

Views from Abroad. Foreign Historians on a Small State by the North Sea. With Reflections on Historical Writing in Belgium and Elsewhere

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"That very commonality with other Western European states and societies, however, is what makes Belgium unique" (Carl Strikwerda).

The editorial board of a journal that includes the label Belgium so prominently in its name, certainly could not let the 175th anniversary of Belgium and its 25th anniversary of federalism pass without mention. However, on this occasion we prefer not do the talking ourselves. Instead, we have asked some foreign historians, specialists in the modern and contemporary history of Belgium, to give their view on the history of Belgium and its historiography. Indeed, our request was twofold: on the one hand to situate, within the field of their specialization, the country within its broader European context and, on the other, to discuss and evaluate Belgian historical writing. However, we let the authors have free reign on where to focus.

1. REFLECTIONS

Amongst the authors that we contacted are both well-known historians with a long-standing record, as well as younger colleagues who, nevertheless, have earned their spurs. All have done original research in and on Belgium and hence are familiar with the country. In this respect, it is not without impor-

¹ I wish to express this appreciation to the colleagues that were so generous to offer their observations and suggestions on an earlier version of this text, in particular Jan Art, Shu-chin 'Claire' Chang, Eric Geerkens, Peter Scholliers, Eric Vanhaute, and Leen Van Molle. Their contribution was substantial in the realization of this text. They are, however, not bound in any way (nor is the editorial board of the BTNG/RBHC) by the opinions and statements expressed. I would also like to thank Annick De Coninck, who took care of the copy-editing of this issue, and Chris Brennan, who revised the English text of this introduction. Incidentally, this introduction does not have the ambition to give an overview of the literature about Belgium either by Belgian or by foreign scholars. The references only aim to illustrate some arguments and rather unveil the limitations of my knowledge of the literature on Belgium.

tance to observe that they all know at least two of Belgium's national languages, at least enough to be able to consult the primary and secondary sources in their original state. That may seem self-evident, but those who are familiar with this country will understand that it is not, if only because it is often not easy outside Belgium (and obviously the Netherlands) to learn the Dutch language. It goes without saying that to learn French and German, there are usually more opportunities available. Incidentally, in this respect, we cannot help but observe that in Belgium itself, the knowledge of other national languages (certainly of German) is not always perfect, and is sometimes downright problematic, especially among coming generations of students. So, before we adventure into learning Chinese, as some particularly visionary Flemish politicians like to recommend, perhaps in high school one should first of all focus on mastering the main European languages, English for sure, as well as the main national languages and, perhaps from a historical point of view, also Spanish.

That a thorough understanding of English is important for historians – in historical science, French had held a dominant position until very recently – comes to the fore in the predominance of Anglo-Saxon writers in this special issue of the BTNG/RBHC. This preponderance is no accident, although we did contact Dutch and French-speaking historians, who at various stages and for various reasons – mainly lack of time – declined. But indeed, the interest from neighbouring countries for Belgium is fairly limited. Dutch historians have an eye for the whole world, and as far as regards contemporary Belgium, the author of one of the major syntheses on the history of the Low Countries, E.H. Kossman (1978), has not find a successor. The absence of any French author has – apart from the fact that French historians are very preoccupied – much to do with the strong national orientation of contemporary historical research in France, even if there is much interest in the history of European integration and there exists an important world history tradition. The latter, however, views the world largely from a French (post-colonial) perspective and focuses almost exclusively on non-European objects. In Germany, the Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität in Münster hosts the Centre for the Study of the Low Countries (Zentrum für Niederlandestudien), whose founder and former director, Horst Lademacher, publishes in this issue a remarkable contribution. However, this institution in Germany is unique of its kind. Also, in Great Britain the interest in Belgium is restricted, though surely more important than in France and the Netherlands (see below). In the USA and the rest of the world the history of Belgium, if it is studied, is part of a larger history of the Low Countries or, rather of the whole of (Western)

Europe. Sometimes though, we do find some interest in Belgian history in departments of Germanic languages and cultures.²

The complaints of a stepmotherly attitude towards Belgium in international historical writing, even if they are sometimes shared in the contributions presented hereafter (particularly by historians that not only work on Belgium, such as Proctor and Horn), in our view need to be put into perspective though. Still, foreign historians regularly publish overviews, whether or not under the common denominator of the Low Countries, thus including the Netherlands and Luxemburg, in which modern and contemporary Belgium figures prominently (Cook, 2004; Arblaster, 2005; Chang, 2005). The more penetrating interest in the country however, is very much focused on certain issues and moments. In the first place the national question and the way it is dealt with drew the attention of foreign scholars, from historians as well as social and political scientists (see references, De Wever, 2003, which should certainly be viewed along with Koll, 2003, 2005; Hossay, 2002; von Busekist, 1997; Fix, 2001; Zolberg, 1974, to name just a few of the more important studies). Particularly among political scientists, Belgium stands as an example of what the Dutch-American political scientist Arend Lijphart (1977) called "consociational democracies". Lijphart's understanding of the democratic function of deeply divided and fragmented societies, which until this day is considered very relevant (Steiner & Ertman, 2002), has played a major role in the revision of the Belgian (as well as Dutch) 'pillarized' past and present (Huyse, 1984; Hellemans, 1990a, 1990b; Wintle, 2000; Blom, 2000). The comparative perspective, as it has further been developed by the Dutch historian Hans Righart (1986) and particularly the Belgian sociologist Staf Hellemans (1990b), replaced much of the former's views on pillarization which, it seems, had been obscured by the ideological and political perspectives scholars in these countries inevitably shared (Pasture, 2002; Pasture & Damberg, forthcoming). The social history of Belgium, in particular of the labour movement (Strikwerda, 1997; Polasky, 1995), working conditions (Hilden, 1994), industrial relations (Prigge, 2000) and social insurance and welfare (Fix, 1999), also raised considerable international attention. Not surprisingly in the light of their own past, German scholars study the interna-

