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3 Ricardo in Flanders. Landlords and tenants in Flemish agriculture in the 18th and 19th centuries

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Thus, the landowners actually reap all
the benefits resulting from the progress made
by the entire community in various fields.
(E. de Laveleye, 1881: 467)

Until the early twentieth century, the distribution of landed property in Flemish agriculture was characterised by three trends: fragmentation of the land, expansion of leasehold farms and increased land rent prices (Vanhaute, 1993). The question to be dealt with in this article concerns the relation between these trends, and more specifically, whether a pattern can be discerned which enables us to explain the shifts in the distribution of property in the course of the 'long nineteenth century'. I shall examine successively the main shifts in the distribution of property, the ownership of land, the prices of land, the yields, and the profit rates of land. I shall focus on a typical Flemish pattern of surplus extraction, in which the fragmented use of land is coupled with the fragmented ownership of land.[1]

I. The fragmentation of agricultural land

About 1900, the English sociologist *avant la lettre* B.H. Seebohm Rowntree described Belgium as *un pays de petites exploitations* ('a country of smallholdings') (Seebohm Rowntree, 1910). He had calculated the average farm size in Belgium to be 2.3 hectares, which meant that Belgium did indeed lag behind significantly in comparison with other Western European countries (fourteen hectares in Denmark, twelve in Great Britain, six in France). If mini-farms smaller than 40 ares were not taken into account, the area of land cultivated on a typical farm in Great Britain rose to 26 hectares, in Denmark twenty, in Germany fourteen, in France ten and in Belgium a mere six. While in Belgium holdings smaller than twenty hectares accounted for two-thirds of the agricultural area, in England they accounted for a mere fifteen percent. It was no coincidence that during the decades before and after the turn of the century, smallholdings in Belgium were the subject of an ideologically coloured debate: *c'est une garantie pour le maintien de l'ordre social actuel* ('It guarantees the maintenance of the established social order') (de Laveleye, 1878. See also Vandervelde, 1902 and Seebohm Rowntree [1910]).

[1] Flanders means here the Flemish speaking, northern part of Belgium. East-Flanders and West-Flanders are two of the provinces in Flanders, and Inner-Flanders is the textile-producing region that covered most of the provinces of East-Flanders and West-Flanders. The typical 'Flemish' case refers in particular to the latter region.

Seebohm Rowntree's observation was made on the eve of an historical turning point. After an age-long trend of parcelling out farm land, the number of farms started to decrease again from the 1930s onwards.

Figure 3.1 Flanders (the modern federal state) and its regions

As the figures in Table 3.2 in Annex show, two out of three households, including the urban population, at least partially depended on an agrarian income in the middle of the nineteenth century. However, more than half of the farms were smaller than one hectare, which is significantly below the survival minimum. As an illustration, in 1850 between a quarter and one-third of all Belgian households were able to live on an agrarian income. Fewer than ten percent of farms cultivated more than ten hectares, and only eight per mil had more than 50 hectares. The latter, large holdings accounted for sixteen percent of the farm land, whereas the hundreds of thousands of mini-farms accounted for only four percent. A second characteristic of nineteenth-century Belgian agriculture was the dominance of leaseholds: only a third of the cultivated land was held as freehold property. Mini-farms especially were being leased out, whereas in relative terms the middle-sized group (one to ten hectares) accounted for the highest number of property holders. Land-parcelling took place most intensively in Inner-Flanders (the textile region between Gent, Kortrijk and Aalst). Farms with more than twenty hectares were almost completely absent from this region. However, such farms did occur in the coastal area (polders) and in the Campine region, which resulted in somewhat lower figures for the mini-farms there.

The figures of the first national agrarian statistics of 1846 provide a snapshot of a development which started in the late Middle Ages, but continued and even accelerated as late as the second half of the nineteenth century (Thoen, 2001). This trend is confirmed by existing village-level micro studies for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as

summarised in Table 3.1 in Annex. Throughout the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century, there was a further increase in the number of small farms and leaseholds in the various Flemish regions. Because this increase was most noticeable – in terms of percentages – in areas which traditionally had a lot of freehold farms and property, regional differences became less important in the course of the nineteenth century.

