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EDITOR'S NOTE

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The research which this text is based on was conducted by Philomène Gallez as part of a Brussels Studies Institute (BSI) project financed by the municipality of Schaerbeek.

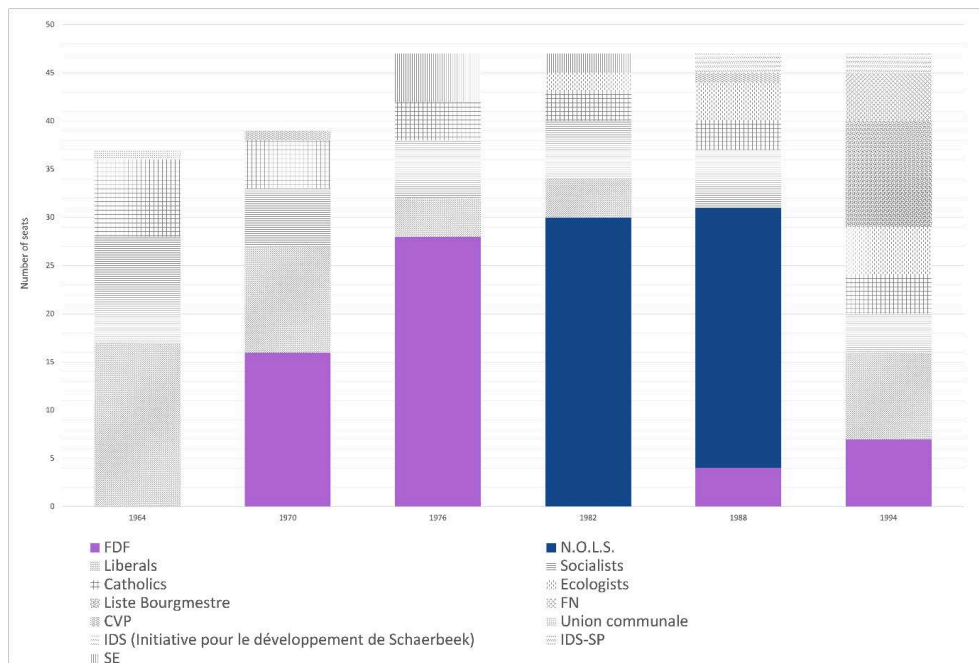
- 1 In the large foyer of the Schaerbeek town hall, busts of the former mayors are displayed. Among them, there is one which has unleashed passions for several years: that of Roger Nols. Should we keep this representation of the man who served four successive terms at the head of the municipality while consistently making the national headlines? With the “separate counters affair” (1971-1976), his arrival on the back of a camel at the town hall (December 31, 1986) and the invitation of the French far-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen in 1984, the Schaerbeek politician has given rise to the most heated controversies.
- 2 In an open letter sent on 5 September 2017 to the municipal authorities of Schaerbeek, the Mouvement contre le Racisme, l'Antisémitisme et la Xénophobie (MRAX) officially requested the removal of “the bust of this patent racist” whose presence among the other mayors “legitimises his unacceptable opinions and his rhetoric of hate”¹. The municipal majority, sensitive to the arguments, proposed to put up a sign recalling the

controversial chapters of Schaerbeek's history symbolised by this mayor, before suggesting a broader reflection based on an assessment of the state of knowledge of the “Nolsist period”.

- 3 This article questions the reasons why the bust and memory of this mayor seem so obtrusive in the public space, and discusses some of the main aspects of the political, socio-economic and urbanistic evolution of the municipality in order to understand the context surrounding this political figure. At the same time, this reflection allows a discussion of the risks of “presentism”, i.e. the use of the past according to current political objectives without taking historical context into account [Beauchemin, 2010: 10; Van Drie and van Boxtel, 2008].
- 4 The extreme polarisation which Roger Nols is the subject of today should not obscure the fact that he was mayor for almost two decades (1970-1989) thanks to his impressive electoral success, which testifies to his great popularity. In the collective memory, however, his name remains associated with the many xenophobic excesses which marked his “reign” and with his love affair with the extreme right, until he joined the Front National at the end of his career. His stigmatising attitudes also targeted Dutch speakers, as this prominent figure of the FDF (Front démocratique des francophones) was accused of “anti-Flemish racism”. During the so-called “counters affair”, he set up separate counters in his municipality not only for the foreign population but also for Dutch-speaking Belgians. This discriminatory measure, aimed at imposing FDF plans regarding the bilingualism of services (and not of persons) and which went against the language legislation adopted in 1963, received a lot of attention nationwide.
- 5 In other words, the debate around this bust is an opportunity to question the local and national impact of this long term of office as well as its particular context. In order to carry out this study, we have mainly examined the works related to the history of the municipality and the country during the “Nolsist” period, which we have supplemented with semi-structured interviews with eleven people².

1. The “Nols Era”

Figure 1. The FDF and the N.O.L.S. list in the Schaerbeek Municipal Council (1964-1994)



Sources: *Le Soir*, 14/10/1952, 13/10/1964, 13/10/1970 and [Mares, 1998]

