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THE LOW COUNTRIES, 1750-2000

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1. Ownership, power relations and the distribution of property

Types of landowners

After 1750 four main types of non-farmer landowners can be distinguished in the Low Countries: ecclesiastical institutions; investors in land (those who buy, own and sell land for profit); (noble) landowners who have inherited their land and aimed to pass it on to their offspring and government, both regional and local and public institutions. Farmers with full property rights (owner-occupiers) also controlled substantial proportions of the countryside although the proportion varied from area to area.

After the Reformation the provincial, local and urban governments in the Northern Netherlands became large landowners. The estates of Catholic churches and monasteries were expropriated, although many Catholic charities, like orphanages, were allowed to retain their endowments. As a result the provincial governments became major landowners. For instance, until the 1760s, the provincial government of Groningen was the owner of about 25,000 hectares in the province.

In the western provinces of the Northern Netherlands many large landowners belonged to the urban elite. Rich inhabitants of the capital of Zeeland, Middelburg, owned a great deal of land on the isle of Walcheren, but they had also invested heavily in large reclamation projects in other parts of the province. These urban landowners viewed their land in a more business-like fashion than the noble landowners in the east of the country, regarding it more as an investment which could be liquidated when necessary. In the nineteenth century many investors from Belgium and France bought land in Zeeland, but in the twentieth century, especially in the second half, the investor in agricultural land was less important than before.

Much land in the provinces of Friesland, Overijssel and Gelderland was in the hands of members of the old rural nobility. Some families had possessed their land for centuries. In the delta area of the Rhine, Meuse and Waal rivers in Gelderland they owned almost half of the land in the eighteenth century, but the ownership of unbroken land per family was limited {meaning? What is unbroken?}. In the Graafschap, situated in the eastern and sandy part of the province of Gelderland, some

noble families owned more than 1,000 hectares unbroken land, but most real estates were no larger than 300 hectares. Some rural estates survive through to today, but it has been very difficult for them to keep their heads above water, because rent yields were relatively low over the late twentieth century.

{I think we should have more here on the extent of government ownership in the 19th C.} The role of the government as landowner continued through the twentieth century, but its main task became the protection of nature. In this context a new type of landowner came to the fore: (private) nature and landscape conservancy organizations, who now own a great deal of agricultural land (Priester, 1991; Brusse, 1999;Van Cruyningen, 2005; Van Cruyningen, 2006).

{What about owner-occupation in the Netherlands. Can we have a table to show this distribution of land?}

In pre-Revolutionary eighteenth-century *Southern Netherlands*, the ecclesiastical institutions and the nobility owned about 25 to 50 per cent of the land. Most big domains were in hands of the Church. Urban investors controlled about 10 to 15 per cent of the land, with highest proportions in the more densely populated regions in Flanders. Fifty to 65 per cent of the land was owned by its occupiers or was common land controlled locally. This ratio was higher in the south and the east of the country. The sale of the *biens nationaux* around 1800 affected mainly the ecclesiastical lands, most of whose land was acquired by members of the old and new (industrial) bourgeoisie. Local farmers {occupiers?} only managed to secure between 10 and 23 per cent of the land depending on the region (Vandenbroeke, 1979). These sales promoted the tendencies to the concentration of property and the subdivision of the large ecclesiastical estates {contradictory?}.

In mid-nineteenth century Belgium more than 80 per cent of all landed property was in private hands with public institutions controlling between 15 and 20 per cent. After 1850, the share of public property diminished {why?}. The property in private hands was extremely subdivided. On average, a cadastral property title measured only three ha. in mid-century, shrinking by the end of the century to two ha. In 1845 almost six of ten households had at least one property title in the Cadastre. In 1910 the proportion was only 41 per cent, but had risen slightly to 43 per cent in 1930. From this time onwards the number of households with landed property rose again. The number of large estates was largely stable in the nineteenth century, about 1750 landowners having more than 100 ha each. Around 1900 only 146 families

owned more than 1000 hectares, the two biggest ones having in total 12,800 hectares. However, proprietors with more than 50 hectares, no more than one per cent of the total number, controlled half of the land. The 70 per cent of small landowners (with less than one hectare) possessed only five per cent of the total land area. Still, in 1900 69 per cent of all proprietors had less than one hectare of land, 95 per cent less than five hectares. Until at least the inter-war years, the number and proportion of large properties diminished significantly, a consequence of the equality of inheritance, demographic growth and taxation.

Changing social property distribution

A snapshot around 1900 shows significant regional differences in the position of land holding in the Low Countries. In the south (Belgium), leaseholding was dominant. Almost three quarters of the cultivated land and more than half of all agricultural holdings were held and cultivated on lease (Vanhaute, 2001). The highest proportion of land held on lease could be found in Inner Flanders and between Antwerp and Brussels (up to 80 or 90 per cent of farms and farm land). Low proportions characterised the Campine region in the provinces of Antwerp and Limburg and in the Ardennes (40 per cent and lower of farms and farm land). In the north (The Netherlands) owner-occupiers held about 53 per cent of agricultural land at the beginning of the twentieth century. High proportions of property holding {owner-occupation} were found in the north-east (Groningen, Overijssel) where up to 70 per cent of the land used for arable, grazing or horticultural purposes was owned the farmers who cultivated it. Elsewhere in the country, the percent of land held by owner-occupiers was much lower, with values of 26 or 27 per cent in Zeeland and Friesland.

The balance between owner-occupation and tenancy changed considerably in the centuries before 1900, and continued to change thereafter. In Flanders, the former Duchy of Flanders in the sixteenth century for example, half of the land and the farms were owned by the farmers themselves. This ratio was reduced to one third in the eighteenth century and less than 20 per cent (and locally often less than 10 per cent) after 1850. Between 1846 and 1895, the number of smallholdings of less than one hectare mainly or completely held on lease doubled. This trend was accompanied by a process of proletarianization. In 1850 almost six of every ten families in *Belgium* owned land. In 1910, this was only four of ten families (Vanhaute, 2001). In the

regions with high proportions of leasehold, the beginning of the twentieth century marked a turn in a secular trend of decline of peasant land property. This was most pronounced in the case of small family plots less than one hectare. In 1950 55 per cent of them were held in owner-occupation where farms larger than one hectare still were exploited mainly or completely on lease. That is why in Belgium the overall share of leasehold remained at a high of 65 per cent. Around 1950 the regional differences still reflected the historic distribution of owner-occupation: a predominance of leasehold in the Polders, the sandy and sandy-loam regions up to the Condroz (75 per cent and more), against less than 50 per cent in the Campine and the Ardennes regions. Leases were normally limited to terms of three to nine years, but in densely populated areas of Flanders, annual verbal agreements for potato plots, pasture and even for arable land were not exceptional. The distinction between owner-occupation and tenancy narrowed with the improved statutory protection of leasehold, guaranteeing rents of at least nine years {fixed for none years?} (first law voted in 1929 {was it passed in 1929?}, adapted {amended?} in 1951, 1969 and 1988) (Segers and Van Molle, 2004).

