

Confusing categories: peasants, politics and national identities in a multilingual state, Belgium c. 1880-1940

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1. INTRODUCTION

The issue of the politicisation of European rural societies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries calls to mind the seminal and much debated book by Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen* (1976). For Weber, the politicisation of rural France was part of the internal colonisation process from Paris that led to the modernisation and civilisation of rural areas, to cultural homogenisation, economic unification, and hence to nation-building. Between 1870 and 1914, according to Weber, peasants from all areas of France gradually became Frenchmen, fully fledged citizens of the French nation state (Weber, 1976: 95-114, 241-277).

In this and more recent publications qualifying or even contradicting Weber's thesis, the discussion about the politicisation of the European countryside focuses sharply on the process itself (conducted from outside the rural communities and top-down, or from within them), the variable chronologies and regional diversities, the influential vectors at work (for instance, local clientelistic networks, the government, the state administration, the army, various kinds of association, the school) and the political positions adopted by

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country people in the modern nation states: pro-monarchy or republican, (extreme) left-wing, centrist or (extreme) right-wing, protectionist or anti-protectionist, pro- or anti-Church (Pécout, 1994; *La politisation des campagnes*, 2000; Le Gall, 2005; Aldenhoff-Hübinger, 2006; Sanz Lafuente, 2006: 133-137; de Smaele, 2009). Such studies concentrate on the evolving political awareness of rural populations and the ideological and party political tensions within nation states with peasants as the stake, as *objects* of electoral mobilisation and as *actors* striving to achieve their own goals. When historians then establish a connection between the nation state and the countryside – several studies have recently been published on this subject – the focus often lies on the identity-building and identity-strengthening quality which, in the process of modern-state-building itself, was attributed to the state's landscape, its agriculture and its peasants. Many modern states have systematically deployed and fostered their rural past as banner proclaiming their national identity. Conversely, it should come as no surprise that peasants have, when necessary, used patriotic exaltation of «their» environment to defend their own interests in the political forum (Thiesse, 1997, 1999; de Jong, 2001; Lekan, 2004; Readman, 2008).

In terms of the relationship between countryside, nation and party politics, Belgium – from her establishment in 1830, a bilingual country – is a fascinating case apart, as is also Spain, which struggles with her so-called «weak nationalisation thesis»¹. This paper aims to unravel the singularity and complexity of the Belgian example. Its originality derives from its focus on the role played by farmers' associations – as influential intermediary bodies between the (French- or Dutch-speaking) peasants, the state, the Catholic Church and political parties – in confirming or reordering national identities and strengthening or weakening ideologies and parties. It questions the weight of «nation» and «denomination» in the successive moves of the farmers' associations on the Belgian chessboard, via the combined use of relevant primary sources and the literature of three types of often disassociated scholarly disciplines, namely rural history, political history and the history of nationalism.

2. ONE COUNTRY, THREE FAULT LINES

Belgium is a young, small and complex state, the complexity also applying to the political position of the farmers and the agricultural organisations within the state. These or-

1. Fernando Molina and Miguel Cabo Villaverde analyse the recent historiographical turn that complements the view on nation-building from above – with its focus on the weak central state that proved to be unable to «create Spaniards» – with a view from below that takes the countryside, Catholicism, non-state-led agents of change and forms of «peripheral» nation-building (Catalonia, Galicia, and the Basque Country) seriously, see CABO VILLAVERDE (2006); MOLINA and CABO VILLAVERDE (2012).

ganisations, whose advance started in the 1880s and 1890s, did not begin their activities from a neutral base, but from within a context in which farmers and agriculture were a part of the areas of tension that reflected the fault lines in Belgium herself.

In the depiction of the new Belgian state established in 1830, peasants were already soon accorded a heroic role. The so-called *Boerenkrijg* (Peasants' Revolt) of 1798, an uprising against the introduction of conscription by the French, became an important symbol in the nineteenth century of «Belgian» resistance to foreign tyranny, a resistance that first manifested itself against the Austrian Habsburgs (cf. the participation of peasants in the Brabant Revolution of 1789), then against the French (1794-1815), and finally against Dutch tutelage within the United Kingdom of the Netherlands (1815-1830). The influential Flemish novelist Hendrik Conscience engraved the revolt of the Flemish, Walloon and Luxembourg peasants of 1798 into the Belgian collective memory as a rebellion «*voor God en Vaderland*» (for God and Fatherland)². His novel *De Boerenkrijg*, first published in 1853, was translated into French in 1886 and served to fuel romantic nationalism (Dupont-Bouchat, Rousseaux and Stevens, 2003: 53-89). Consequently, referring to the events of 1798, Belgian children learnt to sing «*la faux devint une arme aux mains du laboureur, dressé comme un héros devant l'envahisseur*» (the scythe became a weapon in the hands of the farm worker, set up as a hero against the intruder)³. In the Belgian collective memory, the rebellious «brigands» of 1798 were marked as «real» peasants, in the sense of good Catholics and brave framers of the Belgian fatherland. The association between peasants, religion and the new fatherland seemed to be firmly established.

But the young Belgian state soon had to contend with the internal antitheses on which it was founded in 1830 and which, in varying degrees of intensity and priority, have held it in thrall ever since. There are three fault lines, which, according to sociologist Luc Huyse, are together said to be responsible for 95 per cent of the crises in domestic politics, namely in the socio-economic, the philosophical-ideological and the ethno-cultural fields (Huyse, 2002: 35-42; also Strikwerda, 1997). All three have affected the rural world. The socio-economic fault line manifested itself from the early nineteenth century onwards and cyclically in tensions between the rich and the poor, between the bourgeoisie and industrial workers (culminating in the violent workers' uprising of 1886), between agriculture and industry, between the backward rural and the modern urban areas. As regards agricul-

2. The motto «*Voor God en Vaderland*» is time and again repeated in the novel, see Conscience, *De Boerenkrijg*, reprinted Brussels, Lebègue, 1912, pp. 29, 233, 239, 242, 244, 248, 278, 280, 294.

3. «*Le Laboureur*» (music by Paulin Marchand), from *Recueil de chants patriotiques pour les écoles/Verzameling Vaderlandsche schoolgezangen*. Brussels, undated (c. 1895).

ture, the first forms of association took shape in the decades after independence; their purpose was to defend the interests of large landowners, who first obtained protection for grain prices, then approved the liberalisation of the grain market, following the famine of the 1840s, while at the same time exerting their political influence to modernise farming and increase its competitiveness via scientific progress and the development of agricultural education⁴ (Van Dijck, 2008). While Belgium was expressly presenting herself to the world as a leading industrial nation, the first on the European continent to industrialise, her agricultural sector was looking to be recognised and fostered as a genuine «*industrie agricole*»⁵.

The ideological fault line was initially not particularly conspicuous. The young Belgian state, as did the equally mono-denominational Spain until 1931, corresponded to what the Swiss historian Urs Altermatt calls «*Das Einheitsmodell von Kirche und Staat*» (the unity model of Church and State). The Catholic Church was initially an important support for the new Belgian state and the construction of its national identity (Altermatt and Metzger, 2007: 15-34). Within a few decades, however, ideological tensions placed Catholics in opposition to anti-clerical Liberals, and from the 1880s onwards to Socialists, as well. The ideological antitheses reached a climax in the first «school war» (1878-1884), a conflict about schools «with or without God» (i.e. religious education), and fed the ever-grimmer struggle of the three parties to secure the support of the urban and rural masses (Lamberts 1992; Van Schoenbeek, Van Molle and Vanhaute, 2002; Witte, Gubin, Nandrin and Deneckere, 2005). The pressure exerted by socialism drove the electoral democratisation that resulted in the transition in 1894 from a very restrictive voting right based on taxation, to universal (plural) male suffrage (see further Table 1)⁶.

