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The quest for social history in Belgium (1948–1998)

In 1980 Reinhard Schiffers presented a state-of-the-art survey of Belgian social history in the post-war period.¹ According to Schiffers, the major influences that shaped Belgian social history in the years 1944–1977 were those of Henri Pirenne, the »Annales school« and the Ghent historian Jan Dhondt. Where the writing on 19th and 20th century history is concerned, the latter was undoubtedly one of the most influential figures in Belgian historiography. While his oldest pupils and followers are now reaching the age of retirement, they have in their turn passed on his intellectual legacy to others who are today training, at the universities of both Ghent and Brussels, the Belgian historians of tomorrow. Given the impact of the so-called »Dhondt school« on the practice of social history in Belgium up till today, it seems appropriate to take this as a starting point of my survey. The first half of the article will deal roughly with Belgian social historiography until the 1980s. Continuities and discontinuities that have developed since then will be discussed in the second half, although a strict chronological arrangement is difficult. In the compilation of the bibliography, my preference went to books, survey articles and syntheses as well as to contributions in English (all published before 1999).

WHEN IT RAINS IN PARIS, IT DRIZZLES IN BRUSSELS ...

Following Jan Dhondt's death, a volume was published in 1976 that reproduced his most remarkable essays on 19th and 20th century history, preceded by introductions by his pupils. Overall they illustrate Dhondt's approval of the »structuralist« history of the Annales. Stressing the influence of the »Dhondt school« therefore amounts to pointing out the extent of penetration of the Annales discourse in Belgium. In his theoretical excursions Dhondt pleaded for »l'histoire problème«, instead of »l'histoire récit«, and for the establishment of regularities in history.² Jan Dhondt believed that history had to offer society a »total« explanation of its development. Making the course of history intelligible was possible, however, only if a high incidence of regularities was admitted, discovered and proved. Studying history had to be a never-ending quest detecting the underlying forces that govern society and disentangling how these forces engender changes in human behaviour. Rather than to the volatile, the superficial and the apparent, the historian's attention had to be drawn to durable evolutions, the »macro-structures« of society, the »phénomènes de profondeur« in which, subsequently, epiphenomena would be granted their proper place. This programme was not merely the responsibility of the social historian, but of the historian *tout court*.

Since Jan Dhondt's ambition was to study society as a whole, emphasising the inter-relatedness of structures and processes, he is akin to the proponents of a »history of so-

1 Reinhard Schiffers, Die sozialgeschichtliche Forschung zum Industriezeitalter in Belgien. Historische Grundlagen und gegenwärtiger Stand, in: Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte 67, 1980, S. 22–80.

2 Jan Dhondt, Histoire et reconstitution du passé, in: Machten en mensen. Hommes et pouvoirs, Ghent 1976, S. 147–170 (originally published in 1963); Jan Dhondt, L'histoire récurrente, in: Machten en mensen, S. 177–206 (originally published in 1971).

ciety« or »Gesellschaftsgeschichte«. His belief in economic processes as a prime mover and the mechanistic relationship he suggests between the economic, the social and the mental, refer to the basics of vulgar Marxism. It is also clear that Jan Dhondt, like many fellow historians in the 1960s, was deeply impressed by the spectacular development of the social sciences. The latter were apparently successful in imitating the »real« sciences in establishing correlations, recurrences, models and universally applicable statements. It does not therefore come as a surprise that Dhondt distanced himself from colleagues studying »le fait historique dans son unicité«. He saluted the resurrection of a way of history writing that had been initiated by Henri Pirenne and Karl Lamprecht, abandoned after the First World War, but revived by the »révolution des Annales«. Jan Dhondt welcomed quantification, serial history and the methods of the social sciences, but the introductions written by some of his pupils make it clear that the man himself lacked the patience and the sense of order required to embark on a journey through population registers or price series.

Jan Dhondt's pupils concentrated on the production and supervision of numerous empirical studies rather than on the development or adjustment of the theoretical underpinnings of the new paradigm. One of the few additions to Dhondt's theoretical contributions was a programmatic article published by two of his pupils, offering variations on the familiar theme.³ The historian of the new batch, and the tone of the article leaves no doubt that it was a superior one, would (just like a »real« scientist) organise his research in four phases: »observe, guess, predict and check«. Such theoretical excursions were rather exceptional, not merely for the »Dhondt school« but for Belgian historiography in general, which is not rich in theoretical and methodological debates.

While in his 1971 article Dhondt complained that the academic »gerontocracy« embodying »l'histoire événementielle« still had a lot of influence, I have the impression that in the middle of the 1970s the discourse on the new paradigm was becoming hegemonic in Belgian social history, and even in Belgian history in general. The »Dhondt school« was of course not the only one professing the new paradigm, but where the Flemish-speaking part of the country is concerned (Dhondt's pupils taught at the Flemish universities of Ghent and Brussels), it was undoubtedly the most efficient one in promoting this »savoir faire« as the uncontested, in fact the only possible, way of practising history. The bilingual *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis/Revue belge d'Histoire Contemporaine*, the journal founded by Dhondt (1969) and the first one in Belgium to be entirely devoted to the modern period, itself evidently advocated the above paradigm.