Eighteenth-century regional patterns of landownership among farmers in the Northern Netherlands were different. In contrast with the southern regions, individual property holding increased. In Over-Betuwe, in the river region of the province of Gelderland, this development began shortly after 1700. A comparable development can be observed in Zeeland; although in some districts, the trend started before 1740. In the Salland region of Overijssel, it seems that the only purchasers of farm estates after 1750 were farmers, which meant that the proportion of leased land fell and that of owner-occupied land increased. The same process can be observed in Friesland and Groningen although the changes took effect much more rapidly in the latter than the former. The turning point and speed of change differed to some extent, but the general tendency was the same. In the nineteenth century, the trend was reversed, although the developments in this period are less well documented. It seems that after 1817 developments in all parts of the Northern Netherlands {exactly what are they?} ran in parallel. Between 1884 and 1910, the numbers of landowning farmers grew less rapidly than those of the leaseholders. In 1910, an average of 53 per cent of the land in the Netherlands was being farmed by its owners. Thereafter, the proportion of the land owned by farmers decreased in most provinces and by 1950, 44 per cent of Dutch agricultural land was in owner-occupation. {But was buying this land?} In the second half of the twentieth century, ownership by farmers in the Netherlands

increased again as a result of the Agricultural Holdings Act of 1958 which made the leasing of land much less profitable. In 1959 more than half of agricultural land was rented by farmers: by 2004 this had fallen to 29 per cent (Priester, 1991; Priester, 1998; Van Zanden, 1984; Brusse, 1999).

Systems of tenure

Systems of tenure also varied regionally and can be directly related to the prevailing regional agro-system. In the clay and more market-oriented areas, relations between leaseholders and landowners were businesslike. Rent was usually paid in cash. Leasehold relations in these areas were rather flexible, because the continuity of the lease was in the interest of both parties. In times of falling rentals, for example between 1650 and 1750, landowners made many concessions to their leaseholders. In more favourable times, like the period between 1750 and 1817 it was the other way around. In depressed times many farmers and smallholders preferred to rent their farms because this way the risks of agriculture could be shared. On the other hand, in times of economic upswing, it was advantageous for farmers to buy their land because landlords did not hesitate to raise the rents. However renting a farm was accepted as normal in market-oriented regions. Some tenants on the clay land of Zeeland and Gelderland were renting huge farms and counted amongst the leading figures in their villages. In some commercialized regions the tenure system retained some traditional features. The government was the largest landowner in the clay area in Groningen, but completely failed to exploit its rights over its tenants. Here farmers were able to strengthen their hold on the land they rented through the so-called *beklemrecht*, a special type of hereditary leasehold which gave them the perpetual right to lease the land (Priester, 1991; Brusse, 1999)

On the sandy soils landlord-tenant relationships were often more paternalistic. In some regions the landlord expected to be the godfather of the tenants children. The sons of the tenant in Overijssel were expected to introduce their brides to their father's landlord {for approval?} (Van Cruyningen, 2005). In other regions tenure systems were part of village-based credit networks. The bigger farms exchanged their capital surplus (horses, equipment) for labour surpluses on the smaller, often rented holdings. In many peasant-like regions, this dense system of credit and exchange served to keep rents low. Rents themselves were part of the credit relations and could be reduced or postponed in depressed conditions.

Nonetheless, land prices rose sharply in both Belgium and the Netherlands in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In densely populated regions with a high proportion of smallholdings, the competition for land was most intense. In Inner Flanders between the middle of the eighteenth century and the third quarter of the nineteenth, the real price (expressed in labour days) of one ha of arable land increased three-fold (to more than 90 days' wages). This rise reflected also a changing balance of power between farmers, landholders and the state. While in Flanders, the nominal value of land taxes hardly changed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we notice a sharp increase in the value of land rents (Vanhaute, 2001). In other words, the productivity gains which were made in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Flemish agriculture were entirely expropriated by private landowners. The direct capital {income?}transfer from agriculture towards private owners via rents can be estimated at 10-15 per cent {of the capital invested?} in the third quarter of the eighteenth century and 20-25 per cent in the nineteenth. Net yearly profits of landowners can be estimated {at a return of 3.5 per cent on capital}before 1880 and 4.5 per cent after 1895. {Do I understand this right?}

In some sandy-soil regions such as Gelderland and Overijssel, *métayage* remained common practice until the early nineteenth century. Until then more than 90 per cent of the arable land of the Veluwe was leased under this system (Roessingh, 1969). Leaseholders had to pay rent in kind, up to half of the harvest. The landowner sold this on the city market {which city?}. In this system the landowners often contributed to the variable costs, by supplying seed and manure.

The balance of power in the relationship between lessor and leaseholder, preconfigured {?} these regional differences. In the river-clay regions such as Gelderland, the rent was largely determined by the market and the market in tenancies was free and open. Every six years, farms were re-leased and farmers had to compete to secure a tenancy for a further term. The relationship between lessor and lessee was purely a business one. That is why rents increased around three times on average between the second half of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, in some cases as much as five times. On the clay soils of Overijssel where the leasing situation was just as business-like, rents also rocketed (Van Zanden, 1984; Brusse, 1999). In such eastern sandy areas as Overijssel, Gelderland and the Campine region, the position of leaseholders was stronger. Over time the landowners, whose attitude was, as was explained before, more paternalistic, had conceded excessive

privileges to the leaseholders who usually managed to prevent agricultural surpluses being skimmed off, with the result that rents between 1770 and 1810 only rose by an average of 50 per cent. This was, as we noticed, very different to the densely populated proto-industrial region of Inner-Flanders, where the competition over land pushed prices upwards between 1750 and 1870.

In the eighteenth century, those who farmed the clay soils of Groningen had increased their hold on the land because of the *beklemrecht*. When, around 1770, investors bought this land hoping to profit from the rising agricultural prices, the rights of the leaseholders were confirmed by means of legal action. Consequently investors did not make much profit on their investment. By contrast, farmers profited from the agricultural boom, strengthening their social position in the nineteenth century. In the second half of the twentieth century the position of all farmers in the Netherlands and Belgium who rented their land and farm was strengthened by successive Agricultural Holdings Acts, of which the first ones were brought into force in 1929 (Belgium) and 1938 (The Netherlands).

The economic value of land

In general, the economic value of farming land in the Low Countries was determined by market forces and by the mechanism of supply and demand. The level of rents and sale prices started to fall in the middle of the seventeenth century and continued at depressed levels until around 1750. By then land prices had started to rise, sharply so after 1800. Shortly after 1815, a peak was reached, followed by a sharp but temporary fall in rent levels. They subsequently rose again from 1825 until around 1875. The second half of the 1870s marked a new turning point, because the rent started to drop again and continued to do so for about two decades. Between 1895 and approximately 1925, rent levels rose, but in the second half of the 1920s and especially in the first half of the 1930s, they took a turn for the worse. Prices began to rise again from around 1935. In the second half of the twentieth century prices of land were rising in response to an increasing scarcity of land. However in that period rent and sale prices in the Netherlands were held below market levels, because all leases and property transactions were regulated by the so-called *grondkamer* (Land Tenure Control Board {when was this established?}) (Van Zanden, 1985; Brusse, 1999; Priester, 1998; Van der Bie en Smits, 2001; Knibbe, 2006)