² For example, the Department of Germanic Studies of the Trinity College in Dublin, that in April 2005 held a 'symposium' about Belgium, the proceedings of which are just being published: Barnard et al. (2005). Its reading, however, risks to leave the reader with a certain *nausée*, because the eagerness with which some authors – particular the British historian Tony Judt and the Dutch writer Benno Barnard – like to focus and amplify the dark sides of Belgian politics and society until the country appears a (however not totally unsympathetic) banana republic.

tional politics and position of Belgium, as well as both world wars (Dolderer, 1989; Klefisch, 1988; Helmreich, 1976; Jacobs, 1976; Lademacher, 1971). Also, British and American historians feel drawn to these events (Zuckerman, 2004; Horne & Kramer, 2000; Thomas, 1983; Kieft, 1972) and they recently also put Congo on the agenda (Ewans, 2002; Hochschild, 1998).

From the contributions presented here, as from the comments that we have noted in the margins of this special issue, it appears that foreign scholars have often experienced difficulty in finding research material on Belgium abroad. That is most evidently the case for primary sources, for which 'field work' is often necessary. Perhaps one has too easily ended the tradition of publishing and editing primary sources and repertories, such as the famous 'blue series' *Bijdragen/Contributions* of the Interuniversity Centre of Contemporary History (Interuniversitair Centrum voor Hedendaagse Geschiedenis/Centre Belge d'Histoire Contemporaine), the last issue of which was published in 1992. There is a case to be made that the major scientific institutions should resume promoting primary source editing. Moreover, many (particularly public) archives still await efficient archiving and cataloguing. As a belated and happy result of 'pillarization' however, the Flemish government (to some extent followed by the French community) has installed a fairly generous system of subsidizing archives and documentation centres that collect and archive documentation (also audio-visual materials) originating from the many 'politicized' social movements, otherwise notoriously hard to survive.³ Also, other private archives and documentation centres with public help carved out a niche for themselves in the now blossoming landscape of private archival and documentation centres, particularly in Flanders. Public archives, including the General Archives, only recently started to catch up, apart from the Centre for Historical Research and Documentation on War and Contemporary Society (Centre d'Études et de Documentation Guerre et Sociétés contemporaines/Studie- en Documentatiecentrum Oorlog en Hedendaagse Maatschappij, CEGES/SOMA), a division of the General Archives, which under the dynamic leadership of its former director José Gotovitch, was a precursor in collecting information about World War II. In 1997, it transformed itself into a major centre for the study of war and society in the twentieth century. All these centres have already published inventories and catalogues on the internet (<http://surf.to/BEL-archives>),⁴ though the next step of digitalizing and

³ These pillarized archives and documentation centres are the Archives and Documentation Centre for Flemish Nationalism ADVN in Antwerp; the Amsab-Institute for Social History in Gent, the Kadoc Documentation and Research Centre on Religion, Culture and Society in Leuven, and the Liberal Archives in Gent.

⁴ One may note the pioneering role of the Mundaneum in Mons in that respect.

publishing primary sources on the web is only just beginning to be made. Another major move in the right direction of facilitating the access to primary sources is the so-called Max Wildiersfonds, installed by the Flemish government in 1999 (but apparently stopped since 2004). It allows the Flemish Fund for Scientific Research (FWO-Vlaanderen) to support research projects of which the opening of private primary sources constitutes an important part.⁵ The ODIS project, that is the Research Resource Centre and Database for the Study of 19th and 20th Century Intermediary Structures in Flanders (Onderzoekssteunpunt en databank intermediaire structuren in Vlaanderen, 19e-20e eeuw), is one of these projects realized under the impulse of the Max Wildiersfonds. It has been set up by the four major private archives and documentation centres and has created a huge database with regard to the intermediate structures in Flanders.⁶ The Archiefwijzer Vlaanderen, as well as the Archiefbank Vlaanderen, which has recently been put into operation, offer the historian in Flanders keys to the many public, semi-public and private archives and collections, though only for those who know Dutch. It is indeed revealing that many of these websites are in Dutch, the English pages ever still 'under construction'.

