

Belgian Historical Demography as Viewed from North America: Protoindustrialization, Fertility Decline, and the Use of Population Registers

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1. INTRODUCTION¹

The demographic history of Belgium has long been important to the international research community, including that of the United States. From the early days of the emergence of this field of specialization, the work of Belgian researchers and the issues that arise from Belgian history and Belgian data have made it imperative for outsiders to take this important territory into account. In this essay we do two things: we briefly survey the study of Belgian historical demography – especially as it is viewed from the lens of North America – over the past fifty years, and we look in greater detail at two issues. The first of these is the demographic and social process leading to the rise and decline of rural industry, often called "Protoindustrialization". Introduced in the 1970s by the late Franklin Mendels, the debate about the implications of rural industry for marriage ages and hence for reproduction, has attracted attention to Belgian history and made outsiders acutely aware of the importance of that history for understanding many social phenomena. The second issue we will explore is the use of Belgian data – especially the registers of population – to understand the long-term decline in fertility that took place in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The spread of family limitation was the key to population trends in the twentieth century for both developed and developing countries, and it is no less important in an era of population decrease than times of rapid population growth. By focusing on only two topics we pass over a large and important literature on issues like rural-

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to-urban migration and differential mortality.² We chose these topics, however, from a North American perspective, because they played a central role in international scholarly debates and because work in Belgian historical demography made distinctive and lasting contributions.

2. PROLOGUE: UNDERSTANDING CITIES AND CRISES

Given the density of its urban fabric, from the 1940s through the 1960s, and continuing until today, no contribution that Belgian researchers could make to the newly emerging field of demographic history was as important as the study of its urban history. While never as dramatic and contentious as those we will discuss later, the study of urban history has been a continuing theme in Belgian historical demography, one that has brought important insights to researchers working inside and outside its borders. One question that has long-persisted in the study of urban historical demography has been the simple to ask but difficult-to-answer question of the size of cities. Beginning with Father Roger Mols's large scale cataloging of European cities in the 1950s and ending with Jan de Vries's updated estimates in the 1980s, this study was informed by the work of many historians, most notably Mols (1954-1956), Hélin (1959; 1963; 1993), Verbeemen (1957; 1962-1963), van Werveke (1948), and van Houtte (1962), from the early stages of demographic study, and more recently Klep (1981).³ What these studies demonstrate is that Belgium was the most urbanized region in Europe by the year 1500, and stayed among the most urbanized until at least 1800. Nevertheless, de Vries shows that its stature among the most urbanized regions in Europe was already in relative decline by 1600, when it was surpassed by the Netherlands. By 1800, Belgium's steadily less urban population was overtaken by the rapidly growing urban population of England and Wales (de Vries, 1984, 39).

The rich literature on urban population dynamics in Belgium confirms that the decline in proportion urban that took place in the eighteenth century, and the loss of leadership relative to other counties beginning in the seventeenth century, were consequences of two other factors: the economic crisis and per-

² For a broader review of recent work in Belgian historical demography see Neven and Devos (2001).

³ For a summary of sources of demographic data about Belgian cities, see Hélin (1963), and de Vries (1984).

sistent warfare of the seventeenth century, and the gradual loss of urban industrial dominance that Belgium held at the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of early modern times. Both these transformations have provoked extensive discussion in writing about Belgian historical demography. The concern with crisis demography has been a long one in the field, starting with Meuvret's article in the first volume of *Population* (Meuvret, 1946), and strongly emphasized by the debate about the "general crisis of the seventeenth century" (Rabb, 1975) and other important works in the developing literature of French and European historical demography, such as Goubert's *Beauvais et le Beauvaisis* (1960). In Belgium Paul Harsin and Etienne Hélin organized an international conference in 1963 on "problems of mortality", which led to a volume (Harsin & Hélin, 1965), with significant chapters about Belgium (Arnould, 1965; Hélin, 1965a; Hélin, 1965b; Ruwet, 1965a; Ruwet, 1965b; van Werveke, 1965), emphasizing the role of crisis mortality. In the two decades that followed, two major dissertations, by Bruneel (1977) and Gutmann (1977; 1978; 1980), and a reprint of Ruwet's works on the subject (1981) confirmed the distinct character of crisis mortality and the role of war, epidemic, and harvest failure in Belgium.