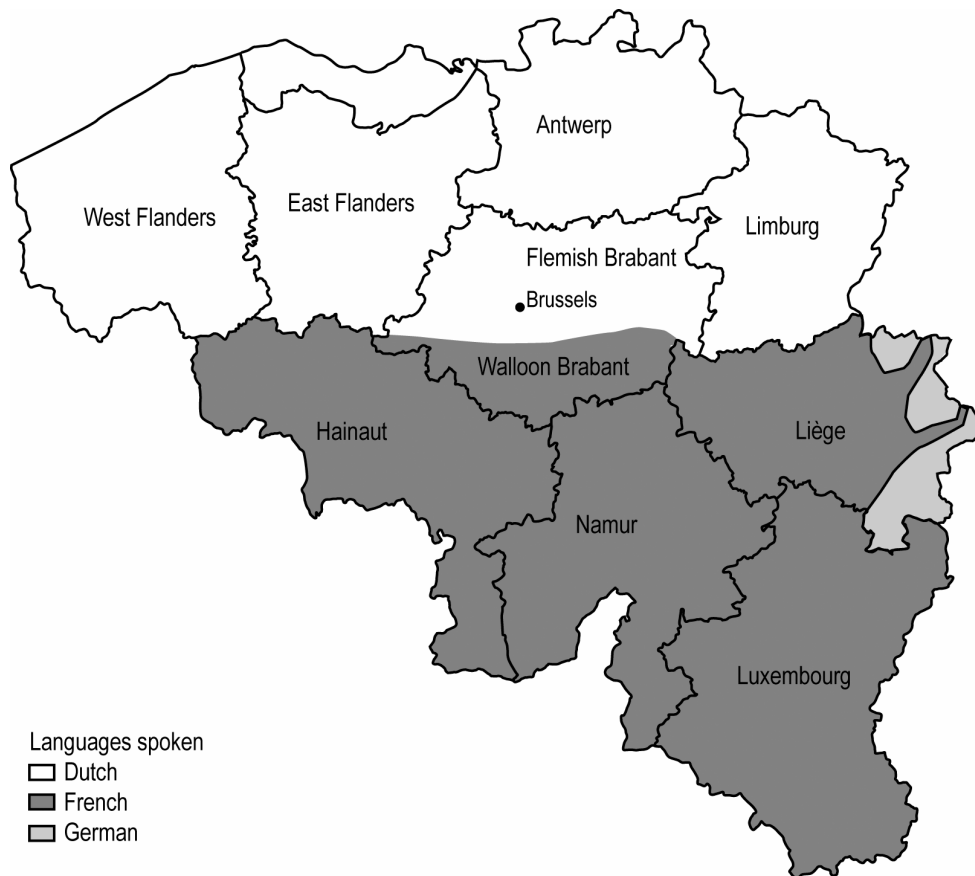
The third fault line was based on ethno-cultural identification, opposing the Dutch-speaking population of Flanders in the north to the French-speaking in the southern part and the Francophone elites that ruled the country.

4. From the late 1840s onwards, the modernisation of farming was trumpeted via a dozen agricultural schools and via semi-public provincial and cantonal agricultural societies whose membership and impact remained nevertheless limited in comparison with that of the farmers' unions that were established in the late nineteenth century (VAN DIJCK, 2008: 210; figures in VAN MOLLE, 1989: 400).

5. The industrial metaphor turned up in governmental documents from the mid-1840s onwards, see, for instance, VAN DIJCK (2008: 171-172).

6. Plurality voting was in place from 1894 to 1919 and implied that up to three votes could be accorded if certain conditions were met by the voter: i.e. owning a property of 2,000 Belgian francs or more; enjoying a yearly interest on savings of minimum 100 francs; being 35 years old or more and the head of a family, and paying a minimum tax of 5 francs on the family home; belonging to a specific profession or holding a diploma (capacity voters). In 1894, the Belgian electorate increased at a stroke from c. 137,000 to 1,371,000 voters, the equivalent of c. 2,111,000 votes.

MAP 1
Belgium, provinces and linguistic borders*



Source: map © Kadoc

* NB: the German-speaking areas of Eupen and Malmédy became part of Belgium in accordance with the 1919 Treaty of Versailles.

According to the ABC model of the Czech historian Miroslav Hroch, the «revival» of small European nations («small» in the sense of oppressed) started (phase A) with the cultural identification of the nation, often by a few men of learning, followed by a phase (B) of patriotic agitation during which the ethnic group at large became familiarised with its national identity and (C) by the development of a nationalist mass movement with a clear political programme. This model also applies to the Flemish movement, which was indeed preceded and accompanied by a phase of cultural self-defining within the Belgian nation state. From the 1840s onwards, a number of «*flaminganten*» or Flemish radicals, facing the lack of respect shown by the Francophone Belgian establishment, began for-

mulating political demands. In doing so, they acquired growing support among the Flemish «second rank» elite of teachers, priests, booksellers, doctors, office workers, students and the like. They succeeded in getting the first language law pushed through in the 1870s and in obtaining official recognition of bilingualism in 1898 (the so-called «equality law»). By that time, it was clear that growing Flemish self-awareness, the economic advance of Flanders and the social and political emancipation of her people went hand in hand (Hroch, 2005: 45-47, 103-108; Witte, Gubin, Nandrin and Deneckere, 2005: 194-212, 396-414, 625-639; Wils, 2005: 153-179).

The complexity of Belgian politics consists precisely in the criss-crossing of the three fault lines. This was increasingly the case from the late nineteenth century on within the context of electoral democratisation and party-political profiling. Farmers' associations, too – although set up first and foremost to secure the income of their members – adopted a stance in the tangle of ethno-cultural and ideological positions. In Flanders, this occurred against a background of growing mental osmosis between popular Catholicism, sympathy for the Flemish movement and rurality. Historians do not agree on the origin of this osmosis. The «traditionality thesis», as Henk de Smaele curtly puts it, states that the countryside long remained backward, more so in Flanders than in Wallonia, where the elites of the *Ancien Régime* – chatelains, large landowners and parish priests – continued to hold sway over the peasants, resulting in a delayed and imperfect politicisation of the rural population and «traditional» (i.e. predominantly Catholic) voting behaviour. This is a thesis that more or less ties in with the interpretation of Weber. The «rationality thesis», on the other hand, considers the same Catholic voting behaviour to be a sign of the «political awakening» of the (Flemish) countryside and a rational choice for the party that was best placed to promote *hic et nunc* its agricultural interests and social practices (including devotional exercise and language), and that was simultaneously obliging the rural voting public (de Smaele, 2009: 19-21, 108-114).

In my view, both theses are exaggerated. Moreover, they are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, tradition and rational choice can complement and reinforce one another. What is clear is that late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century discourses in and about Belgium – ranging from the political and ecclesiastical to the social and cultural discourse, including various forms of art, such as the poetry of Guido Gezelle and the paintings of Gustave Van de Woestijne – stated ever more loudly that Flanders was rural and Catholic, while Wallonia was mainly seen as urban, industrial and Liberal or Socialist. The fact that a large proportion of Wallonia, comprising the extensive area below the rivers Sambre and Meuse, remained highly rural faded into the background, as equally did the fact that, in a few rural municipalities of Flanders, the majority continued to support the Liberal Party (see, for instance, the case study of East Flanders by Adriaens, 1991). But

the citizens of Flanders – a region, it is worth noting, that was densely populated, strewn with small towns (even more than Wallonia), and included the industrial city of Ghent and the port of Antwerp – liked to identify themselves with the rural topos and contributed towards the mental and strategic connection between Flanders and things Catholic and rural, i.e. a connection between the three fault lines. The degree of internalisation of that topos becomes strikingly clear when sources reveal that Flemish students at the Catholic university of Leuven loudly sang: «*nous sommes flamands, nous sommes des paysans*» (we are Flemings, we are peasants)⁷. De Smaele emphasises rather one-sidedly the culturally construed «ruralisation» of Flanders (de Smaele, 2009: 257-403). It is, however, at least equally important to stress that medium-sized and small-scale farming and farming families continued in Flanders, much more than in Wallonia, to form a considerable part of daily economic and social life and thus a matter of political concern (Van Molle, 1989; Segers and Van Molle, 2004: 13-109)⁸.