- 6 The beginning of the “Nols era” dates back to the 1970 municipal elections, which marked a turning point in the history of Schaerbeek. Local politics underwent a first upheaval in 1946 after being dominated by a Liberal-Socialist alliance since the 19th century, with the establishment of a Liberal-Catholic cartel led by liberals Fernand Blum (1947-1963) and Gaston Williot (1963-1970). The alliance seemed solid, and on the eve of the 11 October 1970 elections, the council was still composed of fifteen liberals, ten socialists, ten Catholics, three recent members of the FDF, an independent member of the CVP (Christelijke Volkspartij), an elected member of the Union Schaerbeek, and a member of the Unité francophone. The day after the elections, the FDF made a sensational entry into the municipal council in Schaerbeek as well as in several municipalities of Brussels: it obtained more than a third of the votes, won 16 of the 39 seats and formed a coalition with the PSB (Parti socialiste belge), which, after 24 years, had thus returned to the municipal executive. This victory took place in a very unique national political context: it was the first municipal election since the “Affaire de Louvain”, which had crystallised linguistic and political opposition around the “Flemishisation” of the Université catholique. The FDF – whose positions in the linguistic debate had not gone unnoticed – became the largest party in the urban area of Brussels, where it won several mayoral seats (Schaerbeek, Etterbeek, Forest and Woluwe-Saint-Pierre).
- 7 In Schaerbeek, the victory was accompanied by the accession to power of a man with an atypical background: Roger Nols ousted the civic leaders who had been settled comfortably at the head of the municipality. Born on 19 July 1922 in Tilleur, not far from Liège, and living in Brussels since 1943, Roger Nols had worked in the hospitality sector before getting involved in politics, first in the Walloon movement and then in the Liberal Party. He was an alternate liberal councillor in 1958 and was elected local councillor in 1964 with more than 5 000 votes, after a campaign based mainly on the issue of linguistic freedom. Despite this enviable score (the best personal result after

Mayor Gaston Williot), the PLP (the Parti de la Liberté et du Progrès, which united the liberal forces) did not give him a position as an alderman, so the newly elected representative turned to the FDF, a party in full expansion, which was at the root of the meteoric rise in his political career.

- 8 Nols became mayor in 1970, and the following year he was elected FDF representative in the Chamber of Representatives. In the 1976 municipal elections, he led the Schaerbeek FDF to a new victory, this time obtaining an absolute majority (60 % of the seats in the municipal council). Six years later, the very popular mayor distanced himself from the FDF by presenting an independent list called N.O.L.S. (Nouvelles orientations pour les libertés schaerbeekaises). Another success: the list won 30 of the 47 seats in the municipal council, allowing its leader to wear the mayoral sash once again. In 1983, the split between Nols and the FDF was consummated: he officially left a party which had been badly affected by a crushing defeat in the 1981 legislative elections, to join the lists of the Parti Réformateur libéral (PRL). Under this party's banner, he won a total of 92 969 votes in the 1984 European elections, reflecting a popularity which went far beyond the borders of his municipality. However, giving priority to his mandate as a national deputy, he left the European seat to his running mate Daniel Ducarme. He was re-elected the following year and again in 1987 as a member of the Chamber of Representatives (with some 25 000 votes). In 1988, at the head of another N.O.L.S. list, he once again won the municipal elections, obtaining 7 668 votes, i.e. 5 000 more votes than the second candidate (socialist Guy Lalot).
- 9 The impressive electoral support which Roger Nols received for nearly two decades illustrates the approval of a large segment of Schaerbeek voters of the policies of their mayor. A former FDF elected representative recalls:

“Nols has his place. And how! How long did he reign? Twenty years! Oh yes. He was mayor and was re-elected. The population liked him. There are always opponents. But they are men who want to take his place. No, no, he managed well. (...) Nols (...) was a leader. I thought highly of him. Some people criticised him of course, but those were the ones who did not agree with him! (...) He was a waiter. Not even a waiter – a servant in establishments near the Bourse, in the city. Then he got out of his cage to go into politics, and he succeeded. Bravo! Bravo! (...)”³
- 10 The origins of Nols – this Walloon waiter born in Liège – which contrasted with the profiles of the intellectual leaders of the FDF, quickly gave him the image of the working-class standard-bearer of the defence of the French language in Brussels and of a certain political revival. For example, the “Parc Fou” – a symbolic project which he supported in May 1971 at the very beginning of his mandate – remains a great memory for many of the young residents of Schaerbeek at the time⁴. For one month, Parc Josaphat was transformed into a space for creation and political, social and artistic expression. It was a revolution for a municipality where walking on the park lawn was normally prohibited. But it was probably not so much this event as the virulent discourse of the new mayor and his uncompromising stance in defence of the French language which appealed to a large segment of the French-speaking population in his municipality⁵.
- 11 In 1989, almost two decades later, Nols retired from local politics, officially for health reasons. He handed over the mayoral sash to Léon Weustenraad who was succeeded three years later by Francis Duriau. The municipal elections of 1994 were marked by a reshuffling of the cards, heralding new dynamics under the leadership of Francis Duriau at the head of a mayor's list, and then, in 2000, of Bernard Clerfayt, this time

under the banner of the FDF (now DéFi). Roger Nols also resigned from his deputy's seat in 1992. He had left the track but continued in the direction of the extreme right by joining the Front National in 1995, and then by supporting its dissidents, the Front nouveau de Belgique.

- 12 In the collective memory, Roger Nols is mainly associated with community conflicts, his xenophobic stances and his drift towards the extreme right. However, in reducing his political career to these elements alone, we are not able to understand his longevity and above all his sweeping electoral victories. The debate on the presence of his bust in the town hall of Schaerbeek therefore prompts a retrospective gaze and a contextualisation of his mandates, taking into account the evolution of a municipality which was very much marked by the rapid urban and social transformations of the capital as well as by the national debates on linguistic and migratory issues.