3. FROM URBAN HISTORY TO THE HISTORY OF PROTOINDUSTRIALIZATION

As important as were political changes and the repeated emergence of epidemic disease, the major demographic shift in Belgian urban populations arose out of economic change, a combination of changing patterns of mercantile activity and the gradual decline of urban industry (van der Wee, 1963; Gutmann, 1988). From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries a transformation spread throughout Europe that increasingly moved industry out of guild-based urban structures and into the rural cottages of workers who could be employed at lower cost and with greater flexibility. This era of cottage industry, which stands between the guild-based industries of the late Middle Ages and the mechanized factories of the nineteenth century, brought with it demographic changes that have been widely debated and led to a strong emphasis on Belgium in the international research community.

The demographic history of the rise of protoindustrialization, as this process came to be called beginning with Franklin Mendels's work, plays an important role in the historiography of the Belgian population. Mendels was not the first author to focus on the demographic processes associated with the

conversion of the countryside from a territory populated by peasant farmers and agricultural wage laborers to one that also included industrial laborers. As early as 1960, the Swiss historian Rudolf Braun showed the ways that rural industry shaped Swiss society in the eighteenth century (Braun, 1990; 1966). In some Swiss localities, densely packed spinner-households replaced peasant families. Farms were divided, marriages for love replaced marriages for economic motives, marriage age declined, and few couples desired a large number of children. Mendels's dissertation (eventually published in 1981), summarized in an extremely influential article published in 1972, extended the ideas that Braun originated to Flanders, and in doing so coined the term, "protoindustrialization". Mendels concentrated on the statistical relationships among prices, wages, the growth of rural industry, and family formation.

"A good year would be followed by more marriages, but a bad year not necessarily by fewer" (Mendels, 1972).

In the long term, industrial districts experienced population growth, as younger marriages led to higher fertility. The core of Mendels's argument was that protoindustrialization led to poverty, and poverty was associated with low marriage ages. This was in sharp contrast with the certainty of Hajnal's (1965) western European marriage pattern, under which marriage ages and levels of permanent celibacy were both high until well into the nineteenth century, keeping the rate of population growth low.

The consequences of protoindustrialization may have been the most influential aspect of the study of Belgian historical demography in the 1970s and 1980s, but Mendels's conclusions were not without their critics.⁴ By the early 1980s, at the International Economic History Congress in Budapest in 1982, these criticisms emerged, and took form in publications by Vandembroeke (1981; 1984; 1996) and by Gutmann and Leboutte (1984). Vandembroeke, writing as Mendels did about Flanders, sharply attacked the earlier findings. These newer data, according to Vandembroeke, showed that just as Flemish industry grew (especially in the second and third quarters of the eighteenth century), marriage rates declined and marriage ages increased. In none of the sections of Flanders for which Vandembroeke had data were there high levels of nuptiality, as measurable by average marriage ages or by I_m , the index of nuptiality among women of child-bearing age.

Gutmann and Leboutte, writing together (1984) and separately (Gutmann, 1987; 1988; Leboutte, 1988; 1996), add context to the discussion of the im-

⁴ There is an excellent summary of this issue in Devos (1999). Much of the discussion presented here is also drawn from Gutmann and Leboutte (1984).

fact of cottage industry on population growth by explaining the history of areas in French-speaking eastern Belgium, where a wide variety of industrial activities took place, and where rural industry expanded rapidly in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Their findings also contradict those of Mendels. They show that marriage ages were high and stayed elevated in villages with all kinds of industry. Among the most important of their findings have been those about variation in ages at first marriage for men and women whose families practiced various occupations. By the end of the eighteenth century, when the regions they study were in full industrial development, the occupational breakdown shows that marriage ages for the least privileged in industrial society – spinners – were generally highest, not very dissimilar from those of peasant farmers. More prosperous industrial workers, such as miners and weavers, did marry at younger ages, but they scarcely demonstrate the dramatic decline in marriage ages and increase in the marriage rate that Mendels would have led us to associate with protoindustrialization, and the mere fact that these are the most prosperous industrial workers contradicts the idea that poverty increased the propensity to marry.

While the final story about the protoindustrialization debate has hardly been told, Devos (1999) puts a nice conclusion to it at the end of the twentieth century. In summarizing all the major participants, she shows how dramatic was Mendels's contribution in opening up an important discussion, but how diverse research by others has ultimately left his assertion untenable. The more nuanced views of marriage in the work of Mendels's critics, and in her work and that of others such as Alter and Oris (1999), lead us to understand the subtleties and complexities of Belgian demographic dynamics in the last three centuries.