3. AN IDEOLOGICAL BATTLE FOR THE PEOPLE

From the 1880s onwards, the politicisation of rural Belgium increased noticeably, not as a single autonomous process, but as a component of several, simultaneous processes of mobilisation. For the first time, too, peasants were politicised via farmers' associations that offered them valued vocational services and supported them in their efforts to increase their income, but most of which also strove to achieve an ideological objective. I will first sketch out this process of organisation and then examine the underlying driving forces and finally the consequences.

The process started in the 1880s with the establishment of around two dozen small, local *syndicats agricoles* or agricultural unions, a misleading name, as most of them were co-operative societies that focused on supplying cheap and pure fertilisers and cattle fodder. Some of them bore an apolitical or liberal signature, while most were supported by local Catholic notables. In the 1890s, this embryonic farmers' movement took definite shape, prompted as it were by the top-down interference of socially committed Catholic

7. This was, according to the diaries of the Flemish novelist Ernest Claes, just before World War I (*Uit de dagboeken van Ernest Claes*, 1981: 19).

8. In 19 of the 22 voting districts of Flanders (including Brussels), at least 30% of the (male) electorate in 1894 consisted of farmers; in Wallonia this was the case in 11 of the 19 voting districts. A similar significant imbalance was already earlier in place (cf. elections of 1884), see de SMAELE (2009: 447-448, 460-461). Correspondingly, the so-called Catholic *Groupe agricole*, an agricultural pressure group that was formed in 1895 in the Chamber of Deputies, consisted that year of representatives of 15 Flemish districts and of no more than 6 Walloon districts (see VAN MOLLE, 1989: 192-193).

politicians and bishops. These modelled the Belgian farmers' associations to a large extent on the German example (especially the Christian *Westfälischer Bauernverein* and *Rheinischer Bauernverein*) and gave them a pronounced Catholic profile. By 1914, the entire country was covered by seven regional Catholic farmers' associations, more or less one per province and diocese (see Table 2), among which the *Belgische Boerenbond* (Belgian Farmers' League), with 607 local branches and 56,000 members at that time, was by far the biggest, the most ambitious and the most influential. The *Boerenbond* was the only organisation that was active in the whole of Flanders and that had branches (a few dozen) in Wallonia, too⁹.

The activities of these seven umbrella associations included not only the co-operative purchase of fertilisers and fodder, but also insurance (primarily livestock and fire insurance), rural savings-and-credit co-operatives (based on the German *Raiffeisen* model), co-operative dairies, vocational training (via lectures, courses, member publications and travelling advisers), as well as religious education and political advocacy up to parliamentary level. Their members were in the first place to be found among the multitude of small farmers, the greater part of the land cultivated by whom was leased¹⁰. The sphere of influence of those associations extended from small farmers, large landowners, parish priests and other village worthies to bishops, parliament and the government. The link between the farmers' associations and the Catholic party was in any case obvious, with politicians playing a steering role in their establishment and subsequently in their management at local and central level. The *Boerenbond*, for instance, was presided over from 1890 until 1925 by Joris Helleputte, who was at the same time a member of parliament for the Catholic party, besides repeatedly holding office as minister. Between 1891 and the early 1920s, the driving forces behind the farmers' association of East Flanders were Jules Maenhout and Baron Hermann della Faille d'Huyse, both members of parliament. In Luxembourg, Baron Paul de Moffarts, member of the provincial council and later senator, became the key figure of the farmers' association there.

9. Belgium had at the time nine provinces and seven bishoprics (see Map 1). The diocese of Liège encompassed the Dutch-speaking province of Limburg plus the French-speaking province of Liège; the diocese of Namur encompassed the French-speaking provinces of Namur and Luxembourg. The *Boerenbond* had its main operating area in the provinces of Brabant and Antwerp (together forming the archbishopric of Mechelen) and Limburg (VAN MOLLE, 1990: 96-101).

10. In 1895, 55.2% of all Belgian «farms» consisted of micro-farms of half a hectare or less, 39.4% cultivated between 0.5 and 10 ha and 5.4% from 10 to more than 100 ha. On average, no less than 69% of the land under cultivation was leasehold; the percentage was higher in the densely populated provinces of West and East Flanders, much less in Luxembourg, the southern part of Namur and the sandy parts of Antwerp and Limburg, where freehold prevailed (VAN MOLLE, 1989: 393; VANHAUTE, 1993: table 3, 217-219; VANHAUTE, 2001).

The scarce Socialist initiatives for the rural population were unable to compete against this, and the Liberal influence on the countryside (exerted to an unclear extent through the public *comices agricoles*¹¹) declined. In 1911, the year of the last pre-WWI statistical review, Belgium had 1,200 local farmers' associations with a total of c. 78,000 members, 1,260 purchasing co-operatives and 1,339 mutual livestock-insurance funds. In other words, approximately one in two municipalities (out of a total of 2,629, towns included) boasted these forms of (predominantly Catholic) organisation. Further, that review noted 700 rural savings-and-credit co-operatives, 559 co-operative dairies and 537 cattle breeders' associations. Given that all these associations worked on the basis of one paying member per family or farm, it is possible to calculate the percentage of Belgian farming families that were reached by them: i.e. around 38 per cent, if farms of two hectares and above are included, or 26 per cent, if the threshold for the count is lowered to one hectare (Van Molle, 1989: 303-315, 400).

There are several factors explaining this Catholic thrust in the organisation of agriculture. Firstly, there was the important factor of the economic context. The agricultural depression of the 1880s and 1890s constituted the immediate catalyst, with the associations looking to meet the needs of both the landowners (claiming protectionism to secure their income) and the multitude of small farmers (requiring support to guide them towards more profitable industrial crops, cattle breeding and horticulture). The agricultural crisis also formed the background against which the Catholic party, on regaining an absolute majority in 1884 after six years of Liberal government, immediately decided to set up a Ministry of Agriculture. The fact that the party was able to maintain an absolute majority until 1914 facilitated the development of a consistent agricultural policy, prompted by the farmers' organisations, that furthered the modernisation of Belgian agriculture. That policy combatted the adulteration of fertilisers and food, financed the expansion and improvement of the roads and the railway network in the countryside, established (modest) import duties, invested substantially to control cattle plagues, subsidised cattle improvement and above all deployed a wide range of initiatives to advance agricultural research and education. Those initiatives included not only the State Agricultural College of Gembloux, the State School for Venerinary Medicine of Kuregem, a dozen agricultural

11. The *comices*, established by Royal Decree in 1848 in rural cantons, were set up to organise (subsidised) agricultural shows, competitions and test plots, to spread information, promote innovations and inform the government regarding the state of agriculture at local level. In 1911, Belgium had, on paper, 167 *comices* (out of a total of 222 cantons), with c. 40,000 members, but the degree of their activity was very uneven. By 1928, their number had shrunk to 157, with c. 25,000 members. The *comices* were run by a committee that was composed of members of the local elite (often non-farmers) and, although in principle neutral, were subject to a degree of politicisation. Dual membership of a *comice* and a (Catholic or other) farmers' association, was not uncommon. See, for instance, the example of Halle (VAN ROYEN, 1995).

laboratories and travelling state advisors, but also the new Agricultural Institute at the Catholic University of Leuven, as well as an impressive stream of subsidies to secondary schools – Catholic schools *nota bene* – that started up sections for agricultural or horticultural education, agricultural home economics or dairy, and to *comices* and farmers' associations for the organisation of demonstration fields, lectures and courses (Van Molle, 1989; Segers and Hermans, 2009; Diser, 2012). This policy proved to be an additional strengthening of the mental association of the Catholic «pillar»¹² with concerns about agriculture and farmers.