So, after 1750, the economic value of land was increasing because the demand for land was growing in response to rising demands for agricultural products. In the delta of the rivers Rhine, Waal and Meuse in Gelderland, the increase in the amount of land owned by farmers at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries was regarded by contemporaries as being the outcome of favourable economic developments. Many farmers did borrow large amounts of money in order to purchase their farms. Motivations to buy or sell land could differ between regions and period. Many farmers in the Dutch river region in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century choose to purchase land because the rents rose faster than wheat prices, the main crop in this area. It is likely that farmers in Zeeland could buy land for relatively low prices, because urban landowners were in a desperate need for money as a result of the collapse of the urban economy after 1795. In the sandy area of the province of Overijssel, the farmers became landowners for the opposite reason: that the rise of rents lagged behind farmers' income. It was therefore a logical step for the landowners to sell their land because farmers (in anticipation of future profits) were prepared to pay high prices for the freehold. When the land prices started to fall after 1817, some of them were forced to resell because of accumulated arrears of mortgage payments. The same upswing in sale and resale activity can be seen in other commercial regions such as Friesland and in Zeeland after 1878. In the twentieth century, especially in the second half, the economic value of land was determined by factors other than the profitability of agriculture. Land became scarce because of the population growth and urban development (Van Zanden, 1984; Wintle, 1986; Priester, 1998; Brusse, 1999, Brusse 2009).

The cultural and political value of land

The cultural and political value of land differed between social groups and region. Until the end of the eighteenth century, political power in the Dutch province of Friesland was directly connected to the possession of certain parcels of land. This was not the case in other provinces, but the ownership of land conferred social prestige and therefore political power everywhere in the Netherlands. Until 1795 the most important administrator in the district of Over-Betuwe (eastern river clay area), i.e. the *ambtman*, was always a noble man and large landowner. On the isle of Walcheren, urban owners of rural land wielded the most political power in the countryside, although their power was in fact based on the possession of so-called *ambachten*. In

Holland the administration of the water board districts was in the hands of large landowners (Brusse, 1999; Faber, 1972; Stol 2002).

In the nineteenth century, both in Belgium and the Netherlands, the right to vote for and to be elected to a public administrative body was to a large extent based on the amount of land tax that one paid. The Belgian nineteenth-century Senate reflected the enduring power of noble and bourgeois landowners. Only the 400 to 600 highest tax payers (in majority {?} land taxes) were eligible {to sit in, or to vote for?}for the upper chamber. Forty-three per cent of its seats were held by the 'new' bourgeoisie in 1842 and 92 per cent in 1892. Many industrial families, such as the Ghent textile manufacturers, invested heavily in land, both for financial security but also to secure prestige and areas of refuge {acquire the trappings of the rural lifestyle?} (De Belder, 1977). In the Netherlands between 1848 and 1887, only a very small group of male tax payers was eligible for Parliament. In Gelderland for example, although one of the most populated province of the country, only 144 were eligible in 1875, most of whom were large landowners.

At the local level, most mayors (elected in Belgium, appointed in the Netherlands) had an additional income from land. Although farmers were not without political influence in the eighteenth century, they had to wait until after the administrative reforms of the nineteenth century before their possession of land gave them the opportunity to hold the more important local administrative positions. After the abolition of the census suffrage {explain, or say 'widening of the franchise'}in 1887 in the Netherlands and in 1893 in Belgium, other social groups were able to secure political power. But throughout the first half of the twentieth century farmers are found running the local administration in the countryside. They were disproportionally represented in municipal councils and many served as alderman. However from the 1960s onwards, as agriculture became a marginal economic sector, farmers lost their political power again (Munters, 1989).

2. The occupiers of land

Peasant ownership of land and the changing size of holdings

About 1900, the English sociologist avant-la-lettre B.H. Seebohm Rowntree described Belgium as *un pays de petites exploitations.*[1]. This fragmentation of agricultural land into many small holdings was the outcome of an age-old process which only culminated in the first part of the twentieth century. Around 1850 55 per cent of all farms in Belgium were smaller than one hectare. In 1900 this had increased to 66 per cent and by 1950 75 per cent. Most of these holdings were transformed into vegetable gardens for working families living in the countryside but working in nearby towns. It was only in the 1960s that the average area of the farm started to rise significantly. The mixed, market-oriented family holding, exploiting on average 7 to 10 hectares became the standard farm in the 1960s and 1970s. The typical farm consisted of three ha in 1950, 11.5 ha in 1980 and 22 ha in 2000 (Segers and Van Molle, 2004). Again, there were substantial regional differences. In the nineteenth century, in the sandy and sandy-loam regions in Inner Flanders and Hainault, more than three quarters of the holdings were smaller than one hectare, against less than 40 per cent in Limburg Campine and the Luxembourg Ardennes. The typical region of small peasant farming was the old Duchy of Flanders (the provinces of East- and West-Flanders), until the early nineteenth century the most prosperous and most populated region of the Southern Netherlands. These very small leaseholds of less the one to two hectares, which were mostly too small to sustain a family for a whole year, were the outcome of a very long-term, secular process. The fragmentation and expropriation of the Flemish farm started in the 'long thirteenth century', accelerated in the 'long sixteenth century' and culminated in the 'long nineteenth century'. About 30 to 40 per cent of all farms in Inner Flanders in the second half of the sixteenth century were smaller than a hectare, a ratio that had doubled by the nineteenth century. Commercial farms of 10 hectares and more were characteristic of the clay regions in the sea and river polders (coast and the Schelde river district) and in the loamy region south of Brussels. However even the smallest village had its *coqs du village*, bigger farmers who had a central role in the local rural economy. Over time, their number remained surprisingly stable, a legacy of the old, village-based agro-system (Thoen, 2001).

The information about farm size in the *Northern Netherlands* between 1750 and 1880 is more impressionistic, but it seems that in the eighteenth century and perhaps in the first half of the nineteenth century the average size of farms was

[1] B. H. Seebohm Rowntree, *Comment diminuer la misère en Belgique* (Paris., 1910), p. 00.

increasing in the alluvial parts of the Netherlands, a continuation of much earlier trends. However, in the north-eastern sandy regions, especially in Drenthe, the smallholding definitely won ground, although in Salland (Overijssel), also situated in the east, the number of large farms grew relatively quickly. In the eastern part of the river clay area, the growth of employment in agriculture was determined by the rise of smallholders, many of them farming tobacco.

The period from about 1850 or perhaps 1880 through to around 1930 can be considered as the golden age of the Dutch smallholder. Throughout the Netherlands, the number of farms of 1-5 ha grew rapidly. Between 1878 and 1910 their number rose with 64 per cent, while the total number of farms increased only by 39 per cent. In the province of Drenthe the number of smallholders doubled. In 1910 more than half of the farmers had less than 5 ha a piece and almost 90 per cent had less than 20 ha {are these figures for Drenthe only?}(Van Zanden, 1984, 1985; Bieleman, 1987; Priester, 1998; Brusse, 1999).