Between the middle of the nineteenth century and the crisis of the 1930s, the total number of farms doubled. This was exclusively the consequence of a spectacular growth in the number of mini-farms of less than a hectare, which in 1929 accounted for 75 percent of all holdings. In absolute figures, the middle group remained strikingly stable, as evidenced by the average size (about 6.5 hectares). The number of large holdings was halved. Nevertheless, the share of agriculture in household incomes decreased further, as could be expected. Until the middle of the twentieth century, half of all Belgian families cultivated a piece of land, although only ten to fifteen percent were able to earn a livelihood from it (cf. Table 3.2, nos. 1 and 2).

II. The tenure of the land

Until 1900 the share of property decreased; leasehold was gaining importance even further. More than half of all farms were fully leased, as were as many as two-thirds of the mini-farms.

Figure 3.2 Share of leaseholding in Belgium, 1850–1950

The turnover after World War I was significant, primarily in the same category of small part-time farms (cf. Table 3.2). These played an ever-decreasing role in rural income, but kept their importance as the allotment gardens of the commuting working classes and employees. The cross-section of 1950 shows that the importance of agriculture as a main source of income (maximum ten percent of the households) and as an additional source of income (maximum 35 percent of the households) was decreasing. The mixed, market-oriented family farm (which in 1950 had at its disposal an average of seven hectares of farm land) became the standard type of farm in the 1950s and 1960s. The size of this type of farm continued to increase, be it at the expense of land held in property, especially on the larger farms.

Figure 3.3 Share of leaseholds in Flanders in 1846

Figure 3.4 Share of leasehold land in Flanders in 1846

Figure 3.5 Share of leaseholds in Flanders in 1895

Figure 3.6 Share of leasehold land in Flanders in 1895

Figures 3.3–3.6 represent property relations in the Flemish villages in 1846 and 1895. By the middle of the century, the number of leaseholds constituted 50 percent and more in the west of the country and in the region between Antwerp and Brussels. Low proportions were typical of the eastern part of East Flanders (to the east of the Schelde river) and of the eastern part of the Campine region. A larger proportion of the dark shading on the map of 1895 reveals a strengthening of the position of the leasehold. This was especially the case in areas where exploitation in freehold property had been an old custom, such as in the Land of Waas and the Campine region. The geographical distribution of the proportion of the farm land cultivated on lease presents a similar picture (1895, Figure 3.6): in the west, 50 to 90 percent of the farm land was leased out, compared to 30 percent or less in the far east of the region.

We cannot calculate national averages for the period before the middle of the nineteenth century. However, Figure 3.7 summarises a few regional trends (aggregated on the basis of local case studies, cf. Vanhaute, 1993).

Figure 3.7 Share of leaseholding in Flanders, 1750–1900

Between the middle of the eighteenth and the end of the nineteenth century, considerable shifts took place. In the south-western part of East Flanders – traditionally a region with a very strong proto-industrial activity – 70 percent of the farms and the

farm land were leased out by the eighteenth century. In the sixteenth century, the ratio had been 50/50 (Thoen, 2001: 132–133). By the second half of the nineteenth century, farms held in property had become a rarity. Even more spectacular was the shift in the north-eastern part of the province (Land of Waas). In the eighteenth century, three out of four farms were containing lands in property; a century later, only one in five was. Likewise in regions where traditionally there had been a lot of farms with inherited property (i.e. the south-eastern part of East Flanders, and the Antwerp Campine region), leaseholds strongly increased in importance between 1750 and 1900.

III. The price of land

The price of and the rent paid for land are crucial variables in the reconstruction of property relations.

Figure 3.8 Lease prices of agricultural land, 1750–1910 (francs/hectare)

Figure 3.8 reflects the course of nominal lease prices for agricultural land.[2] Prices in East Flanders underwent a nearly continuous increase between 1750 and 1875. In 1750, it cost approximately 40 gold francs to rent one hectare of agricultural land. This price doubled in the second quarter of the nineteenth century and more than tripled after 1850. Belgian averages, although somewhat lower, confirm this trend: a doubling of the lease prices between 1830 and 1870, lower prices between 1875 and 1895, and a new increase after 1895.