The lack of information about Belgian history, however, has also something to do with the research itself and the way it is publicized. In particular as regards the latter, it is obvious that a number of problems manifest themselves, particularly – though not exclusively – for Flemish historians. Their French-speaking colleagues have at their disposal an invaluable asset, for they have easy access to the French academic world, in Europe as well as overseas. However, French has lost its dominant position as an international academic language that it managed to keep with regards to history until the 1970s at least; it now stands at the same 'rank' as other large European national languages such as German, Italian and Spanish, which in some particular fields may rival English. In any case, much historical writing is traditionally published in one's own national language. In this respect Flemish publishers, even if they have a seat in the Netherlands, only cover the Flemish community. French publishers in contrast have a fairly decent distribution outside francophone Belgium as well. Even French authors regularly come to Brussels to have their work published. The Belgian university presses, incidentally, are not exactly known for their zeal to promote the work of their

⁵ Since the regionalization of science policy, also the National Fund for Scientific Research NFWO-FNRS is regionalized. There are, however, many parallels in the science policies in the Flemish and French communities, and particularly between the FWO in Flanders and the FNRS in francophone Belgium.

⁶ See <http://www.odis.be/ned/hom/home.htm>.

authors. Particularly in the English-speaking world, Belgian academic publishers are notoriously absent. Moreover, Belgian historians quite often publish their work with (very) local publishers. These works may have a wide dissemination in one region – the Flemish Davidsfonds offers a case in point – but are not usually picked up by academic libraries outside the region. Special mention should be made of the many 'licentiate's theses' (more or less equivalent to large Master theses), that often contain a wealth of information and insight and are therefore highly valued by foreign scholars – see the example of Horn hereafter – but which are not easily accessible. Nevertheless, not a few of them find their way into publication, either as a book – albeit mostly one with a limited distribution – or as an article that resumes the main conclusions of the thesis. Doctoral theses usually are published as well, either as a book or in the form of several articles (often also in English), though sometimes with delay.⁷

At first sight, the way to remedy the lack of scientific distribution of Belgian historians is to publish more in international journals, as is more and more demanded by federal and academic research authorities. However, notwithstanding all the fuss in that respect, journal articles for historians do not function as central references. This is no different for the large national journals (either general or specialized in a particular field or period) in a 'forum language' such as the BTNG/RBHC, the *Bijdragen tot de Eigentijdse Geschiedenis/Cahiers d'histoire du temps présent*, or the *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Filologie en Geschiedenis/Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* (even if their distribution is truly international), as well as the well known international journals, from the *Annales ESC* over *Past and Present* to the *Journal of Contemporary History*, to name just a few.⁸ In practice, historians publish

⁷ François (1992; 2003) offers a catalogue of doctoral and licentiate's theses, to be completed for the current years by the *Mededelingenblad van de Belgische Vereniging voor Belgische Geschiedenis/Bulletin d'information de l'Association Belge d'Histoire Contemporaine*. Most universities now publish summaries on their websites. The BTNG/RBHC publishes extensive summaries of the doctoral theses. Via www.ethesis.net – a private initiative of the "Sint-Lodewijk" schools community in Wetteren – many individual licentiate's theses can be consulted completely online. With the implementation of the Bologna reform, the licentiate's thesis, the proof that the graduate is able to make a historical analysis on the basis of original research, will disappear from the curriculum. It cannot be replaced by a one-year Master thesis as will become the rule in Flanders.

⁸ Because national languages are so important in human sciences, one refers to the term 'forum language' (*forumtaal*), meaning the language in which the international scholarly community publishes its research on a certain topic (Waelkens, 2006). In practice, this implies that for Belgian history Dutch is used as the forum language alongside French. However, the forum language is relevant only for the debate between the specialists concerned (as well as the larger

mainly first, often preliminary results in journals (sometimes just to 'occupy' the field), or research that, for whatever reason, did not produce enough material for a book, sometimes studies that do not belong to the main argument, or – and in this case they are substantial contributions to the field (though not recognized as such by the 'bookkeepers' of scientific rankings!) – review articles that discuss the state of affairs regarding a certain subject. In that respect, one just has to look at the references of the chapters published here: these authors refer to books, to articles in books, but rather seldom to articles in journals.⁹ Many so-called international historical journals, incidentally, in practice are no more (nor less) than the major national journals of British and Americans. Moreover, publication in journals – as the example of social sciences shows abundantly clear – leads to fragmentation and redundancy. Research that forms a unity, nevertheless, is presented to the public in several disconnected pieces, by which the interconnectivity and the coherence (in historical writing often the essence) is lost. Redundancy threatens when the same results again and again appear somewhere in the fragmented market, each time though with a slightly different emphasis and, of course, under a different title. Another problem is that for historians, a link with the social environment (the *society*) is essential. The legitimacy of historical research – though this is relevant for all social sciences, though even probably more so for historians – not only depends on the recognition of peers, but (certainly in the longer term) also on that of the social environment (the society) in which the research is embedded. For this social environment, relatively easy accessible books, in the national language, remain the most appropriate means of publication, also for professional historians.