The discourse on the new paradigm was a success, but it will not come as a surprise that there was a discrepancy between the theoretical programme and the practice of history. The intelligible story »explaining« Belgian society in a full-fledged synthesis was never written. But there was a growing tendency to view the study of the past as the study of a society as a whole, even if one dealt only with limited aspects. More historians tackled social history subjects as such, others were increasingly inclined (or compelled) to include paragraphs dealing with the »social and economic context«. Substantial borrowing from the social sciences remained limited: in general social theory was referred to and applied in an implicit or impressionist way and formalised models and hypothesis-testing were lacking, but there was an effort to adopt a more analytical and systemic approach. The most visible transformation of Belgian social history in the course of the 1960s and especially the 1970s was undoubtedly a more generous use of tables and graphs (often implying the introduction of statistical techniques) and the display of computer listings in the appendix.

3 Helmut Gaus/Els Witte, *L'histoire, science du comportement*, in: *Revue belge d'Histoire Contemporaine. Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 4, 1973, S. 475–501.

The volume commemorating Jan Dhondt and especially the introductions written by his pupils and colleagues suggest a consensus regarding the paradigmatic choice that had been made. Within this paradigmatic unity, a variety of themes and methods subsisted. Dhondt himself had been involved in a diversity of subjects. These had already been, and were further, developed by his followers who, for quite a few years to come, would determine Belgian social history's outlook.

One line of research dealt with the problem of delineating social classes or groups. Ernest Labrousse's invitation to study the European bourgeoisie, launched at the international historical conference in Rome in 1955, had been heard in Ghent. Four of Dhondt's pupils started a vast programme exploring and exploiting especially 19th century sources that would enable whole populations to be stratified or certain population groups to be delineated. A lot of energy went into source criticism and into the discussion of the limitations of the different types of sources in revealing differences in prestige and wealth. Quite a few students wrote theses exploiting these sources on the local level. Overall, the results were meagre. Belgian researchers were far more critical regarding the possibilities of their source material than their French counterparts.⁴ Perhaps that is the reason why they shunned the grand syntheses, which some of the French researchers presented.

On the other hand, one has the impression that Belgian scholars had fallen in love with their sources and with the act of classifying itself. While Jan Dhondt had criticised the adepts of »l'histoire événementielle« with the words »pour cette génération, l'histoire c'est l'art pour l'art«⁵, it seems that for some of his followers stratifying and classifying as such had more or less become the final goal. The programmatically extremely meagre text introducing a guide to sources of Belgian social history, first published in 1961 and revised in 1965, appears to have been symptomatic of the intellectual poverty of the whole undertaking.⁶

Without any doubt, the »stratification school« produced a thorough collection of excellent source critiques. Unfortunately, an inspiring problematic that could have given a sense to these exercises was either lacking or was »drowned« in the course of the exercise. Some of the introductions in the 1976 commemorative volume were already betraying doubts and dissatisfaction. But they also expressed the hope that difficulties would be overcome with the help of computers, greater financial means, the combination of sources, team work and the operationalisation of solid economic and sociological theories.

THE INVISIBLE MILITANT AND OTHER RARE SPECIES

In the late 1940s, Jan Dhondt more or less inaugurated the study of the labour movement in Belgium. To relate the history of the individual militant: this had to be the mission of the historian of the workers' movement, was what he proclaimed in 1963.⁷ He complained that the contributions to the subject had limited themselves to doctrines and organisations. The individual militant would not have to be studied for his own sake, but to establish a typology, a sociological category. By 1980, the individual militant was

4 See for instance the contributions of Jules Hannes and Herman Balthazar in an issue devoted to social stratification and mobility in: *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 84, 1971.

5 Dhondt, *L'histoire récurrente*, S. 189.

6 Herman Balthazar/Jos de Belder/Jules Hannes/Jules Verhelst, *Bronnen voor de sociale geschiedenis van de XIXde eeuw (1794–1914)*, Louvain 1965, S. 5–17.

7 Reproduced in Jan Dhondt, *Un militant gantois de la Première Internationale*, in: *Machten en mensen*, S. 345 (originally published in 1963).

still a rare species in Belgian historiography of the workers' movement. The history of the implantation and development of working-class organisations, especially of party, union and press, whether social-democratic or Christian, predominated. Quite a few students devoted their theses to the collection of detailed information on the development of local organisations. The difference with the old »histoire événementielle« was not always obvious. In general, it was difficult to integrate the history of working-class conditions and the history of workers' organisations. They led separate lives. Both were dealt with in a descriptive way, and of the organisations there was usually more to tell. Other, somewhat more analytical studies in the history of the labour movement were produced by political scientists, but they dealt largely with the history of political ideas and their adherence. In this vein, some debates emerged, such as the question of reformism in Belgian social democracy.