Secondly, there was the driving force of electoral democratisation. In the parliamentary elections of 1884, when the right to vote was still linked to taxation, farmers accounted for 18.2 per cent of the electorate; in 1894, at the time of the first elections with universal, plural male suffrage, the figure was no less than 30.5 per cent¹³. Moreover, plurality voting worked to their advantage, since, as heads of a family and/or owners of real property – a small plot was enough – most farmers acquired an extra vote. In the electoral battle to win the most supporters – as long as the majority system remained in force, it was indeed a matter of being the largest party – farmers were allocated a central place. From 1891 onwards, when the decision was taken to extend the right to vote, political propaganda in the countryside took on proportions never seen before. The development of the press may be taken as an example of this. In 1891, French-speaking Liberals established a weekly magazine for farmers, *Le Journal des villages*. Dutch-speaking Liberals followed suit in 1893 with *De Zaaier*, also a weekly. In July 1894, the Socialist party began publishing the weeklies *Le Laboureur* and *De Landbouwer*. During the 1891-1895 period, Catholics published at least sixteen different magazines (daily, weekly or monthly) that were addressed directly to farming people¹⁴. Farmers, who in 1890 accounted for around 30 per cent of the Belgian working population, were particularly in demand in electoral terms. That Catholic politicians focused strongly on the rural electorate was a rational choice that meshed with and reinforced the mental image of farmers as traditionally

12. The concepts «pillar» and «pillarisation», translations of the Dutch words *zuilen* and *verzuiling*, refer to the deep vertical fragmentation of the civil society of The Netherlands, Belgium and a few other continental European countries since the late 19th century along ideological fault lines (Catholic, Protestant, Liberal, Socialist). Each «pillar» sustained separate party structures, media, social institutions and cultural organisations, forming together a subculture that guided its following – rural and urban, young and old, workers, middle and upper class – so to say «from the cradle to the grave» and functioned as instruments for social mobilisation and the structuring of political conflict and compromise. Pillarisation as a policy meant that each «pillar» could apply, if certain conditions were met, for state funding for their health insurance, schools, etc. (HELLEMANS, 1990).

13. NB: the figures in the book by de SMAELE (2009: 447-448) are nearly 10% higher, but are wrongly calculated.

14. I exclude here the purely vocational and commercial journals. A detailed repertory of the Belgian agricultural press will be published in 2014 by the ICAG (Interfaculty Centre for Agrarian History).

Catholic, certainly in Flanders. In the competition to gain their favour, that party won in terms of speed and efficiency: with its smoothly functioning farmers' associations and co-operatives it was able to take the wind out of the sails of its Liberal and Socialist rivals (Van Schoenbeek, Van Molle and Vanhaute, 2002).

Thirdly was the fact that the appeal of Catholics leaders to the peasantry rested on three arguments of vital importance, at least from their perspective. Catholics, in the first place, linked their appeal to the farming classes to the swelling pessimistic discourse of criminologists, demographers and moralists about the degeneration of the nation (Tollebeek, Vanpaemel and Wils, 2003). Against the threatening self-destruction –both physical and moral– of people in polluted and over-populated industrial centres, such as Brussels, Ghent, Liège or Verviers, they placed the regenerative power of nature and the «natural» health of the rural population. In the second place, they employed an economic discourse that recalled physiocratic thought of the eighteenth century. In spite of the mass import of cereals from the New World, they continued to present agriculture as the necessary foster-father of the nation (Van Molle, 1989: 47-80). Lastly, and most importantly, their strong attachment to the peasantry was based on the fundamental «For God and Fatherland» argument. For them, religion and Church were sacrosanct and a traditional characteristic of the (Belgian) nation. Against the spectre of so-called godless Liberalism and disrupting collectivist Socialism, they postulated the alliance of faith and farming. The concern for religion and Church was reflected in the central role played by priests in establishing and leading the farmers' associations, both at local level and in the umbrella organisations. «*Zonder de priester vallen de helft of de 2/3 van onze werken*» (without the priest, half or 2/3 of our works would fall away), thus one of the managers of the *Boerenbond* in 1902 (Van Molle, 1989: 320)¹⁵. Shortly before World War I, the Belgian bishops even asked and received permission from Rome to involve priests in the daily management of «worldly businesses» such as the *Raiffeisen* banks¹⁶. The pre-war farmers' associations, with the exception of the *Boerenbond*, operated within a single diocese and all were subjected to the watchful eye of the bishop¹⁷. Vocational organisation thus went hand in hand with denominational.

15. Parish priests not only functioned as spiritual mentors of the local branches, but fuelled the establishment of dairy co-operatives, operated as cashiers of Raiffeisen banks, secretaries of livestock insurance funds, etc.

16. This in reaction to the decree «Docente apostolo» of pope Pius X of 18 October 1910 that forbade such involvement; in 1932, the Belgian bishops decided otherwise (VAN MOLLE, 1989: 320-322; 1990: 128-129, 236-237).

17. Influential priests were Jacob-Ferdinand Mellaerts and canon Eduard Luytgaerens (*Boerenbond*), Alphonse Couturiaux and the Jesuit Alphonse Cus (diocese of Namur), the Jesuit Jules Lechien (dioceses of Tournai and Liège) and canon Aloïs Douterlungne (diocese of Tournai). A detailed account of the efforts of Cus to develop a Catholic farmers' movement in the province of Luxembourg in KREINS (1996: 140-195).

Using these three arguments, Catholic leaders raised the farmer to the position of the worthiest citizen in the country, as the solution to social, moral and political evils. The aim and consequences of the Catholic agricultural policy therefore went beyond economic performance. The party quite frankly regarded agricultural policy as part of its overall Catholic policy (1884-1909, 1909: 4-10). The newly designed Catholic corporative model of society, of which the agricultural project was but one component, represented a conflict-avoidance strategy that sought balance between ranks and classes, between town and countryside, between agriculture, industry and trade¹⁸. It was simultaneously a conservative and modern model, based on Christian solidarity, that attempted to counter the excesses of capitalism, Liberal individualism, Socialist class struggle and secularisation. It accentuated the negative image of town and industry to the advantage of an idealised countryside. Given that Catholics counted the farmers among their «natural» allies, their efforts on behalf of agriculture had at once economic, social, political and religious goals and significance (De Maeyer and Van Molle, 1998; Witte, Gubin, Nandrin and Deneckere, 2005: 595-604).