2. The challenges of urbanisation

- 13 Until the middle of the 19th century, Schaerbeek was a rural municipality whose farms, mills, vegetable gardens and cherry orchards produced goods for the Brussels markets. From 1850 onwards, a large number of these agricultural areas were gradually transformed into building plots. The destruction of the city walls, the extension of Rue Royale, the creation of the first railway line between Brussels and Mechelen and the establishment of many different industries on low-cost land changed the landscape of the municipality. At the turn of the 20th century, there were already 2 296 factories located there, employing nearly 8 000 people. This transformation was accompanied by the development of transport infrastructures. Schaerbeek station was built in 1864, and the tramway lines, the new Chaussée de Haecht and Chaussée d'Helmet and, at the beginning of the 20th century, Boulevard Reyers and Boulevard Lambertmont, facilitated internal travel and connections with the other municipalities [Kesteloot *et al.*, 2008; Wayens, 2016; Berckmans, 2014].
- 14 After the chaotic beginnings of urbanisation, a land-use plan was established by the municipal authorities at the beginning of the 20th century, and the different neighbourhoods of Schaerbeek took shape gradually, with a mix of private housing, small industries, local businesses and administrative centres. The municipality took on a more administrative and commercial role and did not escape the expansion of the tertiary sector in the Belgian economy during the second half of the 20th century [Kesteloot *et al.*, 2008]
- 15 Today, Schaerbeek is a very densely populated municipality (132 799 inhabitants as of 1 January 2020, i.e. a little more than 16 800 inhabitants/km²) and is mainly residential, despite the presence of commercial centres and a few traces of its industrial past. Like the other municipalities in the Region, it has many intra-municipal variations. The Brussels Institute for Statistics and Analysis thus divides it into four areas: the lower and upper parts of Schaerbeek⁶, the area around Schaerbeek station and Helmet [Wayens, 2016].
- 16 The lower part of Schaerbeek, which is part of the inner ring around the city of Brussels, was the first area to be urbanised in the mid-19th century. During the interwar period, this middle-class neighbourhood experienced a phenomenon of impoverishment: the dilapidated dwellings were gradually deserted by the wealthy population (who preferred the eastern part of the municipality) and were rented at low

prices to Belgians and immigrants with more modest incomes, which became even more pronounced after World War II [Kesteloot *et al.*, 2008]

- 17 The upper part of Schaerbeek, the neighbourhood around the station and Helmet were urbanised later (in the 1920s and 1930s and after World War II). The population density is still lower than in the lower part of the municipality and, from a social perspective, these neighbourhoods are either mixed (such as the Terdelt garden city) or more affluent (Plasky, Porte de Tervuren and Georges Henri). The area around Schaerbeek station is characterised by large town houses surrounded by vast green spaces, while Helmet – one of the old village centres of Schaerbeek – is a neighbourhood with a mix of middle-class houses and social housing.
- 18 In terms of urban planning, the post-war period and the beginning of the “Nols period” were marked by several major construction projects which changed the municipal landscape completely: construction of the new North Station in conjunction with the North-South connection (1952), destruction of the Tir National (a military complex where shooting exercises were carried out from 1889 to 1963) and grouping of all RTB/BRT national radio and television services at this location (1964-1978), destruction of the Palais des Sports and construction of the large building Le Brusilia (1966-1970), and widening of Boulevard Reyers into an urban motorway (early 1970s).
- 19 Of all of the transformations, the most striking and controversial was undoubtedly the “Plan Manhattan”. The project was launched in 1967, and consisted in building a vast international business district near the North Station, intended to be worthy of the World Trade Center in New York. In order to carry out this immense project, several working-class neighbourhoods occupying some 53 hectares in the municipalities of Brussels, Saint-Josse-ten-Noode and Schaerbeek were razed between 1967 and 1975 “for public utility”, and 13 000 people were evicted or had their homes expropriated. At the beginning of the 1970s, the oil crisis, the sudden change in property ambitions and the very bad reputation of this highly controversial project resulted in its termination. The human and social tragedies caused by the expropriations in addition to political and economic malpractice and the radical architectural and urban planning choices had made it a very sensitive political subject. The area remained undeveloped for nearly twenty years before the existing towers were occupied gradually and new buildings began to appear [Demey, 1992: 105-169; Martens, 2009].
- 20 Despite a broad citizen's movement to provide legal and material support to the victims of expropriation and to speak out against the project and the interests of the various stakeholders, there was never a true rehousing plan [Schoonbrodt, 2007: 384]. During the entire “Nolsist” period, the ten hectares of the former Plan Manhattan in Schaerbeek remained an empty lot. Roger Nols, the new municipal councillor, was strongly opposed to this project, but when he became mayor in 1970 he showed little concern for the fate of the displaced people, who were mainly immigrant workers in a precarious situation and therefore of little interest on the electoral front. The political opportunism of the new mayor, combined with the deterioration of municipal finances, probably explains why this issue was no longer one of his priorities.