4. THE STUDY OF FERTILITY: A REVOLUTION IN SOURCES AND METHODS

Historical demography was revolutionized in the second half of the twentieth century by new ways of studying fertility. In France Louis Henry and his colleagues developed the method of family reconstitution, which allowed researchers to compute age-specific marital fertility rates from parish registers (Fleury & Henry, 1965; Henry, 1967; 1980). Although counts of baptisms, marriages, and burials had been used for some time, more precise measurements had been considered impossible without regular censuses. The precise measurements produced by family reconstitution revealed unexpected

variations and trends in fertility, and they allowed researchers to develop new ways to detect the presence of intentional family limitation. In the United States the European Fertility Project directed by Ansley Coale brought together an international team of scholars to reconstruct the transition to low fertility in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from census and vital registration data (Coale & Watkins, 1986). The European Fertility Project collected vital registration and census data from all the provinces of Europe to describe the diffusion and timing of fertility decline from Britain to Russia.

Historical demographers of Belgium were in a unique position to contribute to both developments. High quality parish registers and later civil registers of births, marriages, and deaths provided a base for family reconstitution studies starting in the seventeenth century, and regular censuses beginning in 1846 captured the process of fertility decline. In addition, Belgium is one of a handful of countries with population registers that record not only vital events but migration and household composition as well.

Etienne van de Walle (Van de Walle & Blanc, 1975; Van de Walle, 1976; Van de Walle & Gutmann, 1978) was the first to call attention to the potential of Belgian population registers as a source for historical and demographic research. Under the direction of Adolphe Quetelet population registers were generalized throughout Belgium after the 1846 census.⁵ Results of the census were copied into bound volumes with one household per page, and changes due to births, deaths, marriages, or migration were added to the registers until the next census. Van de Walle showed how the logic of family reconstitution and other kinds of demographic analysis could be applied to population registers. Population registers facilitate the reconstruction of individual lives, because most of the relevant information (births, marriages, and deaths) was collected in one place. The inclusion of information about migration in population registers has additional advantages. Life histories that are incomplete, which are often half of the individuals in parish registers, must be excluded from most analysis in family reconstitution studies. Studies based on population registers can include the entire population, which is particularly important for demographic studies of urban areas with very mobile populations.

The use of population registers has contributed to a broadening and deepening of historical demographic research on Belgium. Watkins and McCarthy (1980) used life table methods to study the female life course in La Hulpe. This approach was expanded in Alter's (1988) work on Verviers and Neven's

⁵. Population registers for the first half of the nineteenth century are available in a few places, notably Verviers (Alter, 1988), Sart (Alter, Neven, & Oris, 2004), and Limburg (Capron, 1996).

(2003) book on the Pays de Herve (see also Vanhaute & Devriese, 2001). Recent studies have also taken advantage of new statistical methods known as event history analysis, which provide multivariate models of transitions such as marriage, childbirth, migration, and death (Alter, 1998). Belgian researchers, like Jan Van Bavel (2003; 2004a), continue to make innovative contributions and to find new ways to address old questions. Belgium is also one of five countries in Europe and East Asia represented in the Eurasian Project, a large interdisciplinary project using life histories from population registers to compare demographic responses to economic stress in different family systems (Bengtsson, Campbell, & Lee, 2004).

5. THE GEOGRAPHY OF FERTILITY DECLINE

During the 1960s the study of historical fertility transitions took on a new urgency. Concern about high rates of population growth in less developed countries had spread from academic circles to the popular press. Attention was focused on understanding the successful transitions from high to low fertility in Europe, which would serve as models for other parts of the world with high fertility. The prevailing explanation of fertility decline at the time, known as the Theory of the Demographic Transition, linked the economic and social transformation of society to changing costs and benefits of children (Landry, 1934; Notestein, 1953; Alter, 1992). According to this model, traditional societies favored large families because of the labor that children contributed on the farm and their role as security in old age. In contrast, children became much more expensive in modern urban societies, where there were fewer opportunities for them to work. Urban living and the new consumer society created new lifestyles that competed with children for the attention and resources of parents, and new forms of personal and social savings reduced the dependency of the elderly on their children. Most of these changes were linked to the process of modernization unleashed by the Industrial Revolution. Demographic Transition theory attributed fertility decline to changes in both economic conditions and attitudes, but it left little doubt that economic change was the prime mover.