However, besides an inadequate dissemination of research results, Belgian historical practice raises some particular problems. Notwithstanding considerable efforts and progress, the presence of Belgian historians at international forums remains fairly limited, although they manifest themselves more and more at international conferences and in editorial boards of international journals (much less as editors of international book series though). To a large extent, thanks to the subsidizing policy of the FWO and the FNRS (alongside more local funds, such as the Academische Stichting Leuven), there are many opportunities nowadays for international contact through international research communities, conferences and workshops, the importance of which, so Tammy Proctor informs us in this issue, should not be underestimated. In that

public, important for historians: see below). To have a voice in the international debate, a publication in English remains required.

⁹ One may note though the occasional exception, such as Franklin Mendels's article on protoindustrialization (Mendels, 1972) in the contribution of Alter and Gutmann below.

respect, mention should be made to the possibilities of residing at a foreign research institute, as well as inviting foreign scholars to Belgium, for which funds are also available from the FWO, the universities as well as from foreign institutions such as the European Science Foundation and the Fulbright Program for scholars from (and to) the USA. In addition, the Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie van België voor Wetenschappen en Schone Kunsten offers international scholars fellowships at its Flemish Academic Centre for Science and the Arts (VLAC). The Belgian authorities, however (though they are far from unique in this respect), make things quite difficult for foreign scholars to come to Belgium for a longer term: Those who want to come for more than three months, need a work permit, and the Kafkaesque paperwork that is required is very discouraging, particular for visiting lecturers and professors.¹⁰ Tammy Proctor moreover mentions the poor flexibility of the Belgian banking system with regards to international payments, an observation that is often backed up with complaints by foreign students and scholars about their struggle with Belgian institutions, be it private or public.

The lack of information and knowledge abroad about Belgium should also be attributed to the limited historical production. Of course, Belgium is a small country, which cannot support large numbers of historians. In addition, historical research is fragmented over universities and linguistic communities and regions. That modern and contemporary historical research often is restricted to the own community or region, is an additional handicap. What is more, professional historians suffer from high administrative burdens imposed by public authorities, enthusiastically supported by the administration of their universities, as well as a high teaching load, the result of which being that actual research time for Belgian professors and lecturers is less than many of their foreign counterparts. The opportunities for collective research projects, though certainly available, are limited. There hardly exists a parallel labour market for professional historians outside the academic staff, certainly not to develop a life-long career.¹¹ In contrast to other social scientists and to historians in other (not by accident mainly Protestant countries), Belgian historians find it hard to gain access to additional funding, such as those provided by the Ford-Foundation, the Volkswagen-Stiftung or even European

¹⁰ See for instance "België schrikt wetenschappers af", *De Standaard*, 10 september 2005. For this reason the KU Leuven for example limits the stay of a visiting lecturer or professor for one semester to three months instead of the normal four months. At the time of writing the government announced its will to abolish the need for a work permit for visiting scholars. Details on when this might take effect and on the conditions remain unspecified though.

¹¹ Research projects, such as those funded by the FWO and the FNRS, allow for hiring junior scholars only, rarely of postdoctoral let alone senior fellows.

institutions: the FWO in Flanders and the FNRS in the French-speaking community remain by far the most important subsidizing institutions, and their possibilities are limited.

But perhaps the orientation of the Belgian historians are also to blame for the arguably weak position of Belgian historiography. At an international conference in Brussels on the state of social history in Belgium, later published in the proceedings (Van den Eeckhout & Scholliers, 1997), Patricia Van den Eeckhout and Peter Scholliers argued vehemently that Belgian social historians got out of touch with the international developments in historical writing (in particular the linguistic turn then still fashionable). Apart from blatant rejection and ignorance, their case caused embarrassment, first of all among foreign scholars because they did hold their Belgian colleagues in high esteem (also not all were equally charmed by the results of the linguistic revolt), but among their compatriots as well, because more than one certainly felt there was some truth in the criticisms expressed. Similarly, Sophie De Schaepdrijver, a Belgian historian working at Penn State University (USA), stated that the renewal of a Belgian historical perspective regarding World War I was largely inspired by foreign predecessors (De Schaepdrijver, 2002, 112-113; see also Proctor below). Moreover, it has regularly been observed that Belgian modern and contemporary historians apparently tend to avoid controversial themes from their own history – the example of the Belgian colonial past always surfaces in that context. Rather than letting ones guard down and so having to face criticism, let alone out of loyalty to the authorities or to avoid embarrassment to the royal family – as suggested by Reynebeau (2005, 108 ff.; see also De Schaepdrijver, 2000) – it seems to me rather an expression of the limited vision or breathing space of Belgian modern and contemporary historians. It must effectively be admitted that great interpretative syntheses often lack, as Conway – in our opinion overstated though – comments regarding the political history of Belgium after 1945.¹² Indeed, one can hardly escape the impression that in Belgium there reigns a certain 'academism', particularly in Flanders, that advocates a rather traditional, strongly empiric and historically-critical historiography, which does incorporate new insights, but which does not stimulate methodological and theoretical innovations, which holds back from broad interpretative syntheses and which