In contrast, until the second half of the twentieth century, Belgium remained predominantly a land of small family farms, many of whom adopted horticulture. Between the middle of the nineteenth and the middle of the twentieth century the total number of farms more than doubled. Nevertheless the contribution of agriculture to average household income started to decline in this period. In the middle of the nineteenth century, the number of farms was 65 per cent of the number of families. This fell to about 50 per cent around 1900 to a mere 35 per cent in 1950. If we take one hectare as a lower limit, in 1850 29 per cent of all Belgian families exploited a family farm. In 1900 this had fallen to 18 per cent and in 1950 less than 10 per cent were agricultural households.

Large holdings of more than 10 ha lost ground between 1850 and 1950, from 16 to 9 per cent of the agricultural land, although the numbers of these farms remained remarkably stable at around 45-46,000. After 1950, the distribution of land changed quickly: in 2000 75 per cent of the remaining farms were bigger than 10 ha, against only 28 per cent half a century earlier.

From 1930 onwards small farmers in The Netherlands increasingly ran into difficulties and after 1950 the number of smallholders decreased quickly, while the number of farmers with more than 20 hectares in cultivation rose. Between 1950 and 2000 the total number of farms fell from 338,500 to 97,500. In 2000 less than a quarter of the farmers had only 1-5 ha in use. The increase in scale in Dutch

agriculture is also shown by the considerable rise of the number of dairy cattle per farm. In the early 1950s, an average of about seven cows were kept on a medium-sized dairy farm, but by 1995 a medium-sized dairy farm counted more than 45 cows (Bieleman, 2010). In Belgium, the number of commercial farms {definition?} fell by 75 per cent between 1950 and 2000. The biggest part of Belgium's farmland - roughly 80 to 85 per cent - is now exploited by farms of between 10 and 50 hectares. The large majority of smallholdings cover only 4 to 7 per cent of the land area.

The disappearance of communal land use systems

Communal land use systems existed in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Low Countries only in the eastern (sandy) and southern (forest) parts. Common land and common use rights were regulated and protected by village institutions, as a rule through a strict set of ordinances. Access and use were restricted to villagers. In forested areas in the south, the usage of a yearly rotating system of de- and re-forestation commonly survived well in the twentieth century. In Belgium, French communal law confirmed these public property rights by appointing the local authorities as sole proprietor of these lands. In the eastern provinces of the Netherlands so-called *markegenootschappen* - which that laid down rules for the use of uncultivated ground - were entrusted with the management of this land. The main aim was to keep it for grazing cattle and for producing fertiliser {how?}. All landowners (including smallholders, farmers and noble landowners) in the villages in the neighbourhood of the *marken* were represented in these organizations, but the largest landowners had many more votes than the smallholders.

The first publicly-sponsored attempts at a general privatisation and division of common lands in Belgium in the second half of the eighteenth century were not successful. At that time about 40 per cent – perhaps 400,000 ha - of agricultural land was waste or forested, the larger part exploited as common land. Local resistance to division weakened in the nineteenth century, and after the general law for the reclamation of uncultivated lands of 1847, village authorities sold their common lands with increasing speed. In 1910 only 100,000 hectares of 'vague' lands were left. The main instigators behind this process were the larger (often, but not always, urban) landowners, who wanted their share of these areas of land. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Dutch government made the first move towards carrying out this requirement {meaning} but there was still much resistance to partitioning. It was

only when it was considered to have become economically advantageous that farmers cooperated. In the period 1820-60 the country, especially the province of Overijssel experienced a hausse {in English?} in these activities and the land was rapidly divided. The Enclosure Act of 1886, which ordained that any member of a *markgenootschap* could demand its division, stimulated further inland clearances. In general, the large landowners and larger farmers profited the most from these enclosures. It had the effect of increasing social polarisation within the rural society. In the first half of the twentieth century the last communal land in the Low Countries disappeared, except some forested areas in the Ardennes (Van Zanden, 1984, 1985; Demoed, 1987, Van Cruyningen, 2005)

Power in the villages

During the nineteenth century and to a lesser degree in the twentieth, it was the owners of large landed properties who exercised power in the countryside of both the Northern and the Southern Netherlands. Their ownership of property was also acknowledged because payment of the land tax was linked to the franchise until the late nineteenth century. At this date in Belgium, the most influential people in rural villages were often the local nobility and *nouveau riches* from the new industrial bourgeoisie who built chateaux in the countryside, the 'intellectual elite' at village level, including the parish priest, the superior of a convent or monastery, the notary (should there be one) and the schoolmaster, and, of course, the biggest farmers. The polder villages and the *markgenootschappen* of the northern Netherlands were both dominated by the established farmers and larger landowners. In both countries it was not unusual for members of the same family to retain dominant positions in local politics and administration over several decades. The political opinion of the most influential villagers often determined the political 'colour' of the village: Catholic, Liberal or indefinable in nineteenth-century Belgium, with a clear preference for Catholic parties in Flanders and Liberal parties in Wallonia (de Smaele, 2009). In a number of small Belgian villages this meant that municipal elections never held because there was only one list of candidates, those of the mayor and his followers. The relatively immobile status of remote villages made them immune from the sometimes heated political discussions at the national level, such as the attempt to introduce a 'monastery bill' in Belgium in 1856, which would have facilitated gifts and legacies for poor relief to religious institutions, and the 'school war' between

Liberals and Catholics (1878-84). The attempts of the Belgian socialist party before the First World War to gain support in the countryside remained practically fruitless (Van Molle, 1989).

Rural municipalities were self-governing with a framework of provincial and national regulations and laws. The powers of the local administrations extended to matters such as the organization of poor relief via a public *Bureau de Bienfaisance* (charity office, compulsory since the French Revolution), the public school (at least one public primary school per municipality was compulsory in Belgium from 1879 onwards), public order (the rural policeman), safety and health (including the fight against contagious cattle diseases) and the construction and maintenance of local roads. The rural elites worked hard – both for ease of personal travel but also for access to agricultural markets - to secure their own railway station or at least a tramway connection. In 1890 Belgium had the densest railway network in Europe: 15.9 km per 100 km², followed by another 12.4 km per 100 km² of tramways by 1910. This efficient transport infrastructure curbed the so-called 'rural exodus' and encouraged commuting. But because of the frequent contacts between the rural and the urban world, comfort norms changed rapidly. After World War I, local politicians felt the need to provide new public services, often via the foundation of jointly-owned municipal enterprises: water supply, a sewer system, electricity, gas distribution, telephone etc., followed after the Second World War by bus connections, sports infrastructure, public libraries and cultural centres. Local authorities competed with each other in order to increase their prestige and become the most modern and most beautiful village of the region. This modernization process was encouraged by the Belgian government, for instance by the *Commission nationale pour l'embellissement de la vie rurale* (National Committee for the Betterment of the Countryside), that functioned from 1905 to the 1950s.