3. The language issue and the radicalisation of an FDF mayor

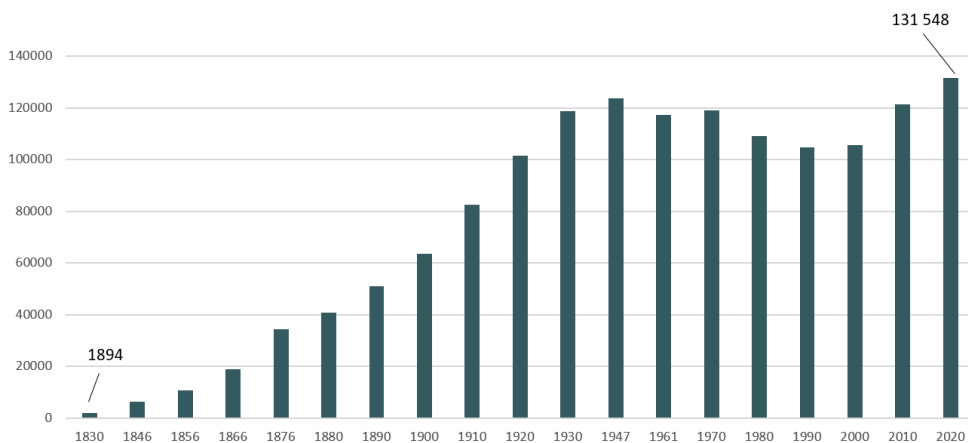
- 21 Roger Nols' lack of interest in the situation of the displaced inhabitants of the North Quarter contrasted with his activism on the linguistic front, where his extraordinary zeal contributed to making him known at national level.
- 22 Until the middle of the 19th century, like most municipalities in Brussels, Schaerbeek was still largely “Flemish”: the 1846 census indicates that 71,5 % of its inhabitants spoke only “Flemish”. In the following decades, the social and cultural prestige of French, the access to the labour market, education (dominated by French as the language of instruction) and internal migration furthered the “francisation” of the working- and middle-class population, to such an extent that in 1947 – the date of the last language census – the situation was completely reversed: 78,2 % of the inhabitants of Schaerbeek declared that they spoke French mainly or exclusively, compared to 21,2 % for Dutch [De Metsenaere, 1988; Kesteloot *et al.*, 2008].
- 23 In the 1960s, however, linguistic tensions – which had become a community issue – were increasingly stronger, and in 1963 the capital became an officially bilingual region. As early as the 1964 municipal elections, the very young Front Démocratique des Francophones (FDF) – which had not yet presented its own lists – supported the lists and figures who clearly demonstrated their willingness to defend the rights of French speakers. In Schaerbeek, the Unité francophone list and liberal Roger Nols were among them. Four years later, the latter – like a large number of municipal councillors in the urban area – supported the “Manifeste des 29”, whereby a group of Brussels parliamentarians strongly defended the unilingualism of service agents and the bilingualism of services, whose linguistic framework should be established “according to the actual needs of the population” [Wynants, 2015].
- 24 In 1971, Roger Nols, who had just become the mayor of Schaerbeek, struck a blow: he decided to apply this principle to the letter and made it widely known in the media. On the initiative of the alderman for the civil registry, his municipality established a linguistic separation for the service counters: five counters for French-speaking Belgians, two for non-Belgians and only one for Dutch-speaking Belgians, while the language legislation of 1963 required bilingualism of municipal agents. The decision caused a media and political outcry. Newspapers, political parties, various associations and other municipal administrations commented extensively on the situation to support or oppose these linguistic policies. The “counter affair” was born, which would fuel the political news from 1971 to 1976. Roger Nols, – supported by the FDF and, more broadly, by a number of defenders of the French-speaking cause in Brussels – set an example: in 1975, the principle of separate counters was extended to the municipalities of Etterbeek, Forest, Ixelles and Uccle, although not all of them were led by an FDF mayor. Dutch-speaking members of parliament, especially from *Volksunie*, were indignant about what they called linguistic “apartheid”. They were joined by various extremist Flemish nationalist movements such as Vlaamse Militanten Orde, Taal Aktie Komitee and Were Di. However, the permanent commission for linguistic control, followed by the Council of State, finally decided that the practice was illegal. In June 1976, the Interior Minister put an end to the era of separate counters officially by sending a special commissioner accompanied by gendarmes before a political compromise was established [De Groef, 2007].

- 25 The separate counters affair in Schaerbeek still caused a big stir, becoming a symbol of linguistic opposition in a country which was moving towards federalisation [Witte and Van Velthoven, 2011]. It contributed in particular to giving the mayor of Schaerbeek a national reputation. In the media, Roger Nols was often portrayed as a staunch defender of the French speakers' cause and, at least initially, his public attacks on immigrant populations received less attention. However, in addition to creating different counters for French and Dutch speakers, the mayor had also set up separate counters for foreigners, on the pretext that their files required specific skills from municipal employees⁸. This was only the beginning: after his triumphant re-election in 1976, he passed even more radical measures against the immigrant population of Schaerbeek.

4. A diversifying population

- 26 From the middle of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th century, the population of Schaerbeek grew dramatically. It increased from 6 000 inhabitants in 1846 to 82 000 in 1910, and reached 125 000 forty years later. The number of inhabitants then stagnated for about fifteen years before dropping between 1965 and 1995. That year, there were only 102 000 inhabitants in the municipality. On the other hand, the first years of the 21st century were marked by a new reversal of the trend and, in 2020, Schaerbeek officially exceeded 131 000 inhabitants. This demographic curve is not exceptional, however, as it is in keeping with the overall evolution of the Brussels population, which has been marked by a phenomenon of peri-urbanisation since the 1950s, with its inhabitants (especially from the middle class) moving to the outskirts of the current Brussels Region, and then beyond this perimeter. This phenomenon, combined with a death rate which was higher than the birth rate, was not immediately compensated by international immigration and thus led to an overall decline in the Brussels population between 1965 and 1995 [Zimmer 2007; Wayens, 2016; Deboosere *et al.*, 2009].