¹². Possibly the new history of Belgium (*Nieuwe Geschiedenis van België*, published in Dutch by Lannoo in Tielt and in French as *Nouvelle Histoire de Belgique* with Complexe in Brussels), of which the first volume is just published (Witte et al., 2005), will offer an answer to that criticism. Conway also points to the lack of a synthesis of postwar history of the socialist party, which indeed lacks (see Klijn, 1990 though). A study of the Leuven student movement, as Horn suggests, is in the making (by Lieve Gevers and Louis Vos).

misses somewhat the integration into the wider international scholarly debates (although in our opinion the great renewal of historical writing, in particular the 'linguistic' and 'cultural turn' has since rolled back internationally, to give way, precisely, to a return of a more pragmatic, indeed 'academic' way of historical writing. See for example the new institutional history).¹³

In our opinion, based on extensive reading of international and Belgian historiography, in particular also of the contributions of the reputed foreign scholars presented here, there are no great differences in the methodological and theoretical framework.¹⁴ And, particularly as Alter and Gutmann show with regard to historical demography, Belgian historians are certainly not by definition absent in the international debate. We hope our distinguished colleagues will not take it the wrong way if we have to admit that their studies presented here do not bring to light major new facts nor insights – it would not be reasonable to expect so, nor did we ask for it. Still, they do add something to Belgian historiography.

The main difference between the international and the traditional Belgian historiography surely is that the international – particularly the Anglo-Saxon – scholars approach Belgian history from a much broader perspective and situate it in a larger context.¹⁵ As Proctor in the wake of De Schaepdrijver very explicitly comments, Belgian modern and contemporary historians have more of an eye for detail, they focus more on sources – though the days of the so-called 'source fetishism' also belong to a distant past – but they neglect to confront the national and international scholarly community and engage in a real debate. Moreover, the profound regionalism, as well as the legacy of pillarization, still largely shape the choice of the subjects, often local and sometimes too easily restricted to one political family or 'pillar', as well as the references used. The latter, however, is far from a typical Belgian feature and should not exclusively be attributed to the weight of pillarization. Indeed, in contrast to a widely held idealized view on scientific practice, scholars with a common background often use the same frameworks of reference, and notwithstanding the existence of the internet as well as more traditional heuristic instruments, they do not that easily refer to the work of colleagues who do

¹³ See also Defoort (2003). Because of its orientation on France, francophone historical writing in my view is more dynamic and more in tune with international developments in historical practice and writing (see for example the stronger and earlier importance of the history of representation in Wallonia). However, by not participating in the international debates dominated by Anglo-Saxon historical writing, francophone historians to a certain extent do share the isolation French historiography experiences (but may start to overcome).

¹⁴ I am of course well aware of the hazardous character of such a comparison, given the selection of authors.

¹⁵ Not surprisingly in the contributions that follow, since we asked for just that.

not belong to their usual academic networks, not even within the same country or discipline.¹⁶ Only a greater mobility between academic institutions and countries can bring solace here, particularly as regards appointments. In that respect, however, Belgium is notorious, for as probably one of the last countries in the world, an inheritance of pillarization, vacancies for staff functions at the universities, in the History departments even more than others, are rarely filled by candidates from outside the demanding university. At first sight, the latest nominations at the University of Antwerp appear to open a new era. However, the appointments concerned newly created positions after the extension of this university's academic curriculum, and at closer look appear neatly distributed among graduates from the major Flemish universities of Antwerp, Brussels, Gent, and Leuven.¹⁷

However, these observations need to be put into perspective. Although some catching up was necessary, in the studies of current generations, a certain theoretical and problem-oriented approach cannot be ignored. The FWO and the FNRS, as mentioned by far the most important funding institutions for graduate as well as postdoctoral research grants, attach much importance to innovative research questions and an international setting. Partly for that reason, many current doctoral and postdoctoral research proposals adopt a comparative or transnational perspective, in which the Belgian case is systematically compared with its neighbouring countries.¹⁸ Here too, the FWO

¹⁶ A strong example from a totally different field as the one of Belgian history: in Hughes-Warrington (2005), presented as a critical overview of world history, one is confronted with a true canon of the World History Society. However, in the whole collection, just one single work is quoted which is not published in English – a French text of the fourteenth century Arab writer Ibn Khaldoun (1332-1406). Also who does not figure in the authors' privileged address book, like most non-Western scholars, is not mentioned: Even Edward Said is relegated to a footnote! In this context see also Bourdieu (2002).

¹⁷ The nomination of dr. Pieter Lagrou, a graduate from the KU Leuven, at the ULB is remarkable in more than one respect, for here not only former ideological borders were transgressed, but linguistic ones as well. Incidentally, one should refrain from too easily overstating the negative effects of the practice of 'internal' appointments – which are real enough – since, partly because of the intermediate role of the FWO/FNRS in the development of research careers, enough buffers are provided to guarantee a high quality of academic staff (as is confirmed by external visitation reports) and it allows, to a certain extent at least, the development of a human resources policy and the building up of specific research traditions. Incidentally, working conditions for academic historians in Belgium are not of a kind to be able to attract highly qualified foreign scholars.