Figure 3.9 Lease prices of agricultural land, 1750–1910 (labour days/hectare)

Figure 3.9 converts the prices into labour wages.[3] In 1750 a wage labourer in East Flanders had to work for 30 days to be able to lease one hectare of agricultural land. This figure rose to more than 60 days' wages in the 1820s and to more than 90 in the third quarter of the century. Belgian averages show a maximum of 65 days' wages in the 1870s. In the last three decades before Word War I, the actual rent dropped to an average of 50 days' wages. The connection between the parcelling out of the land and

[2] That is, lease prices of arable land and pasture land. For rent prices in the eighteenth century: Vandenbroeke, 1977: 162; 1830–1895: agricultural censuses; 1908: Seebohm Rowntree, [1910].
[3] I.e. average daily wage of a male farm labourer: Vandenbroeke, 1977: 162; agricultural censuses 1846–1910.

the high prices is evident. Seebohm Rowntree calculated that farm land in Belgium cost twice as much as it did in Great Britain (Seebohm Rowntree [1910]: 150). The cause of this, he continued, was not to be sought in the natural fertility of the soil, or in the population density, but in the high – and ever increasing – number of small family farms (Seebohm Rowntree [1910]: 151–154).

Another way to convert nominal prices into real value is to calculate the value of the lands in grain equivalents. These are then related to the gross yields of the land in order to be able to express the lease price as a percentage of the gross yields.[4] I performed this exercise for East Flanders and came to the remarkable conclusion that in the period between the mid-eighteenth century and the early twentieth century, the share of the lease with respect to the gross yields remained virtually stable, viz. 35 percent of the gross yields of rye. In other words, during this whole period, one-third of the yields of rye had to be sold in order to pay the rent on one hectare of farm land. This may indicate that the increase in rental prices closely followed the increase in the yields of the land. If this is the case, we can talk about a real 'price policy' pursued by the landowners, based on a cost-benefit analysis – that is, a policy which took into account the increasing potential of the farms. Thus, the changes in property relations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries can be seen from a new perspective: rather than automatically following from anonymous market processes, they were the result of a conscious policy.

[4] Prices of rye: Vandenbroeke, 1981: 138–139.

IV. Rents for and taxes on land

Taking into account the high proportion of leaseholds and the high rents in Flemish farming, one could expect an important flow of capital from agriculture to private owners and investors.

Figure 3.10 Weight of taxes and rents on agricultural land in Belgium, 1846–1910

Figure 3.10 shows the weight and the portion of rents and taxes. Firstly, I calculated the direct taxes on land. The nominal sum hardly changed during the nineteenth century. Other types of property taxes should be added, viz. registration rights, mortgage rights and rights of inheritance. As the share of agricultural land cannot be calculated, I have considered the total amount of taxes on land as a proxy. In reality, this sum is an overvaluation, since ten to twenty percent of the taxes were levied on non-agricultural land. Secondly, I calculated the rents that were collected on agricultural land. These had increased greatly between 1846 and 1880. As a consequence, the proportion between rents and taxes – which together constitute the surplus extraction – became even more

unequal. In 1846, 87 percent consisted of taxes, but in 1910 this figure had increased to 92 percent.

Figure 3.11 Weight of taxes and rents on agricultural land in East-Flanders, c.1790–1910

Calculations for the province of East Flanders confirm that the relations in the second half of the nineteenth century were the result of a much more long-term movement. It is striking that the nominal value of the taxes on land at the end of the eighteenth century (based on Faipoult, [1805]) was almost equal to that in the second half of the nineteenth century. Could this be a matter of a psychological upper limit, expressed in terms of money? Most remarkable, however, is the sharp increase in the value and the proportion of leaseholds. At the end of the eighteenth century, 31 percent of the surplus extraction flowed to the treasury. After 1850, this amount constituted barely ten percent. In the middle of the eighteenth century, the proportion is thought to have been 50/50 (Vandenbroeke 1981: 158).