Figure 2. Evolution of the number of inhabitants in Schaerbeek



Source: IBSA website, Population/Annual evolution of the 19 municipalities

- 27 From the post-war period to the end of the 1960s, immigration to Belgium was mainly linked to temporary work contracts offered by growing companies in search of low-skilled labour, yet the crisis in the 1970s led the authorities to curb this economic

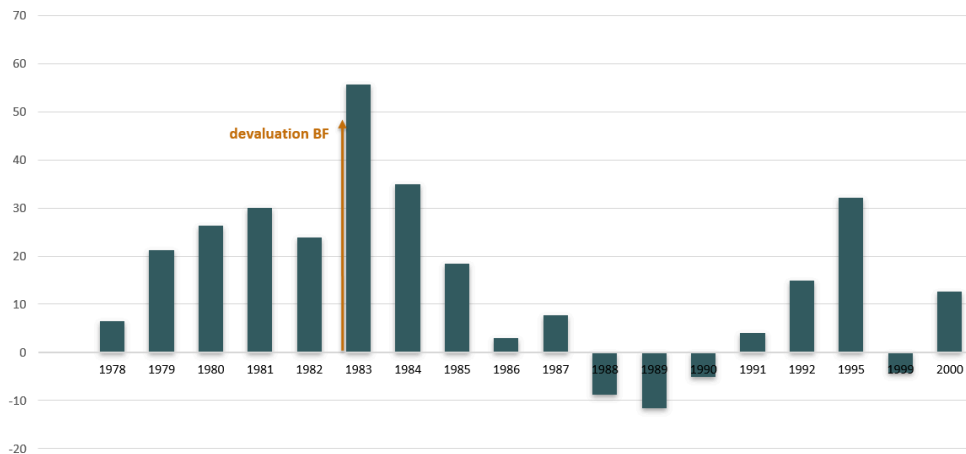
migration. As a result, family reunifications, marriage, applications for asylum, student visas and the free movement of persons within the European Union became the preferred means of immigrating to Belgium [Panciera 1976; Hanin 2005]. At national level, the restructuring and closure of mines and many factories in Wallonia and Flanders, combined with the demand for labour in the capital (especially for large infrastructure projects such as the metro), led to the migration to Brussels of many foreign workers who had already settled in Belgium and were looking for a new job [Noël and Vanderhoff, 2004]. In 1967, more than a third of foreign employees in Belgium resided in Brabant, and half of the Spanish and Moroccan population was concentrated in the same province [Panciera, 1976]. The combination of all of these phenomena led to a significant increase in the proportion of the foreign population in the 19 municipalities, from 7 % of inhabitants in 1961 to 21,1 % in 1977 [Van der Haegen, Juchtmans and Kesteloot, 1995].

- 28 In Schaerbeek, where the population growth observed during the second half of the 19th century was due mainly to the arrival of Belgian workers drawn by the establishment of new industries, the interwar period was marked by the arrival of many French, Dutch, Italian, German and Polish immigrants. These groups – which made up 10 % of the population of the municipality in 1930 and of which a large part was Jewish – had settled around the North Station and Rue Josaphat. From the end of World War II, the migration was extended to North African countries and Turkey. In 1972, 12 % of the population of Schaerbeek was composed of immigrants, and the top five nationalities represented were Morocco, Italy, Spain, France and Turkey [Panciera 1982: 8]. The proportion reached 33,2 % in 1981 and 35,3 % in 1988 [De Biolley, 1994: 36]. These immigrants were mainly concentrated in the neighbourhoods of the lower part of Schaerbeek where they lived side by side with an underprivileged Belgian population occupying low-rent housing, which had been abandoned after World War II by the political elite in favour of the neighbourhoods in the upper part of the municipality [Kesteloot *et al.*, 2008].

5. A mayor who was becoming more radical

- 29 In Schaerbeek, as in the Brussels region as a whole, the middle-class exodus to the suburbs, the impact of the reform of the “Fonds des communes” subsidies in 1976 (which disadvantaged Brussels), the relocation of companies, and the decline in average household income (see figure 3) led to a decrease in municipal revenue, while spending on infrastructure and social assistance increased. Faced with an economic and above all financial crisis at the end of the 1970s, most of the Brussels municipalities were affected by a significant budget deficit. The situation in Schaerbeek was one of the most difficult [Deweerd, 1983: 449]. Like 16 other Brussels municipalities, it had to resort to aid in the form of loans (the “Hatry loans”), which amounted to 1,441 billion Belgian francs. In this difficult financial context, Mayor Nols, who was always seeking media attention, stood out once again: in 1987, he addressed the inhabitants of the neighbouring municipality of Evere directly in a brochure suggesting a merger between the two municipalities. In the end, the merger did not take place, but there were heated debates on the maintenance of municipal services, with the mayor of Schaerbeek going so far as to suggest the closure of several municipal primary schools and Paul Brien Hospital [Vaesen, 2004: 62; Vaesen, 2008: 262 and 369].

Figure 3. Median income in Schaerbeek, adjusted for inflation (base: 1977)



Data source: Grimmeau, J.-P., personal communication, June 11, 2020

- 30 The budget deficit of the municipality, together with the impoverishment of its population and the increase in the number of foreign residents, provided fertile ground for the emergence of xenophobic ideas. The absence of political rights for people of foreign nationality “freed” the discourse of certain elected officials from electoral constraints, in Schaerbeek as well as in several other municipalities of Brussels⁹. Deprived of the right to vote, migrant populations seemed to be the ideal target, justifying the disastrous state of public finances and even the insecurity and unhappiness of the other inhabitants.
- 31 In this context, part of the popularity of Roger Nols during his second mandate at the head of the municipality was based on increasingly xenophobic and racist statements and actions. In 1979, he had no qualms about publishing an “appeal to immigrants” in the *Schaerbeek Info* leaflet, indicating that he could not understand, “in this period of economic crisis and unemployment, their continued presence among us” [quoted in Hanin 2005: 93-94]. The following year, he went further, deciding illegally to limit the civil registration of foreigners from countries outside the European Economic Community. He did this either indirectly, through a sharp increase in municipal taxes on certain administrative documents (work permits, provisional registration certificates, etc.), or directly, through explicit refusals. In June 1981, he ordered a major operation to increase security in a neighbourhood in the lower part of Schaerbeek, resulting in the arrest of 142 people, most of whom were immigrants. Two years later, when the local financial situation was disastrous, he announced to the municipal council and then to the conference of mayors his intention to close 10 of the 16 municipal schools in Schaerbeek, most of which were located in the lower part of Schaerbeek and (according to him) were composed of 60 to 65 % of pupils with an immigrant background [Vaesen, 2008: 369]. The decision – which was finally reversed by the supervisory authority – caused a great stir. It was probably one of the reasons for a decrease in attendance which led to the closure or amalgamation of several of these schools [Vileyn, 2018].
- 32 The mayor's shocking actions did not stop there. On 28 September 1984, his political path led him to invite Jean-Marie Le Pen, the leader of the French extreme right, to give a conference at the Neptunium in Schaerbeek. Two years later, in December 1986,