Meanwhile power relations in the countryside had started to change both in Belgium and the Netherlands. The introduction of universal male suffrage at the end of the nineteenth century and the women's vote (in the Netherlands in 1922, in Belgium first at municipal level in 1921 and at national level in 1948), the increasing literacy of the masses and the rising degree of organization among farmers and workers in unions and other forms of association all contributed to heightened self-awareness. Leaders of the local branches of the farmers' unions at village level soon became an influential part of the local social and political elite (Bax and Nieuwenhuis,

1981). Power relations changed once again after the Second World War when sprawling suburbs and the construction of new residential areas in the countryside multiplied the influence of newcomers. In Belgium this process was fuelled by the so-called De Taeye act{in English?} (1948) which provided subsidies for building houses for families with children as a means of reducing the acute shortage of housing. Numerous municipal administrations seized the opportunity to attract new inhabitants by putting building land at the disposal of social housing companies and individuals. By doing so, they reversed the pattern of migration from the countryside: it was urban centres in densely populated Flanders which in the 1950s and 1960s which witnessed a net loss of inhabitants, whereas villages saw their population grow. The expansion of villages with new housing provoked hostility and tensions between 'natives' and newcomers. In combination with the diminishing number of farming people, the countryside became a zone of mixed 'cohabitation'. The process of 'counter urbanisation' also meant that cities had to cope with shrinking tax incomes, the degradation of their housing stock and a decreasing attractiveness for retailers who preferred to settle in new shopping centres in the vicinity of the new housing areas in the countryside. It is in this context that the successive mergers of Belgian municipalities, whose numbers fell from 2670 in 1964 to 589 in 1983 must be understood: it was a way to reduce costs and increase tax revenues from a larger population base. Comparable developments took place in the Netherlands. The number of municipalities decreased from 1250 in 1819 to 537 in 2000 (declining steadily from 1900 onwards with an acceleration since 1965 {can we have a figure for 1965?} (van der Meer, 2006). The loss of local autonomy to the larger municipalities into which they were merged was not welcomed by the majority of the villages.

Peasant organizations

From the second half of the eighteenth century, and in parallel with demographic growth and pressure on the food supply, the interest of the elites in farming increased. The first agricultural societies, founded earlier in the Northern than in the Southern Netherlands, sought to bring about progress by experiment, and through publications and lectures. Their sphere of action was local or regional and their membership limited to well-to-do aristocrats and large landowners, politicians and scientists. The Low Countries, in the same way as the United Kingdom and France, became gripped by a real 'agromania'. Under French rule, during period of the United Kingdom of the

Netherlands (1815-1830) and then, after the separation of north and south, the number of prestigious agricultural and horticultural societies continued to grow. Some had a semi-public status as royal or provincial agricultural associations or regional *comices agricoles.* But a wide gap remained between these rather elitist initiatives and the day-to-day practice of the mass of smallholders.

The organization of these smallholders started in earnest in the later nineteenth century in the context of the agrarian crisis. The elitist agricultural societies were unable to meet the needs of the farmers who struggled with falling market prices. New types of farmers' organizations succeeded in filling the gap: firstly small-scale cooperatives for the purchase of fertilizers and livestock feed, savings and loan cooperatives and cooperative dairy farms, plus mutual insurance for cattle loss; secondly farmers' unions on the model of the German *Bauernvereine*. The farmers' unions presented themselves as the political representatives of the farmers, secured the support of much of the cooperative and mutual insurance movements, and efficiently supported their members in the process of modernization. It was not by accident that the foundation of the farmers' unions coincided with the introduction of universal (male) suffrage. On the eve of the First World War, there was already a branch of a farmers' union and a mutual cattle insurance association in every other Belgian municipality, and a *Raiffeisenkas* in one in four. By also uniting rural women and youth, during the inter-war period, the unions gradually created a strong identity as a 'second home' for the whole farming family (Van Molle, 1990).

In the Netherlands the unions quickly acquired an anti-liberal character, either strongly Catholic in the provinces of North Brabant and Limburg or strongly Protestant, particularly in Gelderland and the East of the country. Thus Dutch farmers' organizations became involved in the process of ideological pillarization (*verzuiling*). Locally, the competition between Catholic, Protestant and more liberal associations reinforced the degree of organization (Smits, 1996). In Belgium, the establishment of farmers' unions formed a part of the Catholic offensive against liberalism and socialism. The Catholic party's unbroken political ascendency from 1884 to 1914 contributed further to the identification of agriculture and countryside with the Catholic establishment. In this respect the First World War was not a turning point.

In the 1920s, the membership of the farmers' unions reached record highs. The *Belgische Boerenbond* (Belgian Farmers' Union), founded in 1890 and the largest

union before the war, tended to a virtual monopoly position after the war, but soon lost ground to new ideologically neutral organizations, especially in Wallonia where the dominance of Flemish and explicitly Catholic organization was no longer accepted. During the crisis of the 1930s, a small number of discontented farmers turned to extreme right-wing politics and formed their own *Parti Agraire Belge* and *Boerenfront* in Belgium, and the *Nationale Bond Landbouw en Maatschappij* in the Netherlands. But in both countries the remarkably extensive network of traditional farmer's unions remained in place, strengthened its position via mergers and continued to put pressure on the national agricultural policy. Moreover, from the late nineteenth century onwards, private and state initiatives towards agriculture (in the field of education for instance) became tightly interwoven, forming together a solid 'agricultural institutional matrix', which remains in place today notwithstanding the decimation of the agricultural population (Schuurman, 2010).

Fromthe 1960s the well-oiled agricultural lobby itself came under pressure. First from outside, because of the negative effects of the agricultural policy of the EEC: the production of surpluses at high cost and environmental damage (Kooij, 1999). Secondly, the agricultural lobby faced internal criticisms: increasingly some rejected the productivist path, as is demonstrated by the formation of alternative farmers' organizations, the development of organic farming, agricultural tourism and social care farms, the turn towards traditional regional products and direct sale from the farm to consumers (Van der Ploeg, 1999; Segers and Van Molle, 2004). But all this took shape in Belgium and the Netherlands gradually, without major shocks or social dramas. In order to understand this smooth evolution, it is necessary to point once again to the powerful driving and protective role of the farmers' unions. After a long period of stability in the organizational landscape, at the end of the twentieth century they started to merge both in the Netherlands and Belgium (cf. for instance the foundation in Wallonia in 2001 of the *Fédération Wallonne de l'Agriculture*). The result is that farmers nowadays are no longer organized according to the ideological 'pillars', but in large regional associations and according to agricultural specialisation.

Peasant resistance

The modern rural Low Countries are not known for either rebellion or disorder. The fact that small ownership and tenancy were both widespread, and that large properties were relatively rare, made for a social hierarchy in the countryside which was less

questioned than that of Britain. Instead of notable conflicts within the farming population – between proprietors and tenants, or between employers and agricultural workers – Belgium experienced repeated hunger crises in the first half of the nineteenth century which provoked conflicts between those who were able to afford food and those who could not. The last food riot took place as late as 1861. Beside that, there were periodic complaints about high rents, violations of the hunting rights of the landowners and problems with poaching, as described in well-known late nineteenth-century novels of the Flemish naturalist and writer Cyriel Buysse.

The absence of serious class conflicts within rural society can also be explained by the fact that, at least in Belgium, the number of agricultural labourers diminished drastically from the 1860s onwards. New job opportunities with higher wages in expanding industries drained the countryside of manpower. In 1880 Belgium counted *c.*180,000 agricultural workers, in 1910 about 160,000, but in 2000 barely 100,000 were left {please check these numbers}. Although their living and working conditions fell far short of those of urban and industrial wage earners, the socialist party did not succeed in its attempts to mobilize them and lost interest in rural affairs.