In his characterisation of Belgian historiography of the labour movement up to 1980, Jean Puissant pointed to its focus on the merely political and to the fact that Belgian research on the subject was rather fact-orientated than problem-orientated: it shared the pragmatism of the movement it was studying.⁸ His own study illustrates the difficulty of writing a social history of the labour movement, rather than an institutional/political one, with so-called social and economic factors serving as a mere background.⁹ Contributions combining theoretical discussions (e.g. the thesis of labour aristocracy) and a social historical angle were scarce.¹⁰

Where the historiography of the labour movement is concerned, an implicit division of labour manifested itself from the beginning: authors wrote mostly the history of the movement they sympathised with. Jan Dhondt and his collaborators focused on socialist organisations, while father S.H. Scholl, mainly operating outside the academic sphere, focused on the Christian labour movement. Both parties accused each other of ideological bias. In fact they were both largely incapable of acknowledging anything but the merits of »their« movement, proposing a teleological view of the long but eventually successful march towards either the social-democratic or Christian-democratic welfare state.

Two other authors also operated outside the academic sphere. The first one was Jean Neuville, active in the Christian labour movement and a prolific writer on unions, industrial relations, work time and workers' condition in general.¹¹ His work is stuffed with citations from source material (parliamentary discussions, official statistics, reports and inquiries). In fact it resembles a collage of quotes which are reproduced rather than used. The second is Jaak Brepoels, who wrote a bestseller on the workers' struggle in Belgium. The first volume amounted largely to a compilation of existing material, but the second volume dealing with the years 1966–1980 had the merit of discussing workers' struggles on shop-floor level, a marginal topic in Belgian historiography until today.¹² »A Trotskyist pamphlet« and »written from an ultra-left point of view« were some of the reproaches formulated at the time. A few years later the author presented a new synthesis. The 350 pages that had been devoted to the years 1966–1980 were reduced to

8 Jean Puissant, *L'historiographie du mouvement ouvrier*, in: *Revue de l'Université de Bruxelles*, 1981, S. 188.

9 Jean Puissant, *L'évolution du mouvement ouvrier socialiste dans le Borinage*, Brussels 1982.

10 Peter Scholliers, *De Gentse metaalbewerders in de 19e eeuw: de enquête van L. Varlez*, Brussels 1985.

11 Between 1976 and 1988 Jean Neuville produced 7 volumes in the series »Histoire du mouvement ouvrier en Belgique« published by »Vie ouvrière«.

12 Jaak Brepoels, *Wat zoudt ge zonder 't werkvolk zijn? Anderhalve eeuw arbeidersstrijd in België, 1830–1966*, Louvain 1977; *Jaak Brepoels, Wat zoudt ge zonder 't werkvolk zijn? Anderhalve eeuw arbeidersstrijd in België 1966–1980*, Louvain 1981.

25 and while empathy with social democracy surfaced, the treatment of workers' conditions and social action at the shop-floor level disappeared completely.¹³

The industrial revolution in Belgium and, more precisely, the emergence of a mechanised cotton industry in Ghent, was another subject tackled by Jan Dhondt in 1955. Of particular interest to him were the social origins and the mentality of the manufacturers, a theme already explored by one of Charles Verlinden's pupils (Verlinden being one of the last students of Henri Pirenne).¹⁴ Few would follow this example, and in 1980 Ginette Kurgan noted that studying the entrepreneurial class was still anything but popular in Belgian historiography and, where the subject was tackled, the emphasis was on economic and technical aspects.¹⁵ With the exception of Dhondt's posthumous contribution on Ghent, this was also the case with the ambitious collective attempt to put forward a thesis on Belgian industrialisation.¹⁶

The commemorative volume dedicated to Jan Dhondt illustrates that in the 1950s the latter also explored the study of mentality and of piety and secularisation. Work in this vein, conducted by his pupils, strongly emphasised the social and economic determinants of cultural or ideological choices. Especially in the case of Helmut Gaus, the vulgar Marxist conception of the relationship between base and superstructure led to a rather mechanistic understanding of the process of mental and cultural change.¹⁷ The old Labrousse-maxim »sur l'économique, retarde le social, et sur le social, le mental« predominated the outlook. Jan Art was in turn finally more influenced by sociology and cultural anthropology.¹⁸

INTELLIGIBLE STORIES AND OTHERS

The school of Jan Dhondt did not have, as I have already mentioned, a monopoly of the above approach to history and neither was it the only channel through which the message of the *Annales* reached Belgium. Since the 1950s, a Ghent school compiling wage and price series had developed, resulting in the study of the standard of living: this was one of the Belgian variants dealing with the »longue durée«. By the 1970s the predominance in this field had switched from Ghent to Brussels and while the initiators had focused on the Ancien Régime, the followers in Brussels compiled series on the 19th and 20th centuries.¹⁹

In tune with developments in French historiography, Ghent researchers extended their inquiries to long-term trends in demographic and agricultural development, focusing on the one hand on the relationship between demographic transition and cultural development and on the other hand on the intertwining of demographic, agricultural and industrial development. Chris Vandenbroeke, inspired both by French and English his-

13 *Jaak Brepoels*, Wat zoudt ge zonder 't werkvolk zijn? Anderhalve eeuw arbeidersstrijd in België, Louvain 1988.

14 *Hilda Coppejans-Desmedt*, Bijdrage tot de studie van de gegoede burgerij te Gent in de XVIIIe eeuw, Brussels 1952.

15 *Ginette Kurgan-Van Hentenryk*, Un monde à découvrir: le patronat, in: *Revue de l'Université de Bruxelles*, 1981, S. 193–206.