To summarise, we can say that the productivity profits of Flemish farming in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were increasingly appropriated by private landowners. This contrasts sharply with the position of the government, which conceded ever more ground. In comparison to the previous century, the per capita land tax burden in the Flemish districts was halved in the nineteenth century, from 6.5 gold francs to 3.3 gold francs on average. The burden of direct and indirect taxes on the national income was estimated at 6.6 percent for the end of the eighteenth century, 7 percent for the end of the nineteenth century and a mere 5.3 percent for the beginning of the twentieth century. These proportions were only half as high as they were in Great Britain and France (Vandenbroeke, 1981: 153–158; de Visschere, 1935: 102–103; Seebohm Rowntree, [1910]: 343).

V. A Ricardian capital transfer

So far, this case offers an illustration of the Ricardian thesis about the land rents appropriated by landlords. The total capital transfer from agriculture to private owners is estimated at eighteen percent of the gross yields in the whole of the agricultural sector in 1846, at 24 percent in the period between 1866 and 1880, and down again to twenty percent between 1895 and 1910.[5] In the middle of the nineteenth century, this surplus transfer would have amounted to 35 percent of the gross production in East Flanders (Kint, 1989: 307–312). However, this alone does not explain the strong desire to invest in agricultural land. In order to explain it, we have to know the profit rate.

The proportion between lease and sales prices is the land rent ratio. In Flanders this ratio fluctuated around 2.7 percent in and until the end of the nineteenth century, and between 3 and 3.2 percent in the period from 1895 until 1910. During the interbellum period, the ratio dropped to 2 to 2.5 percent (Lamartine Yates, 1940: 210). Thus we know the direct return on landlords' capital via rents. A second source of profit was the increase in land prices, viz. the surplus value of the land. Between 1830 and 1880 sales prices rose by an average of 1.4 percent a year, and between 1895 and 1910 by 1.8 percent a year. Hence, the total gross return for the owners amounted to approximately four percent a year until 1880 and five percent after 1895. Net profits were of course lower due to the payment of land taxes. However, this cannot have made much of a difference, as a result of the low direct taxes on land and the low interest on mortgages.[6] Taking all this into account, nineteenth-century landlords collected solid interests, especially if we take into consideration the low risk that is associated with this kind of investment.

[5] Agricultural production based on the estimates of Gadisseur, 1973: 46.

[6] According to an estimate by Seebohm Rowntree, at the beginning of the twentieth century 31 percent of the agricultural land was mortgaged, with a total mortgage burden of 13.5 percent of the mortgaged land and of less than five percent of the value of all the lands combined (Seebohm Rowntree, [1910]: 52–55; de Laveleye, 1878: CX).

VI. Small landlords

Unanswered so far is the main question of this article, viz. what was the driving force behind this combined movement of extreme parcelling out of the land, loss of property and the increase in leasehold prices? External factors do not offer a satisfying explanation. First of all, the natural condition of the soil played hardly any role; for example, the great differences within the province of East Flanders did not correspond to variations in soil conditions. Secondly, the Belgian inheritance law in theory stimulated the equal distribution among the children.[7] As Seebohm Rowntree put it:

'Naturellement, la loi belge, qui prescrit la division des propriétés entre les enfants au déces du propriétaire, tend à occasionner un morcellement excessif du sol' (Seebohm Rowntree, [1910]: 114).[8]

Yet he added that heirs often prevented the land from being split up by buying out the other heirs. Moreover, national legislation cannot account for such marked regional differences. At first sight, differences in population density could explain the regional variety. Once again, however, no convincing relation between two supposedly related factors can be established. Population density in the south-eastern part of East Flanders, for example, was comparable to that in the rest of the province, but the patterns of the property relations showed much more resemblance to those in the thinly populated Campine region. However, I did find a meaningful relation between property relations on the one hand and the structure of the farms on the other. If the municipal data for the Flemish provinces is subjected to a regression equation, a significant negative correlation is revealed between the number of independent farms (percentage of households with a farm larger than two hectares) and the acreage of farm land on lease on the one hand (–0.79), and the proportion of fully leased holdings on the other hand (–0.72). In other words, the more the land had been parcelled out, the more leaseholds we find. However, there is no significant statistical relation between the variables of lease on the one hand and population density and land prices on the other.