The European Fertility Project was conceived as a test of hypotheses derived from Demographic Transition theory, but far from confirming the accepted view, it pushed demographic research in an entirely different direction. The Project found no consistent relationship between economic development and fertility decline (Knodel & van de Walle, 1979). While it remains

true that fertility is low in all economically developed areas, the timing of that decline was not closely related to the history of industrialization or urbanization.

Ron Lesthaeghe's monograph for the European Fertility Project, *The Decline of Belgian Fertility, 1800-1970* (1977), provided one of the most convincing demonstrations of the importance of a cultural dimension in the transition to low fertility. Like other volumes in the series, it provides a detailed account of levels of fertility in Belgium. Although birth rates were similar in Flanders and Wallonia in the mid-nineteenth century, the difference between them widened after 1870 as fertility declined earlier in the south than the north. Lesthaeghe shows convincingly that this difference cannot be attributed solely to the earlier spread of industrialization in Wallonia. He selected 70 Flemish-speaking communities close to the linguistic frontier and matched them to the closest Walloon communes. The pairs were all less than ten kilometers apart and similar in economic structures. In 1864-1868 there was no consistent difference between the Flemish and Walloon communities, but a gap appeared in the next decade. By 1898-1902 fertility was lower in the Walloon community in 62 of the 70 pairs (Lesthaeghe, 1977, 112). This showed that the language boundary in Belgium acted as an obstacle to the diffusion of family limitation, which delayed the spread of fertility decline in Flanders by about twenty years compared to the Walloon provinces.

Since the publication of his monograph on Belgium, Lesthaeghe has become one of the leading voices for the integration of cultural factors in the explanation of the transition to low fertility. Writing with Chris Wilson in a volume summarizing the work of the European Fertility Project, Lesthaeghe linked the timing of fertility declines to differences in both modes of production and secular attitudes. Lesthaeghe and Wilson (1986) argue that family limitation was slower to develop where production was organized in labor-intensive family units, like family farms and proto-industrial workshops. Children had a higher economic value to parents in such situations, and parents retained greater control over both the wages of children and the timing of their marriages. Proletarianization weakened this family by giving children earlier independence from the control of parents. Family limitation was associated with a transition toward a new model in which parents invest in a smaller number of "high-quality children", who are educated longer and become economically independent at younger ages (Lesthaeghe & Wilson, 1986, 269). The fertility transition also tended to come earlier to social groups that depended on ownership rather than production, like the urban bourgeoisie.

Although changes in the economic system motivated people to want fewer children, the movement to smaller families could still be delayed by value systems that rejected family limitation in particular and the idea of individual choice in reproduction in general. In Europe this resulted in later fertility transitions in Catholic countries. The Catholic Church had long objected to any form of fertility control, but Lesthaeghe and Wilson (1986, 270) also point to the Church's attempt to reinforce family solidarity and paternal authority and its opposition to individualism.⁶ Protestant teachings were less resistant to family limitation, because they placed greater emphasis on individual responsibility. Successive waves of individualistic philosophies associated with the Enlightenment, French Revolution, Liberalism, and Socialism challenged the moral authority of the Catholic Church. The Church responded vigorously to these attacks and sought to retain influence by sponsoring both political and social activities. Lesthaeghe and Wilson (1986) suggest that these efforts were more successful in areas where the familial mode of production reinforced the Church's message about the family.

Lesthaeghe's interest in specifying the cultural content of the transition to lower fertility was already evident in *The Decline of Belgian Fertility, 1800-1970*. He found a link between differences within Flanders and Wallonia and the spread of secular ideologies that weakened attachment to the Catholic Church. Using voting patterns in the election of 1919, he showed that areas with a more secular political and social outlook entered the fertility transition earlier than those where the political influence of the Catholic Church remained strong. An analysis of variance showed that controlling for secularization practically eliminates the difference in fertility between Flanders and Wallonia in 1910 (Lesthaeghe, 1977, 197).

The voting patterns used in *The Decline of Belgian Fertility, 1800-1970* were problematic as an indicator of secularization, because the elections often occurred decades after the changes in fertility that they were used to explain. In response, Lesthaeghe (1991; 1992a; 1992b) has developed several other indicators of secularization, notably the index of marriages in Lent and Advent (MLA). Since the Catholic Church prohibited marriages during Lent and Advent, there are few marriages in March and December when the Church's influence is strong. Lesthaeghe has shown that the MLA index tends to reproduce the same patterns observed in later voting patterns even before the Industrial Revolution. Patterns in the MLA index emerge in the eighteenth century, and marriages in March and February became common in some

⁶ Stengers's (1971) history of Catholic doctrine on birth control and abortion has also been influential.