Thus, on the eve of World War I the interwovenness between the Catholic pillar (Church, party, schools, vocational, social and cultural organisations) and large parts of the rural population was firmly established. The relationship between the pillar and the farming classes was two-directional. On the one hand – and through the zeal and hard work of numerous priests and Catholic politicians, teachers, agronomists, vets, publishers of local papers, etc. – Church and party smoothly ensured themselves of the devotional and political loyalty of the members of «their» farmers' organisations. They did so without involving their local branches overtly in electoral campaigns. Sometimes, they were willing to adapt to local circumstances: where regular Church attendance and other religious practices appeared to be too demanding, as was often observed in Wallonia, membership of a farmers' organisation was not necessarily excluded; it was better to have passable Christians as members and to offer them the advantages of the Catholic *Raiffeisen* bank, livestock insurance, dairy, etc., than to lose them to the political antagonists. Interestingly, the most demanding and centralised organisation, the one with the most rigid top-down management and explicit Catholic profile, the *Boerenbond*, became the biggest and most powerful. Although far from democratically run, the *Boerenbond* was considered – up to the 1930s and far beyond Belgium's borders, even to the Vatican – as the model to serve the common interests of farmers, party, and Church (Van Molle, 1990: 99-100, 208-210; Kreinz, 1996: 166-175).

18. A comparison can be made here with the aims of the German Centre Party; see, for instance, BARKIN (1970).

On the other hand, the farmers themselves used the pillar mechanism to achieve their own vocational and financial ends. It is revealing in this respect to compare the membership of the farmers' associations with that of their «economic services» that had a clear impact on their farmers' incomes: the memberships virtually mirrored each other because these services often did not operate independently, but as sub-organisations of the farmers' associations¹⁹. The alliance of Catholicism and the farming population was thus not based purely on congruency of ideals and objectives, but was characterised, rather, by a convergence of interests and mutual clientelism²⁰. This alliance under a common ideological banner, however, contrasted with the increasing dissension in Belgium on ethnic and cultural grounds.

4. IN THE LANGUAGE OF THE FARMERS

Belgian farmers may well have been more or less practising Catholics, at least a wide majority of them, but which nation did they belong to? At first sight, the «for God and Fatherland» argument placed the politicisation of the countryside firmly within a perspective of Belgian patriotism. Indeed, Belgian nationalism predominated in the discourse of the Ministry of Agriculture, which was only too happy to see itself, from its establishment in 1884 onwards, as the crucial agent of agricultural change. It trumpeted the triumphs of Belgium's agricultural modernisation at international congresses and world exhibitions (Liège 1905, Brussels 1910, Ghent 1913) and evolved to become a technical department that was less concerned with the daily life of the farming classes than with technological innovation and economic results. It is true that, at the celebrations to mark the seventy-fifth and hundredth anniversary of Belgium's independence in 1905 and 1930 respectively, her farmers were praised for their unremitting labour, but the main focus of attention was given to prestige products: the Belgian draught horse, the dairy herd and butter production, the poultry breeds, the sweet grapes from Hoeilaart and Overijse, the Brabant chicory, cauliflowers and asparagus, and the Ghent *Floralien* (flower shows) with their splendid azaleas, camellias, etc. Once the agricultural depression was a thing of the past, from 1895 onwards, the Belgian nation state identified itself expressly with its agriculture, but much less with its peasantry (*La Belgique*, 1905: 193-232; *La Belgique centenaire*, 1930: 316-321).

19. In 1911, farmers' associations and purchase co-operatives both had c. 78,000 members; live-stock insurance funds even more (c. 115,000) and dairy co-operatives c. 57,500 (VAN MOLLE, 1989: 400).

20. I borrow the analytical terms «congruence» and «convergence» from BREULLY (2012) who introduced them to shed light on the relationship between «ordinary» people and politics in the process of nation-building.

The discourse of the Ministry of Agriculture was, not surprisingly, above all the official discourse of the unitary Belgian state. What was this discourse about? Was there such a thing as «Belgian» agriculture? The territory comprised huge differences in terms of soil type, population density, farm size, industrial development and proximity of markets. Such factors induced divergent developments between Flanders and Wallonia: choice of crop, production techniques and yields followed differing paths, certainly from the agricultural depression of the years 1880-95 onwards. In the densely populated regions of Flanders – in addition to labour-intensive industrial crops such as flax and hops – dairy cattle, pig and poultry breeding increased noticeably, along with market gardening (vegetables, fruit and ornamental plant cultivation). Wallonia, with a respectable area of loamy soil, but also woodland, retained a large portion of grain crops and sugar beet, and also focused on pastureland and livestock breeding. In 1910 Flanders was already using significantly more artificial fertilisers (per ha) and commercial cattle fodder (per animal) than Wallonia²¹.

The official language of the Ministry of Agriculture was not that of the peasants who spoke local Flemish or French dialects. Conversely, those peasants' language determined the field of action of the farmers' associations: Dutch and its Flemish dialects in Flanders, French and the Walloon dialects in Wallonia. Correspondingly, the social commitment of many local priests, agronomists and other propagandists of agricultural associations stopped at the linguistic border: these persons worked for «their» people, in their local language. On the Flemish side, that social commitment sometimes included a more or less pronounced pro-Flemish dimension. The two diligent priests-propagandists of the young *Boerenbond* or farmers' league, for instance, aimed to establish a single farmers' union for all of Flanders and upheld a pronouncedly pro-Flemish agenda: with the *Boerenbond*, they aimed, according to one of them, «*een Vlaamsch bolwerk tot stand (te) brengen, dat zal getuigen van Vlaamsche waardigheid, van Vlaamsche macht, tot dan toe ongekend*» (to create a Flemish bulwark to bear witness to Flemish worth and Flemish might, unparalleled until then)²². The *Boerenbond*'s general assembly of 1904 applauded the exclusive use of Dutch in all contacts of local branches with public authorities (brochure *Onze taal*, 1904) and its member magazine incited the farmers in 1906 to support the Flemish movement, as a means to safeguard their «piety and pure morals»²³. The Flemish image of the *Boeren-*

21. There is currently no thorough regional analysis of the Belgian agricultural economy available; elements in: BLOMME (1992: 244-254); SEGERS and VAN MOLLE (2004: 64-84). For nitrogen and cattle cake, for instance, the consumption in 1910 was three times higher in Flanders than in Wallonia.

22. Namely Mellaerts and Hendrik Theunissen; see *Bijdragen tot de geschiedenis van den Belgischen Boerenbond* vergaard door H. Theunissen, unpublished manuscript, undated (Theunissen died in 1929), pp. 29-30, KADOC, Boerenbond archives, 5.2.

23. Article «Moedertaal» (mother tongue), *De Boer*, 22 Sept. 1906.

bond was also promoted by the fact that two of its leaders, Helleputte and Emiel Vliebergh, were firmly committed to the Flemish cause at the same time. Vliebergh, indeed, succeeded Helleputte in 1903 as chairman of the *Davidfonds*, the most influential Catholic Flemish-militant cultural organisation, remaining chairman until his death in 1925.

However, this pre-war dimension of the *Boerenbond* as being a «*flamingant*» organisation was never systematically deployed, or unambiguous. The motto «for God and Fatherland» never turned into a militant credo «for God and mother tongue»; the *Boerenbond* consciously refrained from mobilising its apparatus as a lever for the Flemish cause. That cause namely clashed with the political ambitions of its two main founders, Helleputte and his brother-in-law Franz Schollaert, also a member of parliament and later a minister as well. For them, the *Boerenbond* had to develop into a central pillar of their Christian-corporative social model conceived on national lines. From 1897 onwards, the league systematically used the name *Belgische Boerenbond*, although it never realised its national ambitions. Its attempts to gain members in Wallonia encountered fierce resistance from, among others, the bishop of Liège to Flemish interference in the French-speaking part of his diocese. The circulation of the league's French-language members' magazine *Le Paysan* fell before the First World War from approximately 5,000 to 1,000 copies, whereas over 50,000 copies of the Dutch-language members' magazine *De Boer* were printed in 1914²⁴.