16 *Pierre Lebrun/Marinette Bruwier/Jan Dhondt/Georges Hansotte*, Essai sur la révolution industrielle en Belgique 1770–1847, Brussels 1979.

17 *Helmut Gaus*, Menselijk gedrag tijdens langdurige economische recessies (een schets), Malle 1981.

18 *Jan Art*, Clerus en volksreligie in Vlaanderen sinds de nieuwste tijd: »ne peius adveniat«, in: *Gerard Rooijackers/Theo van der Zee* (Hrsg.), Religieuze volkscultuur, Nijmegen 1986, S. 99–118.

19 In the Centre for Contemporary Social History Peter Scholliers, Gerda Avondts and Patricia Van den Eeckhout published wage and prices series, mainly for Ghent and Brussels.

torical demography, was the most prolific representative of this approach. In several contributions he challenged Franklin Mendels' proto-industrialisation-thesis, stressing the prosperity of the Flanders countryside on the eve of industrialisation. In his »histoire sérielle«, Vandenbroeke went to great lengths to emphasise Flanders' potential in the 18th century and its regained superiority after the Second World War. Defending the »longue durée« approach in an almost fanatic way, he devoted a trilogy to the history of Flanders' development from the 14th to the 20th century.²⁰ Readers of the latter were not surprised when the author joined active politics and became a member of parliament for the Flemish nationalist party, Volksunie. Vandenbroeke's pioneering explorations of the long-term development of attitudes towards sexuality, birth control and parenthood eventually culminated in a book, written in a somewhat loose and populist style.²¹

The university of Liège also housed an important centre of historical demography. In an introductory article in a theme issue devoted to historical demography, its director Etienne Hélin remarked on the interchanges between the former and social history and the history of mentality.²² Judging by the contents of the theme issue, the relationship was not yet very pronounced. The contributions, which I find representative for what Belgian historical demography had to offer at the time, inspire comments similar to those I formulated in my discussion of the »stratification school«: the emphasis is on sources and methodology and authors seem at a loss to find »a sense« for their labour-intensive research. No matter how justified the critique of Chris Vandenbroeke, he at least had a point to make.

This was also the case for researchers who in turn tried to tell an intelligible story about the development of capitalism in general and the fate of the labouring classes in particular. Working more or less from a Marxist perspective, they were inspired by the social structure approach, historical demography and the standard-of-living debate, but in contrast with the former they did not shun (social) policies.²³ Although tempting in the clarity and simplicity of the schemes it presented, this approach produced a rather black-and-white picture of economic and social transformations, reducing most people to victims, crushed by anonymous forces let loose by a developing capitalism.

A synthetic article on class relations and social structures in Belgium in the years 1770-1840, written for a multiple-volume history of the Low Countries, presents in a nutshell the topics being dealt with round 1980 by Belgian social historians not engaged in the study of the labour movement: social structures, social stratification, business cycles, wages, standard of living, proto-industrialisation, proletarianisation, poverty, poor relief, migration and the origins and mentality of the entrepreneurial class.²⁴ Only in the paragraphs discussing the latter did individual actors emerge. Other population groups came forward as monolithic entities, whose fate was entirely dependent on anonymous

20 Chris Vandenbroeke, *Sociale geschiedenis van het Vlaamse volk*, Beveren 1981; Chris Vandenbroeke, *Vlaamse koopkracht, gisteren, vandaag en morgen*, Louvain 1984; Chris Vandenbroeke, *De toekomst van het Vlaamse volk*, Louvain 1985. The trilogy is discussed: Patricia Van den Eeckhout/Peter Scholliers, *Van sociale geschiedenis naar ideologie. Overwegingen bij de trilogie van Chris Vandenbroeke*, in: *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis* 14, 1988, S. 188-215.

21 Chris Vandenbroeke, *Vrijen en trouwen van de Middeleeuwen tot nu*, Brussels 1986.

22 Etienne Hélin, *La démographie historique: rétrospective et perspectives*, in: *Revue belge d'Histoire Contemporaine* 12, 1981, S. 7-25.

23 Catharina Lis/Hugo Soly, *Food consumption in Antwerp between 1807 and 1859: a contribution to the standard of living debate*, in: *The Economic History Review* 30, 1977, S. 460-486; Catharina Lis/Hugo Soly, *Poverty and capitalism in pre-industrial Europe*, Hassocks 1979; Catharina Lis, *Social change and the labouring poor. Antwerp, 1770-1860*, London 1986.

24 Patricia Van den Eeckhout/Jules Hannes, *Sociale verhoudingen en structuren in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden 1770-1840*, in: *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, 10, Haarlem 1981, S. 435-475.

forces and whose features were entirely derived from their relationship to the means of production. By 1980 the Annales-school was no longer the main source of inspiration. Other but kindred influences were moulding Belgian social history, such as the journal *Past and Present* and the Cambridge Group for the Study of Population and Social Structures.

CRUSHED BY THE WEIGHT OF INSTITUTIONS, ORGANISATIONS, POLICIES...