In order to find a more convincing explanation for the various shifts in Flemish property relations in the nineteenth century, we shall have to focus on the actual actors, the landlords. Just like the land itself, this group of owners was very fragmented. As late as in 1940, the Briton Lamartine Yates observed:

'Although the landlord-tenant system is widespread, Belgium has no class of large landed proprietors (...) the vast majority of landlords own only one or two farms' (Lamartine Yates, 1940: 208).

This increased competition between landlords stimulated a far-reaching splitting up of landed properties in order to obtain as high a price for them as possible:

[7] 'In Belgium the old-established custom is to divide the property equally among the children, and the Napoleonic code no more than dotted the i's and crossed the t's of the established tradition' (Lamartine Yates, 1940: 206).

[8] 'Naturally Belgian law, prescribing the division of all property between the children on the death of a landowner, tends to result in an extreme fragmentation of the soil.'

'The keen demand for land makes it possible and profitable for landlords to let out their property in small lots, for which they can obtain higher rents per acre than if it were let out in big blocks. (...) But, as a result, leased land is almost as badly cut up as that owned by the peasant proprietors' (Lamartine Yates, 1940: 207).

As has been emphasised before, this parcelling out of land was the result of an age-old process. With keen percipience, an observer in the early nineteenth century wrote:

'In Flanders, people do the opposite of what is customary in England: they destroy one large farm in order to make several small ones. They pull down, partly or completely, the buildings of the large homesteads, and lease out the lands to various small farmers, many of whom want to increase somewhat their own small business. This is often the case in densely populated areas, where the spinning wheel and the loom are most of the time in action; as a result, the landlord has to put less effort into the maintenance of his buildings, and obtains a better return on his lands' (Van Aelbroeck, 1823: 282; author's translation).

VII. Conclusion: *In the worst of all situations*

This article examined the relationship between the trends of land fragmentation, the loss of property and the increase in the prices of land in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century farming in Belgium, in particular in Flanders. I have discerned four important connections: a) the relation between the increase in nominal rents and the yields of farm lands (expressed in rye prices), b) the relation between the increase in agricultural yields and the increasing appropriation of the surplus by private landlords, c) the relation between the parcelling out of the farming acreage and the proportion of leaseholds, and d) the relation between fragmented land use and a fragmented ownership of land. As a result of a deliberate policy of ownership management and price-fixing, the production profits in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century agriculture in Flanders were systematically clipped by the landlords. This has been confirmed by Emile de Laveleye, who was without any doubt the shrewdest commentator on the Belgian rural economy of the nineteenth century.

'When large farms are subdivided, it is done on economic grounds – viz., because they fetch higher prices when sold in lots – they are hardly ever divided in consequence of the law of succession. (...) Hitherto, the consequence of the progressive subdivision of land in Flanders has only been to raise at once the rental, the gross produce, and the value of the soil.' (de Laveleye, 1881: 451, author's translation)

This is only part of the story, however. The splitting up of properties and the increasing rents were the result of a policy pursued by an amorphous group of small and very small landlords. Small properties, as de Laveleye put it, combined with small leaseholdings, in a country with a high population density, put the farmers in the worst of all situations (de Laveleye, 1863: 238).

'Without doubt, as we have seen in Flanders, small agriculture combined with small landownership can give an enormous gross output; but we were also struck by the sad contrast between these brilliant harvests and the miserable existence of those who generate these. This way, a large number of small landowners, without any direct interest in agriculture, on top of the even more numerous class of those who exploit the land, cashes without delay rents that are as

high as the excessive competition can bear. Here we have the sad reverse that is offered by the organisation of Belgian agriculture, especially in its richest parts.' (Idem: 234; author's translation).