Roger Nols made the headlines again by riding a camel around the town hall, this time to contest the extension of voting rights to foreigners in municipal elections. These are just some of the highlights of a policy aimed at stigmatising the foreign population in his municipality. To this can be added, throughout the period between 1970 and 1980, a strategy of intimidation aimed at his political and associative opponents, police violence targeting foreign populations, and active participation in the media coverage of a xenophobic and even openly racist discourse [De Biolley, 1994; Hanin, 2005].

- 33 At the time, however, Nols was not alone in raising the “immigrant” issue in his election campaigns or in limiting civil registration. Beginning in 1964, the Minister of Justice had “the power to prohibit foreigners from residing or settling in municipalities where the growth of the foreign population was deemed excessive” [Rea, 2000: 272]. In fact, in Sint-Joost-ten-Noode, registration was already determined by the housing conditions of the applicant. Later, this was also the case in Anderlecht and Ixelles. Moreover, while the Martens-Gol national government passed legislation in 1981 which made it easier for second-generation immigrants to obtain Belgian nationality, it also authorised a ban on the registration of non-European Community nationals in the civil registries of municipalities with a “high” percentage of immigrants. In a sense, Roger Nols' practices had been legalised. In 1982, his “appeal to immigrants” was imitated in Forest, when Henri Lismonde, an FDF municipal councillor, wrote a “letter to the riff-raff” stigmatising the North African population [Wynants, 2015: 53].
- 34 Within his municipality, Roger Nols of course did not act alone. In both the council and the municipal college, many elected officials shared his opinions [Lechat, 2015]. Arguments regarding the financial burden of immigrants, the “level of tolerance” of people of foreign nationality in the population, and the supposedly higher level of delinquency in neighbourhoods with a high concentration of immigrants were put forward in the Schaerbeek municipal council well before Roger Nols became mayor. On 10 July 1964, liberal Robert Blockx did not hesitate to declare that due to the mass arrival of foreign populations in the neighbourhoods of the North Station and Schaerbeek Station, residents were afraid to go out in the evening, which had a negative impact on commercial activities [Khoojinian, 2016: 253]. In the following years, a series of police operations (such as those of 25 June 1965 and 9 September 1966) were carried out in the neighbourhoods of the lower part of Schaerbeek to arrest illegal migrants. Mazyar Khoojinian noted that “these early morning house arrests of ‘foreign delinquents’ whose only crime was that of illegal residence, were particularly anxiety-provoking for their Belgian neighbours and contributed to maintaining a latent xenophobia” [Khoojinian, 2016: 292]. It is therefore important to recall that it was in this very specific context that Roger Nols became mayor. The new mayor actually fanned the flames which were already burning and used his reputation as an agitator to gain political advantage with his increasingly radical stances.
- 35 The impressive electoral victories of Roger Nols and his political longevity illustrate the support of a large segment of voters in Schaerbeek and in Brussels for his radical policies. While this figure – whose bust is now the subject of debate – was very popular, this should not obscure the fact that his actions also gave rise to fierce opposition. This even contributed to the mobilisation of many inhabitants of Schaerbeek within a vast and particularly dynamic fabric of associations in the fight against racism and social exclusion.

6. Schaerbeek, a breeding ground for associations

- 36 At the end of the 1960s, in Schaerbeek as elsewhere, decolonisation, May '68, Vatican II, feminist movements, the desire to escape military service, the wish to go to a “Third World” country, the “discovery” of a “fourth world” close to home, the wish to “experience the life of a worker”, and the will to invest in different social groups were all issues which mobilised many young people. In the 1970s, many young people chose to settle in this municipality due to the many social experiments which were taking place there, such as grouped housing, which brought together people from different backgrounds who were motivated by the same spirit of social commitment, community life and sometimes even a Christian ideal. In this lively context, a host of associations were born¹⁰. In Rue de la Poste alone, almost next door to each other, were MRAX (Mouvement contre le Racisme, l'Antisémitisme et la Xénophobie), Centre Avec (social analysis centre) and Services sociaux des quartiers 1030. Not far from there was the Groupe d'Action Schaerbeek-Saint-Josse, established in opposition to the “Plan Manhattan”, GAFFI (Groupe d'animation et de formation de femmes immigrées) and “Rasquinet” homework school. The number of youth centres had multiplied. These associations, which emerged mainly in the neighbourhoods in the lower part of Schaerbeek, “fulfilled the functions of a ‘spare wheel’ in a failing system, a ‘laboratory’ for public policies and an ‘itching powder’ by questioning decision makers. Above all, they offered personalised support to people in difficulty in order to restore their confidence” [Uytendbroek, 2016: 107].
- 37 In spite of himself, Roger Nols favoured the emergence and development of this intense associative activity in his municipality. A multitude of organisations emerged to oppose his radical and high-profile policies. In 1985, Schaerbeek had no less than 57 Flemish associations active in the fields of continuing education, youth and education [Parmentier, 1988: 234]¹¹. Three years earlier, the Front Antiraciste de Schaerbeek (FAR) had even proposed its own list for the municipal elections. Created after the publication of Roger Nols' “appeal to immigrants” in 1979, the FAR – which held meetings at the café “Le Tigre” located at 190 Rue Josaphat – focused on the issue of the civil registration of foreigners in the municipality and joined forces with various associations such as the Ligue des Droits de l'Homme and MRAX. Despite the support of associations and unions and the enthusiasm of its candidates, the “Démocratie Sans Frontières” list received barely 2 000 votes, and thus could not be represented on the municipal council. From this associative activity, the movement “Démocratie Schaerbeekoise” emerged, and in 1988, after the third appointment of Roger Nols as mayor, it decided to attend each meeting of the municipal council and to publish a summary in a brochure every three months¹².
- 38 All of these initiatives – in addition to the battles fought by a new generation of politicians within the traditional parties – prepared the ground for the revival which marked the life of the municipality after the resignation of the mayor in 1989¹³, as recalled recently by former Green Party minister Isabelle Durant:
- “We campaigned actively against Nols, who was letting the neighbourhoods in the lower part of the municipality rot in an attempt to make the immigrants leave. This work strongly influenced associative activity in Schaerbeek. Today, there is still a strong presence of this autonomous and very independent associative activity.”¹⁴