¹⁸ In that respect we can mention the establishment of the Centre for the History of Intercultural Relations/Centrum voor de Historische studie van Interculturele Relaties/Centre d'histoire des Relations Interculturelles (1750-2000) (CHIR) at Kulak (University of Leuven – Kortrijk Campus), that will focus on the interdisciplinary study of border regions. A good

and the FNRS play a major role by offering young scholars at the early stages of their career travel subsidies for study abroad, even compelling postdoctoral fellows to stay at least one year at a foreign research institute – even if abroad often means only one border stone further. Also the European University Institute in Florence, in Belgium, however, clearly underrated, attracts a number of graduate students in modern history.¹⁹ Collective research projects funded by the FWO and FNRS also often focus on transnational or comparative research; that is of course particularly the case of those of the Flemish-Dutch Committee, though these involve in principle only Flanders and the Netherlands (though often the comparative framework is broadened in practice). But also independent from the FWO and FNRS, more and more international-comparative and transnational studies and overviews covering mainly Western Europe are published, in Belgium as well as with international academic publishers, in which Belgian scholars cooperate with colleagues from other countries. At some History departments other continents are also studied, particularly – but admittedly not very intensively – Africa (mainly Kongo) in Brussels, Gent and Louvain-la-Neuve and Latin-America in Leuven, though non-European history is mainly the privilege of departments of area studies or anthropology. Links between them are not always very functional.²⁰ In addition, Belgian historians have more than an eye on the European integration process, international institutions or transnational organizations. Furthermore, basic works on Belgian history are frequently translated into English (Witte, Craeybeckx & Meynen, 2001; Blom & Lamberts, 1999).

In conclusion, if intellectual suffocation and isolation from the outside seems to threaten Belgian historical academic life, that prospect is in fact avoided, with a great deal of thanks to the stimulating research policy, and the quality control, through the FWO and FNRS.

example of the comparative approach encompassing several countries popular in today's Belgian contemporary history studies is Lagrou (1999).

¹⁹ Only since 2002, the doctorate of the EUI has been recognized in Flanders. That still is not the case in the French and German community. See the list of recognitions on <http://www.iue.it/Servac/Postgraduate/EUIDoctorate/Recognition.shtml>

²⁰ Successful examples exist though, such as re Africa in Gent and more generally in Leuven, where with the support of different departments, among which Anthropology, Slavic Studies and Sinology, the History department in 2005 established a Master-programme in 'Europe and the World 1500-2000. Expansion-Exchange-Globalization'.

2. PRESENTATION

The contributions presented here offer a nice, though obviously incomplete panorama of the international historiography about modern Belgium, that happily encompasses approximately two centuries and several historical domains. The 'great' themes of Belgian history, about which we wrote earlier, as such are not explicitly covered, but they are treated sufficiently elsewhere. That the double anniversary – 175 years of independence and 25 years of regionalization (the latter incidentally quite an arguable anniversary) – offers the opportunity for this issue, rather than it as being the cause, may come to the fore in the fact that there is no particular contribution dedicated to the development of the institutional reforms and the relations between the regions and linguistic communities, though obviously these are never completely absent, particularly in the chapter by Conway.

To start this overview, the issue begins with a contribution by Janet Polasky, for many years an established international authority regarding the social and political history of Belgium. In the framework of her current research on the history of women in the revolutionary years 1787-1793, she returns to an old subject of her, the Brabant Revolution, which in traditional accounts of Belgium's past is 'largely ignored', to use the term recently employed by Mark Reynebeau (2005, 109).²¹ Polasky positions the Brabant Revolution firmly as an integrating part of Belgian history, more than as a 'prelude' to the Belgian Revolution, and surely not as a reactionary event that aimed at turning back the clock, as has been the case in older historical writing and which occasionally surfaces in popular historical narratives. Her analysis fits into a larger revisionist perspective that interprets anti-modern movements no longer as just reactions against modernity, but as reflexive expressions of the modernity that they nevertheless claim to combat. Such historical re-interpretations have fundamentally altered our views on the place and role of quintessential *modern* phenomena such as conservatism and fascism, as well as of typically nineteenth and twentieth century religious movements and expressions. In the context of pre-Belgian history, this novel approach allows Polasky to emphasize the modern and democratic dimensions of the Brabant Revolution, without downplaying its anti-modernist dis-

²¹ It is not so clear to me why though, since the Austrian period and the Brabant Revolution are rather well covered by historians. As appears from Polasky's own references, the so-called 'traditional' narrative has long been overturned, among others by Jan Craeybeckx (!), Jan Roegiers, Van den Bossche, Tassier and Polasky herself.

course. Polasky also devotes much attention to the representation and visions of others on eighteenth century revolutionaries, as well as on the way Belgian/Brabant rebels framed their discourse and activities, referring to the American – not the French – Revolution.