Round 1980, Belgian social historians could be roughly subdivided into two categories: those practising the »social structure approach« and those studying the history of the labour movement. Although the latter was at least implicitly based on a similar »structuralist« approach to history, the old, maligned »histoire événementielle« was never far off and very often the links with traditional political history were more obvious than those with social history. In the course of the 1980s the latter type of history writing (social history with a strong political/institutional/organisational bias) gained more importance and it has continued to do so ever since. Several factors played a role in this development.

While the above approach had to a large part been the province of those who studied the history of the labour movement, it gradually broadened the subjects it tackled so as to include the history of social organisations of other population groups (and the policies directed towards them) such as the farmers and the »classes moyennes«.²⁵ Contributions to the history of the labour movement still predominated, but became more differentiated, not focusing merely on party and union. Invariably, however, the organisation provided the major (and most often the only) angle of research.²⁶ Adding a few occasional interviews with militants did little to change this. Even as organisational histories, however, these contributions have shortcomings, since (presumably important) people and events are discussed, while a more analytical approach (see for example Theo Van Tijn's proposal for a more systemic research into union history)²⁷ remains largely absent.

25 *Leen Van Molle*, *Katholieken en landbouw. Landbouwpolitiek in België, 1884–1914*, Louvain 1989; *Leen Van Molle*, *Chacun pour tous. Le Boerenbond belge 1890–1990*. Louvain 1990; *Peter Heyrman*, *Zelfstandigen in beweging 1854–1994*. Middenstandsorganisatie in de provincie Antwerpen, Antwerp 1995; *Peter Heyrman*, *Middenstandsbeweging en beleid in België, 1918–1940*. Tussen vrijheid en regulering, Louvain 1998.

26 A few examples: *Luc Pauwels*, *Recht en Plicht. Honderd jaar christelijk syndicalisme in de textiel 1886–1986*, Ghent 1986; *Patricia Quaghebeur*, *Welzijn door vooruitzicht. Een kijk op de christelijke mutualiteitsbeweging in het arrondissement Gent tijdens de 19de en 20ste eeuw*, Ghent 1986; *Godfried Kwanten*, *Welstand door vereniging. De ontwikkeling van de christelijke arbeiderscoöperaties 1886–1986*, Brussels 1987; *Emmanuel Gerard* (Hrsg.), *De christelijke arbeidersbeweging in België, 1891–1991*, Louvain 1991; *Patrick Pasture*, *Belgium: pragmatism in pluralism*, in: *Patrick Pasture/Johan Verberckmoes/Hans De Witte* (Hrsg.), *The lost perspective? Trade unions between ideology and social action in the New Europe. Volume 1. Ideological persistence in national traditions*, Aldershot 1996, S. 91–135; *Michel Vermote*, *Santé: 75 ans d'Union Nationale des Mutualités Socialistes 1913–1988*, Ghent 1988; *Roodgloeiend. Bijdragen tot de geschiedenis van de Centrale der Metaalbewerkeren van België*, Ghent 1990; *Geert Van Goethem* (Hrsg.), *Vaandels ruisen, vuisten groeten. 100 jaar socialistische beweging in Sint-Niklaas, deel I*. Ghent 1996; *Luc Peiren/Jean-Jacques Messiaen* (Hrsg.), *Un siècle de solidarité 1898–1998. Histoire du syndicat socialiste*, Brussels 1997; *Edith Pirson*, *Histoire du mouvement ouvrier chrétien à Charleroi 1886–1990*, S. 1. 1995; See also the theme issue on co-operatives in *Revue belge d'Histoire Contemporaine* 22, 1991.

27 *Theo van Tijn*, *A contribution to the scientific study of the history of trade unions*, in: *International Review of Social History* 21, 1976, S. 212–238.

The fact that this type of history writing became, and still is, a flourishing field can also be explained by the creation of a string of private archive centres, linked to the movement(s) they are studying. In Flanders each ideological »pillar« created its archive centre (legally independent). Amsab (1980) was initially conceived in order to collect the archives of people and organisations of the socialist movement but it gradually also attracted archives of leftist organisations which do not belong to the socialist »pillar« as such, as well as archives of the so-called new social movements. Kadoc (1977) collects archives of people and organisations belonging to, or in the margin of, the catholic »pillar«. Liberaal Archief (1982) and ADVN (1984) have an analogous mission for the liberal »pillar« and the Flemish nationalist »pillar« respectively. The situation was swiftly institutionalised by the Flemish authorities (1985). In Brussels and Wallonia the situation was not as clear-cut as in Flanders (an archive centre for each ideological »pillar«) and it took the French Community much longer (1994) to sort the matter out.²⁸

In Flanders, the private archive centres played an invaluable role in saving documents of organisations and individuals which would have been lost otherwise. On the other hand this development substantially strengthened the fraction of Belgian social history that focused on political, institutional and organisational matters. The fact that »pillar« organisations regularly entrusted the archive centres with the mission of writing their history, could only further stress the tendency to view social developments through the eyes of a social organisation. One can conceive that such assignments provide indispensable financial injections for the archive centres in question and that accepting them is an important asset in forging a positive attitude towards them: in the end they have to convince third parties, mostly interested in the past for rather pragmatic reasons of positive image building, that collaborating with them is a good investment. Hence the production of publications with a predictable content on the occasion of anniversaries and commemorations. Fortunately, time and funds are also available for projects in which the organisation's perspective does not provide the major outlook. They deal for example with posters, »maisons du peuple«, photography, ideological »pillarisation«, seasonal labour, sport, servants.²⁹ In 1996 Amsab transformed its newsletter into a popularised scientific journal, presenting theme issues on women's history, communism, nationalism, freethinking etc.³⁰