Walloon districts with little industrial activity (Lesthaeghe, 1991).⁷ The spread of secular attitudes in Belgium lagged far behind France, however, even in areas that were annexed to France during the 1790s (Lesthaeghe, 1992a, 32). This is significant, because the transition to low fertility began in France almost a century earlier than in Belgium.

The link between secularization and fertility decline has been highlighted by other Belgian scholars. Muriel Neven and Michel Oris (2003) contrast the demographic histories of the rural Pays de Herve with Tilleur, an industrial suburb of Liège. The Pays de Herve practiced a very advanced form of agriculture but remained one of the most observant Catholic areas in the region. Tilleur, on the other hand, was swept by anti-clerical and socialist ideas. Neven and Oris (2003) show that this difference was apparent not only in voting patterns and respect for the ban on marriage in Lent and Advent, but also in other indicators of the strength of social control, like illegitimacy and pre-nuptial conceptions, which were much more common in Tilleur.⁸ It comes as no surprise that the fertility transition in Tilleur began twenty years earlier than in the Pays de Herve.

Michel Oris (1993; 1995) distinguishes between transitions motivated by "embourgeoisement" and "proletarian" transitions. In his view the former involved the spread of bourgeois values stressing individual responsibility, education, and foresight that placed a higher value on children and their future success. Oris argues that some groups of industrial workers were more resistant to this message, because the wages contributed by their children had been so essential to the family economy. Tensions within these families were rising in the late nineteenth century, however, as children began leaving home earlier. Adoption of family limitation in these circumstances was based less on new ideas about the family than a general change in world view associated with the rapid spread of socialism. Socialism conveyed both a belief in progress and a strong hostility to the Catholic Church. Fertility decline was later and more rapid in places like Seraing, Oris argues, because workers adopted the new ideology as a group rather than as individuals. Although Oris's account differs in some respects, it highlights the importance of both

⁷. Bougard (1981) shows that marriages in Lent and Advent rose sharply in the nineteenth century in two parishes in the Borinage.

⁸. Oris (1988) finds a different relationship between pre-marital sexual activity and marital fertility among the poor in the city of Huy. The fertility transition started early in Huy, and couples without prenuptial conceptions were more likely to have small families. In this case pre-nuptial conceptions were an indicator of an older system of courtship and family formation that was abandoned in favor of a new set of values and behavior.

the family economy and the adoption of secular ideas emphasized by Lesthaeghe.

Lesthaeghe's work fills an important gap in our understanding of fertility decline. Although the European Fertility Project undermined key aspects of the Theory of the Demographic Transition, its results did not point to an alternative model. The importance of linguistic boundaries emphasized the importance of communication and the spread of ideas, but it provided little guidance regarding the content of those ideas. Did the fertility transition depend upon changes in attitudes about the value of children, the costs of raising them, and the desirability of large families? Or, was information about methods of contraception and attitudes about the acceptability of family limitation involved? Lesthaeghe has emphasized the importance of both of these dimensions, and he has linked regional differences in fertility decline to persistent attitudes and religious beliefs.

6. THE TIMING OF FERTILITY DECLINE

Although much has been written about the factors that delay or hasten fertility decline, few authors have attempted to explain the timing of these transitions. In 1897 Hector Denis offered just such an explanation of the sharp acceleration in the decline in Belgian birth rates in the 1870s. Denis noted that the depression that began in 1873 followed a long period of economic expansion. He argued that workers who had become accustomed to rising wages and a higher standard of living delayed marriages and restricted family building during the depression:

"... lorsque le salaire réel a reçu une amélioration suffisamment prolongée pour fixer *l'habitude* d'un mieux-être appréciable, la représentation de la perte, pour soi et pour sa descendance, de l'avantage acquis éveille des sentiments d'égoïsme ou d'altruisme familial qui retardent les unions et contrarient la reproduction de l'espèce" (Denis, 1897, 11, emphasis in original).⁹

Almost a century later, René Leboutte, Michel Poulain, and Thierry Eggerickx have expanded and confirmed the insight in this observation.