Horst Lademacher, founder of the Zentrum für Niederlandestudien, in his contribution offers a penetrating overview of the international position of Belgium and its foreign policy from 1830, the year of its independence, until its integration in the early European institutions after World War II. Belgian politics is presented here as an example of small state diplomacy, always searching for a position of its own in an international diplomatic landscape dominated by regional great powers. Lademacher includes the perspective of its mighty neighbours, but emphasizes the Belgian interpretations of neutrality, more imposed upon it than as the result of its own deliberation. This 'imposed' neutrality inspired Belgian political elites to engage in a complex set of actions and reactions, anticipations and calculations. But also internal political constellations – in Belgium but also within its neighbouring states – had consequences for the international relations. Lademacher focuses in particular upon the nineteenth century Catholics and their experiences and interests in Belgium as well as in Prussia and the German Empire, and later on the Belgian nationalities' issue. A comparison with the international politics of other small states such as the Netherlands and Switzerland (the subject of Lademacher's next book) is highly revealing in that context. Belgium, the Netherlands and Switzerland all opted for international neutrality, but in each case this was based on different grounds, had a different outlook, and had divergent results. International politics, however, are not only produced by power balances and political constellations, but also, and not least, by perceptions and emotions. These too played a role in the diplomatic calculus on the best way to safeguard the territorial integrity of the country and maximizing its political clout.

Earlier, we observed that Anglo-Saxon authors situate their analyses of a small country such as Belgium in a broader framework. That is particularly the case for the American historian Carl Strikwerda. Strikwerda considers Belgium as a small state in which the main European challenges and developments come to the fore most sharply. Combining a political-historical analysis with an economic perspective, he tries to comprehend what he calls the 'first globalization' in the nineteenth century and the meaning of (European) liberalism, as a political movement as well as a product of liberal political and economic institutions. Belgium functions as an example in which to critically interrogate general European developments and to question all too simplistic narratives about the relationship between small state economies

and economic liberalization. However, the specificity of Belgium is also recognized, in the economic answers it gave to globalization as well as in the successes and limitations of liberalism as a political ideology. Characteristic of Strikwerda's method by the way is the attention he devotes to the agent in history and, hence, to the track changes that always remained possible. In this assessment he emphasizes that different alternatives existed for the nineteenth century Belgian economy in its reaction to globalization.

George Alter and Myron Gutmann, two eminent American historical demographers, in their chapter present what they themselves call an 'American view' on the development of historical debate concerning the decline of fertility in a modern industrial and urban society. Belgian researchers played a major role in that debate, in particular regarding the relationship between demographical changes and protoindustrialization, particularly after the publication of Franklin Mendels's extremely influential article (Mendels, 1972) in which the latter argued that protoindustrialization created more poverty and – completely in contrast with the expectations – a higher marriage age and an increased fertility rate. The critical investigation of that conclusion led to the use of new sources and the application of new research methods, but also encouraged the taking into account of cultural elements alongside economic considerations, in particular religion and life patterns, material expectations and attitudes. Such 'cultural' factors contributed to the decline of Belgian fertility in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Alter and Gutmann's overview of two major themes in the literature in historical demography, regarding protoindustrialization and fertility decline, incidentally shows that Belgian scholars, if they orient their research on international questions and discussions, may have a substantial voice in the international debate.

The former chapters have adopted a rather long-term perspective and have mainly dealt with the nineteenth century. With Tammy Proctor's chapter, we enter the twentieth century with studies that concentrate on more immediate issues. Proctor is currently working on a global history of the civilian experience of the Great War, after studies on British scouting and, more especially, a book on female espionage during World War I. Here, she assesses the international and Belgian historiography about the Great War. She confirms that the Belgian war experience is hardly noted in major international war studies, but she also concedes that the times, in this respect, are changing. She indicates quite a number of directions which remain largely uncovered and which, in her view, Belgian historiography could or should re-orientate. Very much confirming the ordeal of Sophie De Schaepdrijver, she points at the lack of a broader viewpoint that could overcome the local or regional restraints, as well as the lack of original initiative of Belgian historians. No

doubt her new book will cover an important gap in historical writing about World War I in Belgium.

The Oxford historian Martin Conway, who made his name in Belgium thanks to his *magnum opus* about Rex and revealed himself on more than one occasion as an astute analyst and an original observer of Belgian twentieth century politics and society, contributes to this issue with one more somewhat provoking essay on the weakness of the Belgian national state in the 1960s, situating its origins in the turbulent interwar years. More than growing regional 'national' feelings and movements, the crisis of the Belgian national state is, according to Conway, to be attributed to the rigidities of Belgian political institutions since the 1930s and the impotence and unwillingness of political elites to renew the Belgian national political system when it was still possible, even if Belgian national sentiments received a boost after the war. Partly through shifts in the political centre but also due to their immobility, the traditional structures and mentalities that controlled the intrinsic tensions in the country gradually dissipated. Paradoxically so, Conway concludes, the processes that brought Belgium stability after the war, also caused its subsequent disintegration.