Another factor also promoted the writing of social history from an institutional perspective. Until the 1980s, the Belgian social historian of the modern period focused mainly on the 19th century. As the number of studies dealing with the 20th century increased, social history subjects were more often looked at from a political/institutional angle. A striking example is the field of migration studies, where as a result of the at-

28 For a description of the situation of private archives in Belgium see: *Patricia Van den Eeckhout/Guy Vanthemsche*, Bronnen afkomstig van privé-instellingen. Inleiding, in: *Patricia Van den Eeckhout/Guy Vanthemsche* (Hrsg.), *Bronnen voor de studie van het hedendaagse België (19de-20ste eeuw)*. Brussels 1999, S. 685–705.

29 *De rode verleiding*. Een eeuw socialistische affiches, Ghent 1985; *Rik Stallaerts/Luc Schokkaert*, *Onder dak: een eeuw volks- en gildehuizen*, Ghent 1987; *Hendrik Ollivier* (Hrsg.), *Met licht geschreven*. Foto's uit een eeuw dagelijks leven, Ghent 1994; *Jaak Billiet* (Hrsg.), *Tussen bescherming en verovering*. Sociologen en historici over zuilvorming, Louvain 1988; *Bert Woestenborghs*, *Vlaamse arbeiders in de vreemde*, Ghent 1993; *Mark D'hoker* (Hrsg.), *Voor lichaam en geest*. Katholieken, lichamelijke opvoeding en sport in de 19de en 20ste eeuw, Louvain 1994; *Jan De Maeyer/Lies Van Rompaey* (Hrsg.), *Upstairs downstairs*. Dienstpersoneel in Vlaanderen, 1750–1995, Louvain 1996. See also De Wilde note 36. A more creative interpretation of a commemoration book is the text of *Denise De Weerd*, *Een beter leven voor onze kinderen*, in: *Denise De Weerd* (Hrsg.), *De dochters van Marianne*. 75 jaar SVV, Antwerp 1997, S. 14–168.

30 *Brood en Rozen*. Tijdschrift voor de Geschiedenis van Sociale Bewegingen, Ghent 1996 ff.

tention paid to the 20th century, research shifted from the social and demographic treatment of internal migrations to the study of international migrations and their political aspects.³¹ In the latter there is a strong emphasis on state-to-state relations and on the political divisions within migrant communities, while socio-economic dimensions tend to be neglected.

In general, the focus shifted from local social policies to policies of the emerging welfare state. While the former had often been studied in close connection with the condition of the labouring class, the latter focused on policies as such.³² For the 19th century as well, however, there was a growing tendency in the 1980s and 1990s to deal mostly with policies, more or less considering the condition they were addressing as »given«.³³ Where the 20th century is concerned, combining research on the condition of the working class and social policies has always been a rarity.³⁴ Instead, decision-making processes and institutional developments have been emphasised. The same applies to most of the research regarding industrial relations in the 20th century.³⁵ Few studies descend to the level of a particular sector or take account of class relations at shop-floor level.³⁶ Economic trends, demographic developments, the labour market, standard of living, managerial policies, technology and productivity: these are items which are generally neglected or reduced to generalisations, serving as a canvas for institutional and organisational details.

In general, the proliferation of studies of the history of social institutions, policies and organisations has not been beneficial for the practice of social history. First of all, it can be debated whether quite a few of these studies may be regarded as contributions to social history at all. Is it enough to write the history of a social institution or organisation to be able to speak of social history or are we dealing with a political/institutional/organisational history of an entity whose vocation happens to be social? Studies whose research perspective is limited to a political/organisational angle and for whom individuals and social groups exist only in relation to an organisation, an institution, a social policy (thus the overall majority of studies in that line of research), lack an important dimension. The reason I have included them in my survey is that in Belgium they are generally considered as social history, or at least as contributions on the verge of political and social history. In fact, most of them provide a lot of political and organisational details, but fail utterly in procuring more than superficial insights in the material and mental world of the social groups they claim to be studying. Sometimes the missed op-

31 See the literature survey of *Els Deslé*, *Historici ontdekken migranten* (1). Geschiedenis van de immigratie: enkele kritische bedenkingen bij de groei van een nieuw onderzoeksterrein, in: *Els Deslé/Ron Lesthaeghe* (Hrsg.), *Denken over migranten in Europa*, Brussels 1993, S. 33–60.

32 *Guy Vanthemsche*, *De werkloosheid in België 1929–1940*, Berchem 1989; *Guy Vanthemsche*, *De beginjaren van de sociale zekerheid in België 1944–1963*, Brussels 1994.