⁹ E.A. Wrigley (1969, 190-191) presents essentially the same argument for England and Europe in general. Leboutte (1992, 270) points out the similarity between this reasoning and Richard Easterlin's explanation of the 1950s baby boom, which also relies upon the difference between expectations and experiences.

Like Denis, Leboutte (1987; 1988; 1991b) argues that the long period of rising incomes changed expectations and attitudes. The persistent "mass poverty" of earlier generations bred resignation and suppressed the desire for self-improvement and social mobility. Rising incomes in the mid-nineteenth century created new consumption patterns and new aspirations for children. School attendance increased, and teachers themselves were models of the new opportunities for social mobility (Leboutte, 1987, 201). When the depression threatened this progress, couples responded by reducing the sizes of their families (Leboutte, 1988, 155). Thus, family limitation began as a "defensive reflex" among couples who wanted to protect their recent gains (Leboutte, 1992, 296). Leboutte (1991a) shows us this transition through the eyes of Gaspard Marnette, an "archiviste de rumeur" who left an extraordinary record of daily life in the community of Vottem. Although Marnette often ridicules the pretensions of his neighbors, his lengthy journal shows their growing desire to assure a higher standard of living for their children.

Michel Poulain (1996) and Thierry Eggerickx (2002; 2004) see the same process at work in the region Entre-Sambre-et-Meuse, and Eggerickx provides both qualitative and quantitative evidence supporting Denis's insight. Real wages in the mines and mills around Charleroi rose steadily until 1873, when there was a sudden sharp reversal and rising unemployment. Fertility, which had fallen very slowly before the crisis, fell precipitously during the depression. The average number of births per married woman aged 25 to 44 was 5.40 in 1863-1867 and 5.36 in 1868-1872, but it fell to 5.04 in 1873-1877 and then plunged to 3.88 in 1878-1882 (Eggerickx, 2004, 435). Eggerickx finds evidence that workers' aspirations for their children were changing in the debates and investigations following the massive strikes of 1886. Growing demand for education marks an important change from parents in earlier generations, who sent their children to work as early as possible (*Ibid.*, 395-401, 461-467).

7. THE DIFFUSION OF FERTILITY CONTROL

Studies that locate changing fertility in space and time must emphasize aggregate patterns, but there are often large differences in the spread of family limitation among social strata. The earliest signs of family limitation are often seen in elites (Livi-Bacci, 1986), which is usually taken to mean that attitudes and knowledge spread downward through society from the wealthy to the poor. There has been a recent tendency, however, to emphasize the inde-

pendence of fertility transitions in different social groups. Szreter (1996; Szreter & Garrett, 2000) and others argue that each group began practicing family limitation for its own reason (Schneider & Schneider, 1992). Although Belgian research also finds earlier fertility declines in elite populations, it reveals a diversity of patterns within communities.

Vandenbroeke (1977) found examples of very early fertility decline among elites and in urban areas in Flanders and Brabant. Women of the nobility and the wives of industrialists in Ghent show clear signs of family limitation before the end of the old regime. In the countryside wealthy farmers (*laboureurs-propriétaires*) seem to have restricted births before other groups (Vandenbroeke, 1977, 16-18). Coolens (1981) also finds later fertility declines among the poor and the illiterate in Zottegem. Since the overall decline in fertility in Flanders was relatively late, this suggests that the lag between elite and non-elites was rather long. Vanhoute and Matthys (forthcoming) suggest that domestic servants acted as intermediaries carrying ideas about family limitation from urban to rural communities. Large numbers of rural women worked as domestic servants in the homes of the urban bourgeoisie, and former domestic servants had smaller families than other women.

The bourgeoisie played a leading role in fertility declines in most but not all studies of Walloon communities. In Verviers fertility fell first among the bourgeoisie, but Alter (1988, 189) suggests that other social strata adopted birth control at about the same time. Similarly, Oris (1988) sees quite early evidence of family limitation among the poor in Huy, and he contrasts this pattern to the late but more rapid decline in the new industrial areas, like Seraing (Oris, 1995). In La Hulpe the earliest signs of fertility control are among the literate and the relatively wealthy (Gutmann & Watkins, 1990). On the other hand, the conservative Catholic farmers of the Pays de Herve maintained higher fertility longer than other occupational groups (Neven, 2003, 404).