In the Netherlands, the labourers' strike of 1929 in the Oldambt, a region in the province of Groningen where the polarization between farmers and agricultural labourers had grown since the second half of the nineteenth century, is seen as a turning point. Groningen in the north-east and Zeeland in the south-west of the Netherlands are both arable farming regions with relatively many labourers. Against the background of high unemployment amongst them, their union ({Spell out in Dutch?} NVV) called for a strike for higher wages at the beginning of the harvest season. In the end a compromise was reached, but it was a pyrrhic victory for the labour union because the farmers responded by quickening their adoption of labour-saving machinery (Jansma and Schroor, 1987).

If collective protests were seldom were made in the nineteenth century about scarcity and high rents, they sometimes burst out in the twentieth-century context of overproduction and falling market prices, and of the growing importance of politics. Farmers learned, from the example of the industrial trade unions, how to put pressure on the government. Spontaneous demonstrations of Belgian farmers took place in 1936 because of the low prices for milk and potatoes. In the 1960s and 1970s hundreds of demonstrations were held complaining of low prices and low demand, with or without the approval and support of the farmers' unions, with the violent

demonstration against EEC policy in Brussels of around 100,000 angry farmers drawn from all its member states on 23 March 1971 as a notorious high point.

The prosperity of the farming community

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rural society experienced an increasing social polarization. After 1800 the margins of survival for small farming and income pooling {better phrase?} families narrowed, rents reached historical highs and the income which could be drawn from using commons, village credit networks and cottage industries rapidly declined. Large portions of the rural population could only ensure their survival by an ever deeper exploitation of their family's labour on small parcels of land, in old and new artisan industries (such as clothing and lace making), and itinerant seasonal labour. The rising and falling prosperity of market-oriented farmers ran in parallel with the increasing and decreasing prices for grain and land. Conditions after 1750 generally favoured farmers. The prices for agrarian products rose steeply, especially in the French-Batavian period between 1795-1813, a period of scarcity. After a short period of relatively low prices between 1817 and 1825, profits began to rise again. This is reflected in the material culture of the countryside. Large farmers in particular distinguished themselves with a luxurious lifestyle. Around 1850 farmer's wives in the province of Zeeland wore more golden jewellery than 100 years before; the number of silver watches among farmers increased visibly, and the quality of their household furnishings improved considerably. In the province of Groningen, the houses of the farmers became almost stately homes. Until the end of the 1870s agriculture did very well, although not every region profited equally. The '80s and the first half of the '90s were difficult years, just like the '20s and '30s in the twentieth century. Farm income did not grow again until the 1950s and, although that was a decade of relative prosperity, the standard of living in agriculture lagged far that of other sectors. As a result thousands of labourers and farmers left agriculture, mostly to take work in the growing manufacturing and service sectors. A lot of farmers who left in the 1960s and later were financially compensated: many were able to sell their property at high prices. It is difficult to make general statements on the income of farmers in the last quarter of the twentieth century: fluctuations in time, differences between agricultural sectors and regions, and different degrees of government support, especially from the European Union, played a large role in determining income. {But, could a little more be said?}

3. Government and public policies

State policies towards landlords, farmers and peasants

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the governments of both the Northern and Southern Netherlands had a significant but indirect influence over agriculture: high taxes were imposed on landowners, and especially on the farming families. The primary purpose of the agricultural statistics which were first collected during the period of French dominance, from 1794-95 onwards, was to enable the requisition of corn stocks, whilst the making of a parcel-based land register in all the departments annexed by France from 1807 was primary meant for tax purposes. During the amalgamation of the north and south under King William I, fiscal pressure on agriculture and food industry increased. The resentment towards taxation in the south was one element in the Belgian complaints against William I, which led to the division of the kingdom in 1830. In other respects both states tried to mediate between the interests of the producers, including the major landowners who had considerable political weight in the still young parliaments, the wholesalers and the mass of consumers. Beside high land taxes, farming families were also hit in an uneven way by conscription because richer families were able to pay for a substitute.

The fate of farming communities first appeared on the political agenda when both agriculture and industry were hit by the late nineteenth-century economic crisis and governments feared the appearance of a drifting population of poor and unemployed. The Belgian government opted, instead of agricultural protection, to stimulate modernisation and to lighten the fiscal weight on farming by tax reductions for the acquisition and inheritance of small landed property (laws of 1897, 1900 and 1905). The possession of property was seen by the Catholic majority as the most effective way of countering the danger of socialist class struggle. {reaction of the Dutch government?}

The occupation of most of Belgium during World War I led to an acute food shortage, decimated the livestock and did a great deal of damage to buildings and farm equipment. But numerous farmers made also good money on the black market. Part of the war profit was creamed off by a special war tax in 1919, while the tax burden placed on landed property was replaced by a progressive income tax that included wages. The farmers and the food market in the Netherlands only experienced the effects of the war indirectly. After the war, the Belgian and Dutch Ministries of

Agriculture and the farmers' unions resumed their roles as advocates of agricultural modernization and defenders of the farming families. Moreover, memories of shortages and high food prices heightened the appreciation of national agriculture and the domestic food supply. World War II had comparable consequences for both countries, including special taxes on war profits.

The EEC added a crucial chapter to the history of political interference in the lives of farming families. The intention in the Treaty of Rome (1957) to protect the income of millions of farmers was in conflict with other objectives of the same Treaty, namely the ample supply of good quality food at reasonable prices. The stabilization of prices and markets turned out to be harder to achieve than had been hoped, and the farmers themselves were not prepared to simply have theoretically ideal models for rationalization such as the Mansholt plan (launched in December 1968 by the European Agricultural Commissioner Sicco Mansholt, formerly Dutch agricultural minister) imposed on them. Hence the massive protests of 1971.

Changing governmental attitude towards consolidation and enclosure and public regulation of the countryside and landscape change

In the eighteenth and the first decades of the nineteenth century, the organization of land reclamation took place primarily at local or regional level, with or without the encouragement of higher authorities. The growing awareness of food shortage during the Austrian ascendency {correct phraseology, dates?} encouraged the government to introduce compulsory land reclamation into the Southern Netherlands. King William I encouraged attempts at internal colonization in less densely populated sandy regions – in particular the reclamation projects at Veenhuizen, Wortel and Merksplas – although none of these were successful. To increase domestic food supply, in 1847 Belgium government turned to obligatory reclamation of wasteland and the drainage of waterlogged areas using public funding, both measures achieving fairly respectable results. Through the systematic improvement of the road network, efforts were also made to secure the conveyance of fertiliser and the transportation of crops. In the Netherlands, the role of the central government was noticeable in the legislation for the enclosure of common land (cf. *markenwetten* of 1809 and 1837). In the period 1840-70, most remaining common land was divided up.

Rural landscapes altered besides in other ways too: increasing rural housing, industrial expansion and land consolidation. The fear, current since the late nineteenth

century, of a rural exodus and social unrest in urban and industrial areas inspired the Belgian government to subsidize the building of new housing in the countryside. In 1935 the *Nationale Maatschappij voor de Kleine Landeigendom* (National Society for the Small Property) was founded for that purpose (Dejongh and Van Windekens, 2002). This move of housing into rural areas was advanced further by the De Taeye Act (1948). A decade later, measures were taken to facilitate the establishment of industrial parks in the economically-less developed areas of Belgium, with the intention of attracting American and other foreign companies, but at the expense of arable land.