In the last chapter, Gerd-Rainer Horn, who concentrates on the historical study of transnational phenomena and movements – publishing on social democracy as well as on Left Catholicism in Western Europe – goes deeper into the revolutionary year of 1968, which has, in Belgium, also turned into an almost mythical event. 1968, however, was a global phenomenon that stands for a series of protest movements that span a whole decade and include student agitation as well as workers' protests and activities of (new) social movements, and has deeper but also broader roots than commonly realized. Belgium offers an interesting case to study the processes and interactions between the different factors. Horn emphasizes the significance of the cultural avant-garde – in particular of the beat generation in North America, the Provo's in Amsterdam as well as Cobra and, in particular, Situationism in Belgium itself. In contrast to many, particularly Anglo-Saxon studies of '1968', Horn includes the social dimension in his assessment, the worker protests and the new social movements – although lack of information compels him to ignore the whole issue of women's liberation and the so-called second feminist wave.²²

²² On that issue see, however, Van Molle (2004).

3. FINAL THOUGHTS

A few final thoughts to conclude this introduction. A first observation is that several authors consider Belgium to be a mini Europe, where – apart from some minor particularities – all the major themes of European history come to the fore. Here lays the originality of the country and for Carl Strikwerda the main reason to study its history. Proctor too views Belgium as a major case to highlight the social history and the cultural shifts of World War I and to question the borders between military and civilian, an issue that can be viewed from the perspective of World War II as well. Strikwerda considers the strength and the continuation of liberal thinking in Belgium a benchmark to which other countries can be measured:

"Where liberal democracy failed in Europe, it could be argued, one must look at the weaknesses of the liberal heritage and its divergence from the standard that the Belgian example set".

But also in the transition from a low skilled to a high skilled economy, Belgium constitutes a model that learns much about the possibilities of adaptation to globalization and control over economic transformation processes. In addition, Belgium is often considered a 'land of experiments', as both Janet Polasky in her account of the Brabant Revolution, as well as Carl Strikwerda in his assessment of the impact of globalization and liberalization argue. The latter calls the country blatantly a pioneer in social and economic policy – and one that illustrates the difficulty to reconcile both.

A classic theme that traditionally surfaces in many analyses and representations of Belgium, here in particular in the chapter by Lademacher, is that of Belgium as a crossroads of cultures. It is mostly associated with an idea that Henri Pirenne, in his monumental *Histoire de Belgique*, borrowed from Karl Lamprecht.²³ In it, medieval Flanders and Brabant appear as a microcosm between the rivers Rhine and Seine. Pirenne referred to Belgium as the place where Latin and Germanic cultures confronted each other and mingled, creating something original and unique. Lademacher in this context refers to the necessity of giving Belgium legitimacy and strength. Civil servants such as Emile Banning, and historians such as Constantin de Gerlache and Théodore Juste, who came before Pirenne, also represented Belgium as the core and prefiguration of a 'United States of Europe', precisely because it constitutes a bridge between the Latin and the Germanic cultures in Europe. The idea was

²³ Karl Lamprecht, *Deutsche Geschichte*, Vol. III, Berlin, 1885, 190.

also developed in diplomatic terms into the concept of a European 'buffer' state – quite remarkable in the light of Belgium's history and against the background of the creation of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1815. However, such reconstructions of the role of small states, seem characteristic of Europe's collective representations. The great Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, for example, attributed his native country a very similar role as crossroads and 'mediator' between European nation-states.²⁴ In Eastern Europe too, such views existed (Vermeersch, 2004).

A notable reoccurring theme in several contributions is the emphasis on the unpredictability of history: things could well have gone differently than they actually went. That is of course an interpretation that is readily invoked with regard to the establishment of Belgium itself, but it is regarding more mundane subjects, yet also at more sophisticated levels of analysis, that it is used here. As he did in his masterful *A House Divided*, regarding socialists and Christian democrats, Strikwerda (1997) has in his contribution to this issue focused on the strategic and political choices of the protagonists. That the liberals lost their plea as a major political power, they mainly only had themselves to blame. As the example of Britain, France, and Switzerland – to some extent at least – shows, the liberal potential to build up a mass basis was present, it was their own choice not to pursue that path. A similar idea of unpredictability is mentioned by Horn. For him, the radicalization of the Leuven student movement was "by no means a natural, expected or predictable trend", which did not prevent it from fitting into a wider trend that encompassed the whole globe. Conway too repeatedly stresses, for example in a comparison with several multilingual and federal nation-states, that there was never "anything inherent", such as the weakness of national identities in Belgium, even if his assessment is less voluntary than Strikwerda's. Hence, Conway speaks about 'factors' that mould or re-orientate the course of history. But Conway considers political interests of the political elites as 'factors', which, since these elites make political choices, introduces a voluntaristic perspective in his assessment as well.

History is unpredictable. It is a thought that historians cherish, and which distinguishes them from other social scientists who look for general laws in history to be able to predict, influence, and control the future. Historians prefer to disregard questions about the future and the lessons that may, or may not, be drawn from the past. That certainly is the case with queries about the future of Belgium.

²⁴ Johan Huizinga, *Die Mittelstellung der Niederlande zwischen West- und Mitteleuropa*, Berlin, 1933. See Hanssen (1996, 65-67).

ABBREVIATIONS

FNRS Fonds National de la Recherche Scientifique
FWO Research Foundation – Flanders

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