In short, the seven regional farmers' associations active before the First World War were closely related in terms of religious identity, clerical cachet and supporting role in favour of the «Belgian» Catholic party. But on the ground, the Flemish and Walloon organisations operated separately and in doing so created their own sub-identities. In Flanders, this meant a triple identity as rural, Catholic and Flemish. For instance, the members of the *Belgische Boerinnenbond*, the women's arm of the *Boerenbond*, sang their *Boerinnenlied* (song of the farmers' wives) in Flemish only and to the tune of the *Vlaamse Leeuw* (the Flemish Lion), the emblematic song of the Flemish movement created in 1847 and adopted as the Flemish anthem in the early twentieth century: «*Wij zijn de boerenvrouwen, van 't christen Vlaanderland; vereend door 't zelfde streven, zoo gaan wij hand in hand*» (We are the farmers' wives of the Christian land of Flanders, united by the same striving, we go hand in hand)²⁵. With language and symbolic practices, the members of the *Boerenbond* and *Boerinnenbond* crafted their distinct Flemish rural identity.

24. In 1914 the *Boerenbond* had c. 560 local branches in Flanders and only around 40 French-language branches.

25. «*Boerinnenlied*», *De Boerin*, March 1913, annex.

5. AFTER THE FIRST WORLD WAR: BORDER CONFLICTS

The First World War acted as a catalyst in many ways. The poverty among large sections of the urban and rural population, unemployment, the appeal of Leftism and the tensions between the French-speaking and the Flemings, all threatened the post-war stability of the country. This led to the hasty introduction in 1919 of universal, single male suffrage to prevent social unrest, what put an end to roughly three decades of purely Catholic rule and signalled the start of coalition government (see Table 1). The war radicalised the Flemish movement, of which a radical fraction of «activists» had collaborated with the German occupier and evolved towards an anti-Belgian Flemish nationalism. The war also fuelled the Walloon movement, which had started to take shape in the late nineteenth century as a literary movement; there followed a growing awareness of a distinct «*âme wallonne*» (Walloon spirit), in reaction to the Flemish assertiveness that went hand in hand with Flanders' economic progress and undermined the Francophone basis on which the Belgian state had been established (Van Ginderachter, 2005: 23-27).

TABLE 1
Electoral results for the Chamber of Deputies, 1884-1939

Political party	1884		1894		1900		1912		1919		1929		1939	
	Male tax-based suffrage; majority system	Universal, plural male suffrage; majority system	Universal, plural male suffrage; majority system	Universal, plural male suffrage; majority system	Universal, plural male suffrage; proportional representation	Universal, plural male suffrage; proportional representation	Universal, plural male suffrage; proportional representation	Universal, plural male suffrage; proportional representation	Universal, plural male suffrage; proportional representation	Universal, plural male suffrage; proportional representation	Universal, plural male suffrage; proportional representation	Universal, plural male suffrage; proportional representation	Universal, plural male suffrage; proportional representation	Universal, plural male suffrage; proportional representation
	seats	%	seats	%	seats	%	seats	%	seats	%	seats	%	seats	%
Catholic	86	53.2	103	48.5	86	51.0	101	38.7	73	38.5	77	32.7	73	
Liberal	52	29.7	20	22.7	31	11.1	33	17.6	34	16.6	28	17.2	33	
Socialist cartel ^b		17.1	28	22.5	32	9.3	39	36.6	70	36.0	70	30.2	64	
Daensist			1 ^a	2.5	1	0.7	2							
Flemish-nationalist								2.6	5	6.3	11	8.3	17	
Communist										1.9	1	5.4	9	
Rexist ^c													4.4	4
Other				3.8	2	0.8		4.4	4	0.7			1.8	2

Source: Luykx and Platel (1985, vol.2: 955-962).

^a After a re-election, 1 seat was accorded to the Daensist party. ^b A cartel of Liberals and Socialists in certain electoral districts. ^c Extreme right

The course and aftermath of the war gave rise to new tensions in the landscape of regional farmers' associations, as well, precisely at the intersection of the ideological and ethno-cultural fault lines in Belgium. Most of the associations operated poorly and irregularly

during the war –some came to a virtual standstill– and this created a hiatus²⁶. The *Boerenbond*, which managed more or less to continue operating working between 1914 and 1918, was eager to fill the gap and establish its monopoly in Flanders, the French-speaking part of the province of Brabant and the German-speaking enclaves that were added to Belgian territory in 1919 (see Map 1). In 1919, for instance, and with the approval of the bishop of Ghent, it took over the organisation of the farmers of East Flanders and succeeded in getting a firm foothold in West Flanders, too.

But two new organisations, *Redt U Zelve*n (Save Yourself) and the *Unions Professionnelles Agricoles* (U.P.A., professional unions of farmers), started to occupy part of the void (see Table 2). Both originated during the war, growing out of the discontent among farmers with the German requisitions and the dirigiste provisioning policy maintained until 1921, which favoured consumers, but vexed the peasantry. Both challenged the pre-war farmers' associations on three points: they imitated their range of «services» that made membership attractive (co-operative purchase of fertilisers and fodder, insurance funds, savings-and-credit co-operatives, etc.); they entered parts of their territory (for *Redt u Zelve*n: the region of Aalst in East Flanders; for the U.P.A.: Wallonia and a few enclaves across the linguistic border); and they undermined their Catholic profile. Both indeed presented themselves as ideologically neutral and politically independent. This was a clever move in the post-war context of shifting electoral results (at the expense of the Catholic party) and coalition governments. The U.P.A. positioned itself as an «*organisme de combat*», a militant body putting pressure on the agricultural policy of the unstable governments during the unstable inter-war years. Although with a noticeable number of Catholic farmers among its members (Schertz, 1934: 217-218), it acted as a credible neutral counterpart of the *Boerenbond* for Walloon farmers. *Redt U Zelve*n managed to compete with the services of the *Boerenbond* and soldiered on with ten thousand members, among whom an unclear number with a Daensist background and sympathy for the post-war Flemish-nationalist Front Party that strived for Flemish self-government (Coppein, 2005: 76-77)²⁷.

The *Boerenbond* reacted particularly nervously to both ideologically neutral competitors. From 1919 on, it aimed explicitly to achieve one strong and powerful Flemish Catholic farmers' association: in other words, a monopoly position for itself in Flanders,

26. This and the following paragraphs are largely based on VAN MOLLE (1990: 165-180, 210-222).

27. Adolf Daens was a Flemish Christian-democrat priest from Aalst and member of parliament in 1894-98 and 1902-06. Because of his uncompromising behaviour, he came from the early 1890s into conflict with the Catholic party, his bishop and the Vatican. The Daensist Christian-democrat party combined radical social and Flemish commitment. During and after World War I, the Daensist movement evolved in the direction of radical Flemish-nationalism, with some success, especially in the region of Aalst.

towards which the Flemish bishops were not ill-disposed. For political and above all for commercial reasons, however, it once again fostered Belgium-wide ambitions. The flagging Walloon Catholic farmers' associations, for their part, aimed at co-operation with the *Boerenbond*, albeit perhaps willy nilly. They were in urgent need of this: firstly, because they were threatened with bankruptcy and, secondly, to counter the expansion of the neutral U.P.A. on their territory. In the spring of 1921, a plan was put on the table, with the approval of the Walloon bishops, to merge the four regional Walloon farmers' associations to create a single Walloon Catholic farmers' association, which –at least at first– would be funded and supported by the *Belgische Boerenbond*. This plan offered the association the prospect of major economies of scale and also greater political weight²⁸. The climate appeared fairly favourable, as the *Boerenbond* had gained some sympathy among Walloon agricultural circles in 1919 and 1920 by energetically defending farmers against the accusation of having made exorbitant war profits and against the «anti-farmers policy» of the post-war Socialist Minister for Supplies.