In the Netherlands land policy became one of the cornerstones of twentieth-century agricultural policy (Van den Bergh, 2004; Karel, 2005). Additional land was reclaimed in the nineteenth century, notably the Haarlemmermeer in 1840-52. Reclamation continued in the twentieth century with the winning of part of the Southern Sea, which became the Ijsselmeer. Especially in the 1950s and 1960s, the countryside was deliberately reorganised for the improvement of agricultural production (Groeneveld, 1985). This was the highpoint of agricultural modernisation. Landholdings were was re-arranged, and farmers educated in new business models, technical novelties, accounting methods and the running of efficient households by officials from the state advisory service.

Since the 1960s public opinion has became more and more conscious that attempts to modernize agriculture were in conflict with and developing environmental concerns. In 1973 Belgium passed a law on nature conservation, while in 1974 the Dutch government published a document (*Relatienota*) which explicitly championed the importance of landscape and nature (Kooij, 1999). Public interest shifted towards nature conservation, animal welfare, food quality and food security. Agriculture and the countryside are no longer synonymous. The countryside is mainly perceived as a residential and recreational space for non-farmers, while agriculture itself is reduced to a small link in the global agro-industrial food chain.

Government and market

Before the mid-eighteenth century the Low Countries had no real agricultural policy: at most, there was an urban food policy, a mercantilist trade policy and a physiocratic reclamation policy. The Southern Netherlands produced small grain surpluses and the Dutch Republic acted as grain broker for the European markets. Because of rising

food prices and inspired by Enlightenment ideas about the promotion of the general interest, the Austrian government of the Southern Netherlands started to collect descriptive statistics (grain stocks, price registration {market prices?}and import and export flows), and introduced import and export duties. In doing so, they strove to achieve a proper balance between food production and consumption requirements and a fair price for producers, traders and consumers (Van Dijck, 2009: 305-11). For flax, a crucial source of income for smallholders in Flanders, a thoroughly protectionist approach was taken.

Government concerns about maintaining the food supply to both the population and the French armies became more acute from 1806 onwards because of the Napoleonic 'continental system'. The United Kingdom of the Netherlands wanted to safeguard both the lucrative grain trade and food security. Grain exports slackened and from 1816 imports were permitted, subject to payment of a very low import duty. Following the British and French example, Belgium and the Netherlands introduced sliding scales for duties on the import of bread grains in 1834 and 1835 respectively (Van Dijck, 2008: 341-93).

But because of rising tensions in the food market, both countries abruptly abandoned this semi-protectionism in 1845-46. During the crisis of the 1840s, caused both by failed harvests and the collapse of the linen-weaving industry, the Belgian government did not confine itself to lifting duties from imports, but also imposed export restrictions. The structural deficit in domestic grain production made minds in both the Netherlands and Belgium receptive, from the 1850s onwards, to the cause of free trade in an open, competitive market in line with the ideas of classical political economy. The young Belgian state, with its fast-growing group of wage-dependent workers in the coal mines and the iron and textile industries, could not afford food shortages and high food prices, both because it needed to maintain its competitiveness with British industry but also because it feared popular disorder. By the 1870s, the liberalisation of the market in both countries was complete.

In Belgium, the *laissez-faire* principle was not an obstacle to government intervention in the fields of research, agricultural education, public works, cattle improvement and efforts to combat cattle diseases. Belgian faith in progress through science and education was particularly striking. The Belgian state started with a veterinary school (1836), fifteen secondary-level agricultural schools (1840s), and the *Institut agricole de l'Etat* (Institute for higher agricultural education, 1860). The state

subsidised cattle competitions, agricultural and horticultural exhibitions, demonstrations of agricultural machines, and several hundred lectures and courses every year. With manuals in both French and Dutch, medals, diplomas and prizes, it encouraged farmers to modernize. Also private initiative increased, with the publication of ever more books, farming almanacs and journals. But this was not yet enough to produce effects on a macro-scale (Segers and Hermans, 2009). In the Netherlands however, the role of the central government remained limited.

Large-scale grain imports from the 1870s onwards, mainly from North America, and the resulting fall in market prices, quickly gave agricultural policy in both states a new direction. Despite fierce international competition and pressure from interest groups for the introduction of far-reaching protectionism, both countries broadly maintained an open market policy: Belgium in order to safeguard its industrial interests, and the Netherlands in order to preserve its pivotal position as an entrepôt in the in the international food market.

Belgium's governments before the First World War went no further than highly selective market intervention. Only a few products were subject to (limited) import duties: oats, livestock and meat, flour and pasta, canned food, dairy products and confectionery. The intention was clear: first the government wanted to keep bread as cheap as possible, secondly, it sought to reorient agriculture towards more lucrative market segments, and thirdly to wished to encourage the food-processing industry. The economic recovery from the 1890s increased the purchasing power of the working classes, which contributed to growing domestic demand for meat, butter, vegetables and fruit. The Netherlands made the same policy choice, eschewing protection and opting for a reorientation of mixed farms towards cattle farming, dairy and market gardening. More than in Belgium, there was a strong export focus. The Netherlands established a prominent position in the international market for butter, cheese and horticultural products. Increasing use was made of artificial fertiliser on farms, and the Netherlands became one of the biggest importers of maize, which was used as a concentrated food for cattle. Controls of finished products were intended to guarantee confidence in Dutch foods.

The remarkable expansion in both Belgium and the Netherlands of agricultural research and education from the late nineteenth century onwards should primarily be seen as a response to the agrarian crisis. In the Netherlands, the agricultural school at Wageningen was converted in 1876 into a national institution which became the pivot

of Dutch agricultural research and education. Both countries started with influential agricultural research stations which played also an important role in the struggle against the adulteration of fertilizers, cattle feeds and foodstuffs.

Paradoxically, the strength of the post-war recovery was the cause of the next crisis. As a result of overproduction and sharp price decreases on a worldwide scale, both agriculture and industry again found themselves in difficulties in the 1930s. Agricultural policy was reactivated in both countries, in a particularly difficult context of governmental crises, monetary instability, budget problems and right-wing extremism. There were again loud calls for protectionism, but neither of these small, export-oriented countries was inclined to take this approach very far. What followed in both was a complex set of measures such as import licences, import quotas, low import duties and a crisis law to reduce the financial pressure on leasehold {leaseholders?}. These measures were intended to have a price-stabilising effect, but met with only limited success. Moreover, the Netherlands and Belgium were working against one another. The Convention of Ouchy, which was held in the summer of 1932 and sought to abolish down the tariff barriers between the two countries, was ratified by neither.