Thirty years later. Roger Nols forgotten by history?

- 39 It is of course impossible to cover two decades of the “Nolsist” administration in a few pages. The purpose of this paper was rather to explain the electoral victories of this atypical mayor by presenting the political and socio-economic context of Brussels at the time. While Roger Nols' media stunts attracted a lot of attention, he was far from being the only political figure in Brussels to take such radical positions. In the particular context of the 1970s and 1980s, his political opportunism led him to develop a discourse which appealed to a large part of the electorate, thus ensuring excellent electoral results which allowed him to remain in power.
- 40 We have shown, however, that the popularity of Roger Nols should not obscure the fact that many voters and a myriad of associations spoke out vehemently against the policies of their mayor. It is precisely one of these associations which is asking for the removal his bust. Nearly three decades after the end of this atypical term as mayor, the people of Schaerbeek are questioning the appropriateness of keeping the bust of the former mayor in the town hall: does such a choice not amount to a legitimisation of clearly racist positions?
- 41 Should the bust of Roger Nols therefore be removed? The decision is certainly not up to historians, yet this article has demonstrated the need to place the controversial events in a broader context. History is rarely the work of one man or woman, yet this does not take away from the individual responsibility of each and every person. This quick historical review allows us to recall that it would be too easy – and even too simplistic – to overlook the fact that the discourse and actions of Roger Nols received true popular and political support, as illustrated by his electoral victories. Focusing the criticism on him alone could exonerate those who supported racist and xenophobic discourses and policies openly or in the secrecy of the ballot box, both in Schaerbeek and in other municipalities of the capital.
- 42 The ongoing debates regarding the bust of Roger Nols raise the question of the complex interactions between the past and the present (and even the future). The proposals regarding the fate of the bust range from the request for “nothing at all to be done” (fearing a certain form of historical revisionism and/or an opening up of the wounds of the past) to the wish to have the bust removed (to clearly mark the disapproval of Nolsist politics today). Between these two extremes lie a variety of options which should be discussed in depth within the municipality, such as the addition of some historical background information or an obvious sign of protest with regard to the bust (e.g. via a transformation or relocation of it). All of these strategies point to the broader question of how we deal with the past when it is controversial, sensitive or still “warm” (terms used by Wansink *et al.* [2018: 500-501] in the case of traumatic events). How do frameworks, concepts, tools, skills, etc allow one to “think” or “reason” historically? In Schaerbeek, the issue which focuses on Roger Nols indeed goes beyond the municipality, and is a subject of debate almost everywhere in the world, showing the complexity of having a reasoned dialogue with the past as well as the danger of applying the principle of “historical oblivion”.
- 43 In other words, the answer to the seemingly simple question, “Should the bust of Roger Nols be removed?” belongs to the people of Schaerbeek. It requires a vast public debate which, in order to be conducted serenely, must consider the historical context

presented here as well as the many possible options as to the future of controversial symbols in our public spaces.

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Albert Martens (sociologist at UCL-KUL, actively involved with the issue of housing and the Plan Manhattan, 06/27/2018),

Georges Verzin (N.O.L.S, FDF, MR politician 28/06/2018),

Jean-Pierre Van Gorp (N.O.L.S, FDF, PS politician, 16/07/2018),

Jacques Bouvier (municipal secretary during the terms of Roger Nols, 18/07/2018),

Jean-Marie Faux (Jesuit, FAR member, founder of Centre AVEC, former secretary-general of MRAX, 7/20/2018),

Bernard Clerfayt (FDF mayor, 24/07/2018 and 03/02/2021),

Paul Toussaint (alderman for finance under Roger Nols, 08/24/2018),

Luc Uytendbroek (founder of Démocratie schaarbeekoise, 11/09/2018).