33 *Catharina Lis/Hugo Soly/Dirk Van Damme*, *Op vrije voeten? Sociale politiek in West-Europa, 1450–1914*, Louvain 1985; *Els Deslé*, *Arbeidsbemiddeling en/of werklozencontrole. Het voorbeeld van de Gentse Arbeidsbeurs 1891–1914*, Brussels 1991; *Patricia Van den Eeckhout*, Brussels, in: *Martin Daunton* (Hrsg.), *Housing the workers. A comparative history, 1850–1914*, London 1990, S. 67–106; *Patricia Van den Eeckhout*, *Belgium*, in: *Colin Pooley* (Hrsg.), *Housing strategies in Europe, 1880–1930*, London 1992, S. 190–220.

34 *Peter Scholliers*, *Loonindexering en sociale vrede. Koopkracht en klassenstrijd in België tijdens het interbellum*, Brussels 1985.

35 *Dirk Luyten*, *Sociaal-economisch overleg in België sedert 1918*, Brussels 1995. See most of the contributions in *Dirk Luyten/Guy Vanthemsche* (Hrsg.), *Het Sociaal Pact van 1944*, Brussels 1995.

36 *Ginette Kurgan-Van Hentenryk/Jean Puissant*, *Industrial relations in the Belgian coal industry since the end of the nineteenth century*, in: *G. Feldman/K. Tenfelde* (Hrsg.), *Workers, owners and politics in coal mining*, Oxford 1990, S. 203–270; *Bart De Wilde*, *Witte boorden, blauwe kielen. Patroons en arbeiders in de Belgische textielnijverheid in de 19e en 20e eeuw*, Ghent 1997.

portunities are very striking: a volume on a working-class housing society, for example, sticks to the familiar topics, while it could have contributed to the discussion of how architects and social organisations shaped the material world of the inhabitants and how the latter coped with their surroundings, their landlords and each other.³⁷ Symptomatic at last for the neglect of social groups, detached from organisations and policies, is the fact that chronologically, research of this kind usually starts in the middle of the 19th century at the earliest: take away organisations, institutions and policies and there appears to be nothing to tell.

I have the impression that the above approach has become almost hegemonic in Belgian social history. Studying the working-class, the farmers, the »petite bourgeoisie«: in Belgium this generally means studying their organisations and almost nothing but their organisations, except for the organisations' influence on state policies. The practice has become so self-evident that hardly anyone cares to justify it. Attempts in this respect reveal only that other angles are not in the least considered and, moreover, that the practice of a history »from below« is largely unknown.³⁸

The facility of having well-stuffed archives at one's disposal, either from the organisations themselves or from their leaders, appears to outweigh the objection that this affluence largely prestructures the whole research outlook. It is striking that studies with a more satisfactory balance between organisational history and the evocation of the material and mental world of a social group (e.g. shopkeepers, clerks, pharmacists), deal with the years before the First World War, a period for which organisations' archives and published sources are much less abundant.³⁹ Not so much the use of these archives as such, however, is problematic but the one-sided reading to which they are subject.

Neither methodologically nor conceptually has the political/institutional/organisational emphasis in the study of social organisations and policies promoted innovation. Most of the studies in the field are solid pieces of craftsmanship, albeit basically the craftsmanship of a political historian who has some knowledge of broad social and economic history. Striking is their implicit teleological view of social evolution, since research is completely pre-structured by the need to »explain« the known outcome of development, namely the creation of the social organisation or institution in question. Remarkable, given the emphasis on the political and the institutional, is that this approach has promoted hardly more than a superficial or cliché consideration of the role of the state. Contributions providing an innovative insight into social and economic state policies do not belong to this research tradition.⁴⁰

Now and then, »outsiders« (e.g. sociologists, non-Belgian historians) provide a glimpse of a world beyond the chronology of important people, important events and important decisions. They explore for example how »rural life« and the »petite bourgeoisie« were constructed as separate categories or how catholic organisations tried to mould their members' views on everyday manifestations of modernisation and secularisation.⁴¹ It also

37 Bernard Van Causenbroeck, *Rode daken. De Goede Werkmanswoning 75 jaar*, Ghent 1998.

38 Heyrman, *Middenstandsbeweging*, S. 13.

39 Ginette Kurgan-Van Hentenryk/Serge Jaumain (Hrsg.), *Aux frontières des classes moyennes. La petite bourgeoisie belge avant 1914*, Brussels 1992; *Serge Jaumain, Les petits commerçants belges face à la modernité (1880–1914)*, Brussels 1995.

40 Alain Meynen, *Crisis, sterke staat en fasciseringsprocessen. Enkele conclusies uit de Belgische ervaring (1967/68–1990)*, in: Hugo De Schamphelleire/Yannis Thanassekos (Hrsg.), *L'extrême droite en Europe de l'ouest*, Brussels 1991, S. 281–332; Alain Meynen, *De economische en sociale politiek sinds de jaren vijftig*, in: Els Witte/Jan Craeybeckx/Alain Meynen, *Politieke geschiedenis van België van 1830 tot heden*, Brussels 1997, S. 285–354.