Leboutte (1988, 391) argues that diffusion models are too simple and that we must look more closely at the social and economic context of each group. Proto-industrial ironworkers and gunsmiths were the first to show signs of family limitation in the Basse-Meuse. These families considered themselves self-employed artisans, and they had more contact with the petty bourgeoisie than coal miners in the same communities. When economic depression hit in the 1870s, however, coal miners joined the movement to smaller families, and laborers and straw hat makers followed somewhat later (*Ibid.*, 376-377). Eggerickx (2004, 428) reaches the same conclusion for the industrial basin of Charleroi. He finds evidence of fertility control among the petty bourgeoisie a generation earlier than among industrial workers. During the depression of

the 1870s, however, highly skilled workers, like glass-makers, reduced their fertility very quickly, and other workers, including coal miners, followed only a few years later (*Ibid.*, 437-438).

Van Bavel's (2004b) analysis of late nineteenth-century Leuven offers another perspective on the diffusion of fertility control within communities. He finds only weak evidence of differences in fertility by occupation, but he finds strong evidence that contact with groups with more experience of fertility control resulted in lower fertility. Migrants from Walloon areas not only had smaller families themselves, they also influenced their neighbors.¹⁰ Flemish couples had lower fertility when Francophone families lived on the same street. Similarly, fertility was lower in neighborhoods with a mixture of occupational groups than in the quarter of Leuven most heavily populated by the working class (Van Bavel, 2004b, 77-81). Van Bavel is cautious about drawing conclusions about what kind of information or attitudes was spreading across class and regional boundaries, but his study offers a new model for linking regional patterns with developments at the community and individual levels.

8. CONCLUSION

We have focused on two debates that were important in the development of historical demography. The protoindustrialization debate asked how the transition from agriculture to industry affected demographic behavior. Mendels and others argued that industrial activity loosened the tie between marriage and land that had kept population in check in earlier generations. Without the Malthusian "preventive check" (late marriage) these populations could grow rapidly and become much more susceptible to the "positive check" (high mortality). The more nuanced view that emerged from later research by Vandebroek, Gutmann, and Leboutte suggests that early industrialization did not release the floodgates of population growth by promoting early marriage. Belgians involved in protoindustry continued to marry at relatively late ages in the eighteenth century, and their adherence to the western European marriage pattern was based on cultural constraints that continued when land-ownership became less important.

The shift to more complex cultural explanations is also evident in the debate about fertility decline in the nineteenth century. Belgian research shows

¹⁰. In contrast, Eggerickx (2001) finds no significant difference between migrants and natives in Charleroi.

that there was no simple causal link between industrial modernization and family limitation. Rather, as Lesthaeghe has argued, it was a multidimensional process that unfolded in different ways across space and time and within communities. While Lesthaeghe has emphasized the importance of spreading secular ideas and attitudes, Leboutte and Eggerickx have shown that fertility decline often started when economic conditions fell behind rising material aspirations, and other studies show that the diffusion of family limitation followed different paths in different places. The availability of population registers has allowed Belgian researchers to move beyond aggregate statistics to reveal the dynamics of fertility within communities and households.

These examples show why Belgium has played an important role in international debates about historical demography. In both cases research on Belgium challenged well established paradigms and resulted in new historical insights. The unique combination of extensive urbanization, widespread protoindustrialization, and early development of modern industry as well as excellent sources, like the population registers, make Belgian history a rich workshop for demographic research. From the pioneering work on early modern cities and mortality crises to more recent studies of fertility and life course transitions, historical demographers have exploited this unique legacy. These challenges and opportunities have attracted foreign researchers, like us, and they have resulted in distinctive empirical and theoretical contributions by Belgian researchers.

ABBREVIATIONS

MLA marriages in Lent and Advent

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Belgische historische demografie. Een Noord-Amerikaanse visie

GEORGE ALTER
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SAMENVATTING

Door zijn unieke stedelijke en industriële geschiedenis heeft het onderzoek over België vaak een centrale rol gespeeld in het internationale debat over historische demografie. Wij beschrijven twee discussies die van bijzonder belang waren voor historici en demografen uit Noord-Amerika.

Franklin Mendels lanceerde de term "protoindustrialisering" om de aandacht te vestigen op de groei van de huisnijverheid die vaak voorafging aan de ontwikkeling van fabrieken. In een invloedrijke studie over Vlaanderen stelde Mendels dat protoindustrialisering de huwelijksleeftijd terugbracht, de bevolkingsgroei stimuleerde en de armoede vergrootte. Volgens Mendels knipte de plattelandsindustrie de band door tussen de economie en de reproductie, een band die het evenwicht bewaard had tussen de bevolking en de grondstoffen en die in de voorgaande eeuwen een hogere levensstandaard had gegarandeerd. Later onderzoek van Vandenbroeke, Leboutte en Gutmann nuanceerde dit model aanzienlijk en toonde aan dat de huwelijksleeftijd vaak hoog bleef in protogeïndustrialiseerde gebieden.

