discourses in the Belgian Chamber were added to the sample. Would their curves fit within the Belgian pattern, or would they reveal more similarities to the prevalent tendencies in the Netherlands? Moreover, a division along other than national or linguistic lines seems to impose itself. Would the curves be similar, for example, if confessional MPs from both countries were compared with their Liberal and/or Socialist colleagues from both countries? Or if older MPs were distinguished from the younger, the urban from the rural, and so on? Would the differences be more outspoken if some of these criteria were combined? Would it be possible for example, that by the 1920s only an older generation of urban Liberals still identified with 'our institutions', whereas both the traditional right and the younger democratic forces spoke on behalf of 'our people'?

Fortunately, one of the big promises of the digital humanities is that it can help us to answer this kind of questions (and Kaspar Beelen will answer several of them in his PhD). If we build intelligent biographical databases of all Belgian MPs, and if we optimise those of the Parliamentary Proceedings in such a way that the MPs' names can unmistakably be detected – things which have already largely been done for the Netherlands – we can link them in multifaceted ways and answer a whole range of questions that would have even been absurd to ask before. If this happens in similar ways in different countries, the possibilities of comparative and transnational research will dramatically increase. For that reason it is important not only that political historians take the work of digitisation energetically in hand, but also that they deliberate transnationally about the best ways of doing so.

Even if we were to dispose of perfect digital corpora, the exclusively digital approach would quickly reach its limits. At a certain point we will be tempted to ask questions to which digital tools cannot possibly give an answer.

The computer can detect certain 'objective' relationships between groups of speakers and their speech acts, but it cannot reconstruct the meanings they subjectively brought about during these acts. The question with whom an MP tried to connect when saying 'we' or 'our', for example, can only be digitally answered if he or she did so in explicit and formulaic ways ('We Socialists'; 'our Dutch ancestors', 'our Belgian Fatherland', and so on). In a similar way, it is often impossible digitally to recognise the precise 'object of appropriation'. Did all the MPs refer to the same institutions or the same people if they said 'our institution' or 'our people'? Did Francophone MPs refer more often to a 'Belgian' people, whereas Dutch-speakers in the Belgian House had a 'Flemish' people in mind? Or were matters even more complex than that?

The digital approach becomes entirely unsatisfactory when we try to find out *why* and *how* these appropriations took place. At best, digital programs can recognize certain antagonistic contexts (if the 'we' appears in the neighbourhood of a 'you', for example), but how would they ever be able to detect sarcasm, humour or irony? How can they discover that the speaker is not using his or her own words, but quoting, paraphrasing, maybe even ridiculing those of his adversaries? If we really want to understand political discourse, however, one simply cannot deny these kinds of strategies.

When applied to political history therefore, digital research strategies will necessarily confront the researcher with the need to go back to the texts and to apply hermeneutical methods to them. She or he will try to understand why specific political actors engaged in specific speech acts at specific moments. Instead of moving towards universal patterns, he or she will return to the concrete and context-bound realities that are the quintessence of history. Instead of moving away from hermeneutics, he or she will rediscover its charms and its inevitability.

Does that mean that, after all, we can do just as well without the digital humanities, or that their only added value is in the fact that they increase the accessibility of an extending range of sources? Certainly not. If I started by presenting myself as a believer, I did so because in my view, the digital humanities can bring us to a higher form of hermeneutics. Precisely because they enable us to enter historical reality through 'universals' (such as the first person plural) and to detect patterns in the ways different collectivities engage with them in different periods, they help us to better interpret the thoughts, decisions and actions of concrete historical actors. Indeed, being familiar with these patterns, we can better gauge the mental and discursive frameworks in which these historical actors operated, the ways in which they were influenced by them, and to what degree they resisted to them or tried to alter them. Did a certain MP act according to the pattern which was most predominant within the social and political categories to which he belonged, did he choose for different possible identifications in different contexts, or did he make a decision that went entirely against the pattern of expectations? The answers to these questions will always remain complex, incomplete and

highly hypothetical, and cannot be otherwise because of the complexity of the human mind, of society and of politics. The digital humanities however, might render the historians' hypotheses and interpretations both richer and more solidly embedded. Instead of guiding the historians (or at least the political historians) via the humanities 2.0 to the Promised Land of humanities 3.0, they will make them discover more than ever before the beauty of humanities 1.0. ◄

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