In 1933, the Dutch parliament passed the Agricultural Crisis Act, which gave the government the power to intervene in production, processing and sales. After the Second World War, the line of a powerful statutory organization of the agricultural sector took further shape in the Agricultural Board (*Landbouwschap*) {meaning, and date?}. A special small farmers' committee was set up in 1936 {by who?}. Support for these farmers was coupled with measures to rationalize their farming activities. In Belgium too, a number of people spoke out in favour of a corporate reorganization of the agricultural sector, but they found few supporters. The Belgian Ministry of Agriculture sought to reactivate the sector in the 1930s by creating instruments {?i.e. government bodies?} to raise agricultural productivity, improve product quality and promote sales.

The objectives of post-war Dutch agricultural policy essentially remained the same: higher productivity to ensure domestic supply and a strong export position, plus a good income for the farmers. The government's involvement increased further. In the late 1950s, mechanization, rationalization and economies of scale were recommended as the way forwards to give Dutch family farming a new future. But at the same time, the government abandoned the ideal of maintaining large numbers of

less profitable farms. Many small farmers had to leave agriculture. Measured by its own economic targets, this policy was highly successful. Both productivity and incomes rose rapidly, but agrarian employment dropped in both absolute and relative terms (Bieleman, 2010).

Belgian agriculture had a hard time after the Second World War contending with the competitive advantage of the Dutch farmers, particularly in the dairy sector and horticulture. For agricultural products the Benelux Customs Agreement of 1944 proved problematic. The trade agreement of the BLEU (Belgo-Luxembourg Economic Union) with the Dutch, concluded in 1947, served as a manoeuvre to slow down price harmonization. Yet due to a lack of existing export markets, Belgian agriculture was faced with new problems. With the prospect being able to access an extensive foreign market within the union, Belgium became an important supporter of the EEC. Upsizing, mechanization, intensification and specialization became the watchwords in Belgium too, in combination with the closing down of unrewarding farms which was subsidized by the government from 1965 onwards (*Landbouwsaneringsfonds*).

With the Stresa conference of 1958, the EEC common agricultural policy (CAP) was properly launched. The EEC primarily gave Belgian and Dutch agriculture an important boost, as new markets became available. The firm {Q correct – or farm?} policy of Mansholt reinforced the policy line of subsidising and stimulating competitive sectors (Merriënboer, 2006). The EEC developed the market and price policy, with guaranteed minimum prices for the farmers, whereas the member states assumed responsibility for structural policy such as land consolidation.

The disadvantages of the European common agricultural policy became apparent in the 1970s. It was very expensive, due in part to monetary instability which involved huge expenditure on MCAs (Monetary Compensatory Amounts) but also the accession of the UK, Ireland and Denmark in 1972. Belgian and Dutch farming faced overproduction, and farmers' incomes often lagged behind those of wage earners in industry and the service sector. The McSharry reform of 1992 launched all aspects of EC agricultural policy. in a new direction. Environmental and animal welfare issues have also been taken more seriously since the 1990s (Silvis, 2008).

Peasants and farmers as political force in national politics and their social standing

Belgian historical imagination ascribed farmers a hero's part. The so-called *Boerenkrijg* (peasants' battle) of 1798 – the revolt of the rural population of the Southern Netherlands against French conscription, high taxes and persecution of priests – became the symbol of Belgian romantic nationalism. But whether and to what extent Belgian farmers were already politized and considered as real 'citizens', in the perception of the elites before the introduction in 1893 of universal male suffrage remains unclear. The truth is that the connection between the right to vote and taxes before 1893 favoured farmers because the ownership of even small parcels of land could give them the vote, at least at municipal level. This was also the case for tenants who paid one third of the taxes on the land they leased. The democratic reforms of 1893 favoured farmers in a further way. The plural voting system established then (which continued until 192) gave owners of real estate and heads of households an extra vote.

Hence the increasing electoral propaganda aimed at the farming population, as much by Catholics as Liberals. The countryside became more and more the province of the Catholic electoral campaigns, what has been labelled by de Smaele (2009) as 'ruralisation' of Belgian Catholicism, whereas the Liberals and later also the Socialists developed their support chiefly in the urban and industrial parts of Belgium. The Catholics portrayed farmers as intrinsically religious and faithful to church and throne, the countryside as the healthiest part of the country and agriculture as the necessary basis of the national economy, despite the increasing import of bread grains. Social unrest in industrial cities in the 1880s, the socialist threat, the electoral reforms of 1893 (universal suffrage) and 1899 (proportional representation) and the inadequate food supply during World War I, all gave this emotional discourse and the political efforts in favour of farmers extra boosts. It is important to underline again that the Catholic farmers' unions played a pivotal role in the political 'housing' of the peasantry, especially in Flanders and with the *Boerenbond* in front. They succeeded in being recognized as their political representatives and spokesmen. Farmers themselves made a rational choice when renewing their membership, often from generation to generation, because of the advantages (financial and other) it offered (Van Molle, 1990). The Ministry of Agriculture was headed from 1884 until its abolition as a federal ministry in 2002, with only minor interruptions, by a Catholic (later Christian Democrat) minister of Agriculture. In the Netherlands the countryside voted mainly conservative-liberal (in Groningen and Zeeland) or Christian Democrat

(on the sandy soils). With the changing social structure of the countryside since the 1960s, this pattern became less solid, but was still dominant until the 1990s. The most famous Dutch minister of agriculture, Sicco Mansholt, however, was a social democrat from Groningen. {Discussion of the Netherlands so far in this section seems v slight and needs expansion.}

Political weight does not necessarily equal social respect. Public discourse and collective representations of farmers, agriculture and countryside were often paradoxical, oscillating between distaste for their backwardness, superstitiousness and conservatism, as in the biting naturalist poetry of Emile Verhaeren around 1900, and praise for their innate moral virtues, cultural values and contribution to wealth and welfare. The growing identification of Flemish Catholicism with an anti-urban and anti-industrial discourse formed the breeding-ground for the cultural representation of Flanders as rural and conservative, despite its high degree of urbanization since the Middle Ages and the progressing industrialization from the late nineteenth century onwards. In the Netherlands similar developments could be seen, with as a highpoint the *Vaderlandsch Historisch Volksfeest* (The National Historical Peoples' Celebration) of 1919 in Arnhem which attracted some 400,000 visitors to the recently opened (1918) Dutch open air museum. In the 1950s and 1960s, when Flanders started to develop its own television programmes, it presented itself to the public with films which were based on country novels of Stijn Streuvels, Ernest Claes and Felix Timmermans, and were shot at the open-air museum of Bokrijk which presented itself as a true copy of the Flemish rural past. The Dutch choose as their national symbols tulips and wooden shoes. Since the 1960s, the effects of the CAP and the one dimensional pursuit of higher income via higher productivity have once more set a negative tone, blaming farmers and agriculture for exorbitant expenses, overproduction, environmental damage and questionable food quality. The sector took a long time to come to terms with this criticism. Next to niche markets for biological products, mainstream agriculture also started to pay more attention to landscape preservation, animal welfare, and environmental effects. Recent problems with industrially processed food, for instance. the dioxin crisis in 1999, even gained for the farmers new public respect and praise as hard working producers who were themselves victims of the complex agro-food chain. Traditional production methods and authentic 'produits du terrroir' have come into vogue again. The imagined re-

944 invention of farmers and countryside, whether it be in the positive or the negative
945 sense, appears to be fruitful and usable at different times and circumstances.
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