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NOTES

1. <http://mrx.be/wp/lettre-ouverte-du-mrx-aux-autorites-communales-de-schaerbeek-pour-le-retrait-du-buste-de-roger-nols/>
2. These interviews were conducted during the summer of 2018. In order to determine who to interview, we adopted a purposive sampling approach [Bryman, 2016: 187] using two criteria: (1) people who had been active in political or associative circles during the period concerned; and (2) people from different socio-professional backgrounds with different views on the Nolsist period, in order to incorporate a variety of perspectives [Mortelmans, 2013: 153]. A list of these people is included at the end of the article.
3. Anonymous account by one of our interviewees.
4. Interview with Jean-Pierre Van Gorp, 16/07/2018; Mai 1971 : Un printemps à Schaerbeek, *Le pays est à vous*, 1971. <https://www.sonuma.be/archive/ce-pays-est-a-vous-du-18061971> [accessed on 16/02/2020]. Van Gorp was a municipal councillor in Saint-Josse before returning to Schaerbeek and becoming alderman for youth (N.O.L.S, 1988 to 1991), alderman for the civil registry (FDF, 1994-2000), alderman for public works (FDF, 2000 to 2006) and then a municipal councillor (PS, 2006 to 2018)
5. Interview with Paul Toussaint, 24/08/2018.
6. The lower part of Schaerbeek includes the neighbourhoods of Chaussée de Haecht, North Quarter and Brabant Quarter. The upper part of Schaerbeek includes the neighbourhoods of Colignon, Terdelt, Josaphat, Gare Josaphat, Parc Josaphat, Dailly, Plasky, Reyers, Georges Henri and Porte de Tervuren.
7. In the absence of a standardised language, it was in fact mostly a Brabant dialect. These figures should nevertheless be interpreted with caution [Martin *et al.*, 1987].
8. Interview with Bernard Clerfayt, 03/02/2021.
9. The legislation on naturalisation was not relaxed until 1984. 200 000 people benefited from it in Brussels between 1989 and 2009 [Deboosere, 2009].

10. Interviews with France Blanmaillant, Chille Deman, Luc Walley (25/06/2018), Albert Martens (27/06/2018), Jean-Pierre Van Gorp (16/07/2018), Jean-Marie Faux (20/07/2018) and Luc Uytendbroek (11/09/2018).

11. In addition to the associations already mentioned, let us also mention the presence in Schaerbeek of LDH (Ligue des Droits de l'Homme), trade unions (FGTB and CSC), RDM (Regroupement démocratique marocain), AFM (Association des Femmes marocaines), AJMB (Association de la Jeunesse marocaine de Belgique) UTTB (Union des Travailleurs turcs de Belgique) UFTB (Union des Femmes de Turquie en Belgique), CCTB (Centre culturel des Travailleurs de Turquie), ACET (Association éducative et culturelle de Turquie) and CTIAA/Türk-Danis (Centre turc d'information, d'animation culturelle et d'action sociale).

12. See <https://demoscha.be>.

13. Interview with Bernard Clerfayt, 24/07/2018.

14. DE BOECK, P., 2021. Isabelle Durant : « On a beaucoup de chance d'avoir le parc Josaphat à Schaerbeek ». In: *Le Soir*, 13/08/2021.

ABSTRACTS

Should the bust of Roger Nols be removed? The question is now being debated. This article questions the reasons why the representation and memory of the former mayor of Schaerbeek seem so obtrusive in the public space, and emphasises the need to place the controversial events in a broader historical context. It cautions against focusing the criticism only on him, which could exonerate those who supported racist and xenophobic discourses and policies openly or in the secrecy of the ballot box, both in Schaerbeek and in other municipalities of the capital. This reflection allows a discussion of the risks of “presentism”, i.e. the use of the past according to current political objectives without taking historical reality into account. It shows that it is not the role of historians to make a decision about the future of this bust, but that they do have an essential role to play in documenting the context surrounding this controversial figure.

Faut-il déboulonner le buste de Roger Nols ? La question fait aujourd'hui débat. Interrogeant les raisons pour lesquelles la représentation et le souvenir de l'ancien bourgmestre de Schaerbeek paraissent si encombrants dans l'espace public, cet article souligne la nécessité de replacer les événements contestés dans un contexte historique plus large. Il met en garde contre une critique centrée sur la seule personne de Roger Nols qui pourrait exonérer à bon compte celles et ceux qui ont soutenu ouvertement ou dans le secret des urnes, des discours et politiques racistes et xénophobes, tant à Schaerbeek que dans d'autres communes de la capitale. Cette réflexion permet de discuter les risques du « présentisme », c'est-à-dire l'utilisation du passé en fonction d'objectifs politiques actuels sans tenir compte de la réalité historique. Elle montre qu'il ne revient pas aux historiens de prendre une décision sur l'avenir d'un tel buste mais qu'ils ont par contre un rôle essentiel à jouer pour documenter le contexte dans lequel l'action de la personne contestée s'est inscrite.

Moet het borstbeeld van Roger Nols worden weggehaald? Die vraag vormt momenteel het voorwerp van debat. In dit artikel onderzoeken de auteurs waarom de voorstelling van en de gedachtenis aan de vroegere burgemeester van Schaerbeek voor zoveel wrevel lijken te zorgen in de openbare ruimte, en maken ze duidelijk dat de omstreden gebeurtenissen in een bredere

historische context moeten worden geplaatst. Ze waarschuwen ervoor dat door de kritiek te focussen op Roger Nols alleen, al diegenen die – openlijk of in het geheim via de stembussen – racistische en xenofobe standpunten en politici hebben gesteund er goedkoop van af zouden kunnen komen, zowel in Schaarbeek als in andere Brusselse gemeenten. Hun analyse doet de vraag rijzen naar de risico's van het “presentisme”, met andere woorden het gebruik van het verleden in functie van de huidige politieke doelstellingen zonder rekening te houden met de historische realiteit. Ze toont aan dat het niet aan historici is om te beslissen over de toekomst van zo'n borstbeeld, maar dat zij wel een belangrijke rol vervullen bij het documenteren van de context waarop de actie van de betwiste figuur indertijd aansloot.

INDEX

Mots-clés: communes, histoire, immigration, luttes urbaines, personnel politique

Trefwoorden gemeenten, geschiedenis, immigratie, stedelijke trijd, politiek personeel

Subjects: 1. histoire – culture – patrimoine

Keywords: municipalities, history, immigration, urban struggles, political staff

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