In de jaren 1960 stimuleerde de stijgende bezorgdheid over de snelle bevolkingsgroei in minder ontwikkelde landen de belangstelling voor de overgang naar een lage fertiliteit in Europa. Historisch onderzoek stelde de gangbare overtuiging in vraag dat de demografische veranderingen veroorzaakt worden door economische ontwikkelingen. Ron Lesthaeghe benadrukte het belang van zowel cultuur als productiewijzen in de timing van fertiliteitsterugvallen. Recent onderzoek heeft ook bevestigd dat de economische crisis van de jaren 1870 een belangrijk keerpunt was, zoals Hector Denis al meer dan een eeuw geleden suggereerde.

Etienne van de Walle vestigde de aandacht op de bevolkingsregisters, die na 1846 overal in België bijgehouden werden, als bron voor demografisch onderzoek. Belgische onderzoekers hebben deze registers gebruikt om een gedetailleerd beeld te krijgen van de verdeling van gezinsbeperking binnen gemeenschappen. Hoewel geboortecontrole vaak eerst bij de burgerij voorkwam, was er geen uniformiteit in de verspreiding van dit gedrag naar andere

groepen. Leboutte en Eggerickx concludeerden dat geschoolde ambachtslui deze praktijken overnamen voor andere arbeiders. Van Bavel toonde aan dat Vlaamse koppels een lagere fertiliteit hadden na contact met migranten uit Wallonië.

Démographie historique belge. Une vision nord-américaine

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RÉSUMÉ

La Belgique a souvent été au centre du débat international en tant qu'objet de recherche dans le domaine de la démographie historique. En effet, son histoire urbaine et celle de son industrie s'avèrent uniques. Deux objets de discussions ont particulièrement suscité l'intérêt des historiens et des démographes Outre-Atlantique. Nous les évoquons ici.

Franklin Mendels a lancé le terme "protoindustrialisation" afin d'attirer l'attention sur l'évolution du travail à domicile, qui précède ordinairement le développement des manufactures. Dans une étude prestigieuse sur la Flandre, il affirme que la protoindustrialisation abaisse l'âge du mariage, stimule la croissance démographique et augmente la pauvreté. À son avis, l'industrie rurale rompt le lien entre économie et reproduction. Dans les siècles antérieurs, ce lien maintenait l'équilibre entre la population et les matières premières. Il garantissait, en outre, un niveau de vie plus élevé. Cependant, les recherches ultérieures de Vandenbroeke, Leboutte et Gutmann nuancent sensiblement cette théorie. Elles démontrent, notamment, que l'âge du mariage reste généralement élevé dans les régions qui connaissent la protoindustrialisation.

Dans les années 1960, le souci croissant concernant la démographie galopante dans les pays moins développés stimule l'intérêt des chercheurs pour le passage, en Europe, à un taux de faible fécondité. La recherche historique met alors en doute la conviction courante qui considère que le développement

économique engendre les changements démographiques. Pour sa part, Ron Lesthaeghe souligne l'importance, aussi bien, de la culture que des systèmes de production dans le *timing* du déclin de la fécondité. Une étude récente confirme, également, que la crise économique des années 1870 constitue un tournant décisif, comme l'avait suggéré Hector Denis il y a plus d'un siècle.

Etienne van de Walle met en évidence les registres de la population comme source pour la recherche en démographie. Ceux-ci sont tenus à jour dans toute la Belgique depuis 1846. Des chercheurs belges s'en sont servis pour établir un relevé détaillé de la répartition du phénomène de la limitation des naissances à l'intérieur des communautés. Bien qu'en général, le contrôle des naissances apparaît d'abord dans la bourgeoisie, ce comportement ne se répand pas de manière uniforme dans les autres groupes sociaux. Leboutte et Eggerickx concluent que les artisans qualifiés adoptent ces pratiques avant les autres travailleurs. De plus, Van Bavel démontre que les couples flamands ont une fécondité plus basse suite à leurs contacts avec des immigrants provenant de Wallonie.