On the one hand, the Flemish husbandry was highly praised for its extremely high land yields: with an equal area of land, a Flemish farmer was able to feed three times as many people as his English counterpart could, so de Laveleye remarked (1863: 50). On the other hand, the Flemish agricultural system, with its extreme fragmentation of land, its large proportion of leaseholds and its high rents, forced rural households to provide an extremely high input of labour in return for an extremely low standard of living.[9] *C'est seulement grâce à un labeur incessant que l'agriculteur peut vivre* ('Only thanks to tireless labouring a farmer manages to survive.') (Seebohm Rowntree, [1910]: 51). Two forms of competition lay at the basis of the demanding system of surplus extraction in nineteenth-century Flemish agriculture: competition among landlords and competition among tenants. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Flanders was characterised by prosperous farming and poor farmers, or even better: by prosperous farming at the expense of poor farmers.

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Table 3.1 Some parameters of the farm structure in Flanders, 18th–middle of the 19th centuries

a. farm size (% of farms)

	second half 18th century		middle 19th century	
	–1 hectare	+5 hectare	–1 hectare	+5 hectare
Inner-Flanders	40–50%	10–20%	55–60%	5–15%
Waasland-Dendermonde	15–30%	20–30%	50–60%	10–20%
Antwerp Campine	30–35%	40–50%	50%	33%

b. property structure: share (%) of fully leased farms

	second half 18th century	middle 19th century
	–1 hectare	–1 hectare
Inner-Flanders	55–70%	70–80%
Waasland-Dendermonde	10–25%	40–50%
Antwerp Campine	10–25%	40%

Source: Calculations based on Dekezel, 1988 and Vanhaute, 1993.

Table 3.2 Some parameters of the farm structure in Belgium, 1850–1950

	1846	1895	1929	1950
1. farms				
number	572,550	829,625	1,131,146	990,913
% of households	64%	53%	48%	35%
2. farm size (% of farms)				
–1 hectare	56%	66%	74%	75%
1–10 hectare	36%	29%	22%	21%
+10 hectare	8%	5%	4%	4%
number of farms +50 hectare	4,333	3,584	2,490	2,096
farms +1 hectare/households	29%	18%	12%	9%
3. division of agricultural area				
average size of farms (hectare)				
all farms	3.13	2.31	1.68	1.87
farms +1 hectare	6.68	6.30	6.39	6.83

	[1846]	[1895]	[1929]	[1950]
share of area, cultivated by				
farms –1 hectare	(4%)	(7%)	7%	6%
farms 1–10 hectare			47%	43%
farms 10–50 hectare			35%	42%
farms +50 hectare	(16%)	(15%)	11%	9%
4. property relations				
% ag. area cultivated by owner	34%	31%	38%	33%
% ag. area cultivated by owner in				
group farms –1 hectare			46%	55%
group farms 1–10 hectare			45%	39%
group farms +50 hectare			31%	14%
share of farms in				
full lease	41%	52%	41%	
mixed property	45%	28%	21%	
full property	14%	20%	38%	
share of farms +1 hectare in				
full lease	27%	32%	26%	28%
full property	17%	16%	21%	19%

share of (a) fully leased farms and
(b) farms 50% and more in direct ownership

	1846		1895		1929		1950	
	(a)	(b)	(a)	(b)	(a)	(b)	(a)	(b)
group farms –1 hectare	53%	30%	63%	26%	42%	50%		65%
group farms 1–5 hectare	26%	41%	32%	31%	24%	42%		38%
group farms 5–10 hectare	23%	45%	28%	37%	24%	46%		34%
group farms 10–20 hectare	26%	43%	32%	36%	31%	44%		31%
group farms 20–50 hectare	33%	34%	40%	31%	45%	31%		21%
group farms +50 hectare	36%	31%	48%	26%	59%	23%		13%

5. regional property relations: share of agricultural area cultivated in direct property

	1895	1950
Polders (Coastal region)	15%	18%
Sandy region (Flanders)	17%	28%
Loam region (Brabant)	24%	26%
Campine (Antwerp/Limbourg)	47%	48%
Condroz (Namur)	33%	25%
(High) Ardennes (Luxembourg)	76%	78%

Source: Based on agricultural censuses, 1846-1950.