However, the growing Flemish and Walloon self-awareness did not lie easily with the renewed Belgium-wide ambitions of the *Boerenbond*. The *Boerenbond* itself, still operating under the name of *Belgische Boerenbond*, got caught up once more in its multiple loyalties and interests. Because of the introduction of pure, universal male suffrage, all parties and social ranks again armed themselves to secure their electoral weight. For its part, the *Boerenbond* significantly reinforced its political organisation and its Flemish profile, the latter also as a means to undermine the rise of anti-Belgian Flemish nationalism. It gained a strong position in the administration of the Catholic Union, the post-war Catholic party, and ensured –albeit indirectly via new district committees– the presence of its own candidates on the Catholic lists for the parliamentary elections. Moreover, it stood firmly behind the so-called «Flemish Minimum Programme» (launched in December 1918 by a Catholic member of parliament), which aimed at the exclusive use of Dutch in education, the administration, the army and the courts in Flanders, and behind the claim for a unilingual Dutch university in Ghent. But adequate language laws failed to materialise. The election of a former activist (August Borms) in 1928 and the electoral progress of the Flemish nationalist party in May 1929 acted as a next catalyst. In Flanders, the Catholic student movement, the Christian workers movement and the *Boerenbond* all noticed a tendency among their members towards Flemish nationalism. In December 1929, the *Boerenbond* publicly claimed monolingualism in Flanders. A Flemish nationalist weekly reacted: «*Komt de Boerenbond los?*» (Is the *Boerenbond* coming out?)²⁹.

28. The savings-and-credit co-operatives, the insurance fund and the company for the purchase of fertiliser and fodder of the *Boerenbond* group actually extended their activities in Wallonia from 1919 onwards.

29. Vlaanderen, 21 December 1929.

TABLE 2
Regional farmers' associations c. 1880-1940

Name	Establishment	Operating area (province/region) before WWII	Membership*	Dissolution	
Eigenaars- en Landbouwersbond van Brugge	C	1885	West Flanders	1891: 800 1925: 2,100 1932: 3,700	1971
Syndicat agricole Liégeois	C	1887	Liège	?	1930
Fédération agricole de la province de Liège Boerenbond	C	1890	Brabant (incl. French-speaking part), Antwerp, Limburg and a few branches in the Walloon provinces. After WWI, also East and West Flanders and the German-speaking cantons	1891: 2,300 1914: 56,000 1929: 129,000 1939: 107,000	Still functioning
Landbouwersbond van Oost-Vlaanderen	C	1891	East Flanders	1893: 4,000 1899: 20,000	1920-22
Ligue Luxembourgeoise	C	1896	Luxembourg	?	1930
Fédération agricole du Hainaut	C	1897	Hainaut	?	1930
Fédération agricole de la Province de Namur	C	1900	Namur	?	1930
Redt U Zelven	N	1918	East Flanders	1919: 1,900 1927: 9,500 1932: 12,000	1970s
Fédération des Unions Professionnelles Agricoles (U.P.A.)	N	1919	Wallonia	1932: 35,000	2000
Ligue Agricole Belge	C	1921	Wallonia	1925: 25,000	1929
Alliance Agricole Belge	C	1930	Wallonia	1932: 23,000	2000
Boerenfront	N	1937	Flanders	1938: 25,000	1994

Source: figures as published by the associations themselves or by Schertz (1934); see also Van Molle (1990).

* C: Catholic; N: neutral

Such pro-Flemish moves by the *Boerenbond* were, however, not easily reconcilable with its commercial ambitions on a Belgian national scale and clashed with the growing sensitivities on the French-speaking side. In Francophone circles, aversion to the *Boerenbond* was bolstered by indignation at the Flemish Minimum Programme and distaste for the activists and the ensuing post-war Flemish-nationalist Front Party. The Walloon movement, moreover, bearing for the most part a Liberal and Socialist stamp, feared the presence of many thousands of Flemish-speaking (and Catholic) immigrants in Walloon territory (farmers, farm-hands, miners and industrial workers) and started to campaign for a mono-

lingual Wallonia. In this context, the *Boerenbond* soon became a symbol of threatening Flemish imperialism on Walloon land³⁰ (Van Ginderachter, 2005: 44-51).

In turn, the U.P.A., although it called its members' magazine *La Défense agricole belge*, ventured to sprinkle its discourse with attacks on the Flemings. Walloon Catholics who in 1919 had cajoled the *Boerenbond* into rescuing their destitute farmers' associations, in the second half of 1921 declared this same *Boerenbond persona non grata*. Consequently, the plan to merge the Walloon Catholic farmers' associations came to nothing. Instead, with the support of the weak bishop of Namur, a new Walloon Catholic farmers' association appeared on the scene in December 1921: the *Ligue agricole belge* (Belgian agricultural league), which presented itself as a *Société générale pour favoriser l'agriculture nationale* (general association to promote national agriculture), but quickly adopted a radical Walloon discourse. The *Ligue* thus fed the Walloon regionalist rhetoric, created the image of a «*Wallonie agricole*» (agricultural Wallonia), with «*cultivateurs Wallons*» (Walloon farmers) and claimed these for itself as instruments of the Walloon Catholic cause. This did not prove effective. The financial and political adventures of the *Ligue* seriously discredited the bishop of Namur, increased dissension among Walloon Catholics and in the late 1920s again placed the *Boerenbond* in the role of (financial) lifesaver. In December 1929, the remaining Walloon Catholic farmers' associations did finally merge, at the insistence of the archbishop, to form from 1930 onwards the *Alliance Agricole Belge* (Belgian Agricultural Alliance), which found itself under the financial tutelage of the *Boerenbond*.

In the 1920s, thus, Belgium still had a fragmented range of farmers' associations, which reflected the fragmentation of the country itself in both ethno-cultural and ideological terms. No single organisation spoke uncontestedly for Belgian farming people, and the successive post-war coalition governments with their policy of compromises were not able to satisfy the often contradictory demands of farmers and consumers. The dissatisfaction among farmers was heightened from the late 1920s when the agricultural sector had again to struggle with falling prices, first for grain and then, from 1930, also for animal products. Between 1929 and 1934, agricultural prices declined on average by 42 per cent and the income of Belgian farmers by 22 per cent (Blomme, 1992: 209-214, 267-275). During these years, farmers' associations and political parties competed more than ever to satisfy the farmers and eclipse each other. The Agricultural Holdings Act of 1929 is a first

30. According to an influential Flemish umbrella association for immigrants in Wallonia, Broederbond (League of Brothers), established in 1920, that region counted between 200,000 and 300,000 people originating from Flanders (articles of Byls and of Verbruggen and Vandeweyer, in GODDEERIS and HERMANS, 2012: 143-167, 171-199).

good example of this. The *Boerenbond* had proposed a minimum lease of three years, but the U.P.A. managed to raise the guaranteed minimum to nine years, thanks to the support in Parliament of progressive Liberals, Socialists and Flemish nationalists. When the government decided in mid-1931 to restrict the import of nitrogen fertilisers, in order to protect the Belgian nitrogen industry, the *Boerenbond*, an important shareholder in three nitrogen enterprises, was blasted by the Socialist, Liberal and Flemish nationalist press for a blatant conflict of interest.

Meanwhile, the *Boerenbond* refrained from overtly denouncing the Flemish nationalists, this in contrast to the Belgian bishops and the Christian workers' movement³¹, knowing that some of its local insurance agents, fertiliser salesmen, cashiers of *Raiffeisen* banks and ordinary members already belonged to their following. Apparently, it preferred to avoid an open conflict and feared the loss of members. But its silence, kept until the elections of November 1932, could not turn the tide. Two years later, the *Boerenbond*, too, went through a severe financial crisis – its financial centre, the umbrella organisation of its local *Raiffeisen* banks, collapsing – that seriously eroded its membership and political position. And the organisational fragmentation continued. In Wallonia, the extreme right-wing *Parti Agraire Belge* came into existence in 1932, identifying itself a few years later as *«le Front Paysan en Wallonie»* (the Peasant Front in Wallonia). Protectionism and a corporatist form of government became the most conspicuous points in its programme, which was clearly influenced by the French peasant fascism of Henri Dorgères (Michiels, 2006; Paxton, 1997). However, the party never succeeded in attracting a noticeable audience. In Flanders, the non-religious *Boerenfront* (Peasant Front) – formed in the summer of 1936 as a protest movement against collapsing prices for potatoes and milk, the deficient agricultural policy of the government and the financial debacle of the *Boerenbond* – was publicly condemned by the Belgian bishops and evolved further in a Flemish nationalist direction (Coppein, 2005: 77-81, 138-141). Moreover, all those who counted on farmers for their political rank and file, saw the proportion of farming people in the active population decline to less than 15 per cent by 1940.

6. THE FUNDAMENTS OF THE BELGIAN ORGANISATIONAL IMBROGLIO

The organisational muddle outlined above reveals that, by 1940, or 110 years after Belgium's independence, her farming classes had lost their credibility as unambiguous

31. The Belgian episcopate publicly condemned Flemish nationalism in 1925 and 1930.

stronghold and symbol of the alliance of «God and Fatherland». Between the 1880s and 1940, farm, faith and nation(s) tended progressively to relate to each other as confusing, even competing categories. What was the role of the farmers' associations in this process? The answer is to be found in both the complexity of Belgium and the strategic choices of the associations themselves.

Farmers' associations proliferated in Belgium from the 1880s onwards, as can be seen from the large number of local and regional organisations, their spread across the country and their numerous members. From a bottom-up perspective, their *raison d'être* was and remained the farm, i.e. their vocational mission for the benefit of agriculture and the farming classes. Their backbone consisted of their so-called «economic services» –mutual insurance funds, co-operatives for the purchase of cheap fodder and fertilisers, credit and dairy co-operatives, professional education and advice– which ensured that they attracted thousands and thousands of members and which provided them at the same time with a strong financial basis. Commercial expansion, economies of scale and profit making belonged to their intrinsic logic, as means to invest at the same time in the social emancipation of farming families. Without well performing services, no single farmers' association could keep going. Neither political ideals nor actions, neither national pride nor faith were appealing enough to retain members. This first point is of the utmost importance, as it explains why farmers' associations time and again struggled with the articulation of their vocational *raison d'être* in the face of other virtually unavoidable forms of identification within the Belgian context.

Faith and adherence to the Catholic party initially appeared to be the second «natural» unifying ground for farming people, and the best choice for the defence of their interests in the political forum. That logic was fully commensurate with the absolute majority enjoyed in Parliament by the Catholic party from 1884 to 1914 and with the noticeable efforts of numerous socially committed priests and politicians to serve the farmers, the party and the Church. In the longer run, however, the clerical and religious stamp of the farmers' associations proved for some to be more repellant than attractive, certainly in Wallonia where church attendance and Catholic voting were already on the decline before the establishment of such associations. It is significant in this respect that Walloon associations, in comparison to the *Boerenbond* in Flanders, hesitated to impose strict religious conditions for membership and allowed the «economic services» on their territory much greater freedom of action. This in turn led to further fragmentation, personal rivalries and cases of flagrant mismanagement. After the First World War, an ideologically neutral farmers' association, the U.P.A., seemed a more attractive proposition for uniting the farming forces of Wallonia than the Church. The Belgian Catholic Church itself acted as Janus-faced: on the one hand, as the ideological beacon that gave meaning to the Catholic

organisational thrust in the countryside³², but, on the other hand, as a dividing force. With regard to the farmers' associations, most bishops guarded their autonomy closely, each fostering his «own» regional association, a fact that, from the late nineteenth century on, hampered the *Belgische Boerenbond* in its national ambitions. After World War I, moreover, the Walloon bishops lacked the leadership to bring the Walloon Catholics into line to counter the success of the U.P.A.

The positioning of the pre-war farmers' associations as constitutive elements of the Catholic pillar – i.e. on one side of Belgium's ideological fault line – implied Catholic voting. With their impressive memberships, they indeed constituted a real asset to the party. Their members were expected self-evidently to be politically committed and thus instrumental in the party's electoral scoring. Furthermore, with many politicians in their entourages at local and parliamentary level, and good relations with the Ministry of Agriculture, the Catholic associations had a large reserve of political capital at their disposal.

But two weaknesses undermined their political binding force. Firstly, they kept consciously aloof from eye-catching electoral campaigns and neglected to give an explicit political education to their members: on the one hand, because this seemed unnecessary, their denominational flag serving, they felt, as sufficient sign; on the other, because they probably preferred not to get their fingers burnt on party politics. Secondly, their claims with regard to agricultural policy inevitably became part of the complex interplay of forces within the Catholic party, between parties and between pressure groups vis-à-vis the industrial/rural fault-line whereby the interests of agriculture were opposed to those of industry, the port of Antwerp, industrial workers and their unions, and consumers in general. Political decisions were compromises, all the more so from 1919 when coalition governments appeared, and this paved the way for discontent. Both weaknesses, compounded by the deficient functioning of particular farmers' associations, opened the door for competitors and critics from within to take advantage of the discontent among farmers – discontent above all with the decline of their income and inadequate political measures – to win them for their cause, whether that be an alternative farmers' association, a more forceful agricultural policy or even another party.

On top of this came the shifting relationship of farmers and their associations with the nation(s). In spite of their uncontested loyalty to the Belgium nation state until – for the large majority – the Second World War, all associations, including the neutral ones, became unmistakably an exponent of the growing ethno-cultural tensions in the country.

32. This, for instance, via the influential international conferences of social works of Liège, 1886, 1887 and 1890, and the general conference of Belgian Catholics of Malines, 1891.

Their territorial and linguistic fragmentation had at first much more to do with practical considerations – a matter of working in the language of the people, and within ecclesiastical borders – than with ethno-cultural concerns. Until 1940, they acted in general much more as followers than trendsetters in this respect: nation-building – Belgian, Flemish or Walloon – was not their core business; both the Flemish and the Walloon movement damaged the cohesion of the Catholic pillar, which remained a relevant binding element; and taking sides was, moreover, counterproductive from the point of view of membership and commercial radius of action. But not taking sides within the polarising context of the interwar years appeared to be difficult, too. In Flanders, the *Boerenbond* tried a rather opportunist, catch-all strategy encompassing a standpoint at once of loyalty to Belgium and pro-Flemish, and bold commercial expansion in Wallonia (albeit partially by invitation); added to this was the fact that it choose not to condemn Flemish nationalism before the end of 1932. The main Walloon farmers' associations of the 1920s, the U.P.A. and the *Ligue agricole belge*, added their voices to the regionalist rhetoric of the Walloon movement against the «colonisation» from Flanders, of which the *Boerenbond* was a prime example. Flemish nationalism in turn clearly profited in the late 1930s from the dramatic fall in agricultural prices and the crash of the *Raiffeisen* bank of the *Boerenbond* to recruit a number of malcontents and build its Flemish-nationalist alternative, the *Boerenfront*.

Whereas the Belgian farmers' associations tried first and foremost to function as dynamic actors for the farmers' sake and as mediators between farmers and government, they all became – out of conviction on the part of some of their leaders and members or out of necessity, or both – flexible interpreters of the ideological and ethno-cultural shifts within Belgian society. And being so, they were both mirrors and co-shapers of what is a Belgian house divided.

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