41 Catherine Mougenot/Marc Mormont, *L'invention du rural: l'héritage des mouvements ruraux de 1930 à nos jours*, Brussels 1988; Geoffrey Crossick, *Metaphors of the middle: the discovery of*

appears that the political/organisational bias is sometimes less pronounced when other types of organisations are dealt with: in the commemorative volumes devoted to a catholic school and a catholic asylum for example, there is in the latter case some room for dealing with developments in the treatment of patients and in the former for daily life, educational programme and recruitment of pupils, as well as for the congregation that led the school and the ideals it wished to convey.⁴² That other angles are possible in studying a social group is also illustrated by contributions on the construction of the medical domain and the collective identity of those who claimed it as their territory.⁴³

It remains, however, a difficult exercise. In 1998, a theme issue on legal professions was published, with the objective of exploring their social and political history. The contributions contain a lot of political and institutional details but the social dimension is again neglected or reduced to biographical details whose relevance is unclear.⁴⁴ In his literature survey of the history of justice in Belgium, Xavier Rousseaux concludes that the clientele of the judicial apparatus remains largely hidden.⁴⁵ On the incarcerated, somewhat more information is available, but as a recent synthesis discussing policies towards juvenile delinquents illustrates, the emphasis is mostly on legislation, institutions and policies while the confrontation with the institutions' daily practices and with the inmates remains very superficial.⁴⁶

MEANWHILE AT THE »SOCIAL STRUCTURE« CLUB...

Since the second half of the 1980s, contributions manifesting a clear-cut »social structure« approach have been gradually outnumbered, partly as a result of the rise of social history with a strong political/institutional/organisational bias. On the other hand, the »social structure« approach has itself undergone gradual changes, without a fundamental questioning of its basic premises. A timid critique of the latter, inspired by comments of French social historians, was only rather recently published by two former ardent defenders.⁴⁷ Here and there a more qualitative angle has completed the predominantly quantitative approach, but this has remained marginal.

Since the second half of the 1980s, studies conceived within the »social stratification« logic have definitively been in retreat, despite the fact that the bloodless classificatory exercises of the 1960s and 1970s largely belong to the past. Stratification was given a »sense« by making it subordinate to a specific problematic, such as proletarianisation

the petite bourgeoisie (1880–1914), in: Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 1994, S. 251–279; Rudy Laermans, In de greep van de »moderne tijd«. Modernisering en verzuiling. Evoluties binnen de ACW-vormingsorganisaties, Louvain 1992.

42 Ria Christens, 100 jaar Heilig-Hartinstituut Annuntiaten Heverlee. Geschiedenis van een school en een congregatie, Louvain 1994; Corina Dhaene/Lieve Dhaene, Sint-Jozef Kortenberg. Van »Maison de Santé« tot Universitair Centrum 1850–1995, Louvain 1995.

43 Carl Havelange, Les figures de la guérison, XVIIIe-XIXe siècles. Une histoire sociale et culturelle des professions médicales au Pays de Liège, Liège 1990; Karel Velle, De nieuwe biechtvaders: de sociale geschiedenis van de arts in België, Louvain 1991.

44 »Juridische beroepen in België (19de-20ste eeuw). Les professions juridiques en Belgique (XIXème-XXème siècles)« in: Revue belge d'Histoire Contemporaine 28, 1998, S. 7–277.

45 Xavier Rousseaux, L'histoire de la justice en Belgique: état des recherches d'un domaine en gestation, in: Revue belge d'Histoire Contemporaine 28, 1998, S. 261.

46 Marie-Sylvie Dupont-Bouchat, De la prison à l'école. Les pénitenciers pour enfants en Belgique au XIXe siècle (1840–1914), Heule 1996.

47 Patricia Van den Eeckhout/Peter Scholliers, Social history in Belgium: old habits and new perspectives, in: Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis 23, 1997, S. 147–181.

and survival, language use, the push/pull dichotomy in migration etc.⁴⁸ In historical demography, analogous attempts were made to link the »social stratification« approach to cultural developments, life course, the social history of disease, the labour market⁴⁹, but the discussion of punctual difficulties with sources and methodology as well as the elaboration of demographic monographs as a goal in itself, still mobilised a lot of energy.⁵⁰ In the 1990s several historical demographers at Liège university appeared as authors in surveys on the history of industrialisation, with an emphasis on economic rather than social aspects of development.⁵¹

Within another theme of the »social structure« approach, namely real wages, standard of living and consumption, we have also witnessed a gradual transformation in the way the subjects are dealt with. While the traditional way, emphasising methodological improvements in the mostly quantitative approach, still predominates in some contributions⁵², the influence of cultural sociology and ethnology comes timidly to the foreground in others.⁵³ Where older Belgian research on wages focused on the individual male wage, family income strategies are now considered as well as women's motivation in taking up wage labour.⁵⁴ Wages are treated less as a rather abstract measurement of economic and social conditions, but more as the outcome of managerial policies and class conflict at shop-floor level.⁵⁵ However, the »Alltagsgeschichte« of work, work experience, consumption, leisure, housing etc. remains a very marginal subject within Belgian social history.

In this respect the MIAT, a Ghent museum of industrial archaeology and textile history, must be mentioned. It does not only deal with industrial buildings, machinery and production processes, but it has also been a pioneer in the exploration of oral history

48 *Eric Vanhaute*, De invloed van de groei van het industrieel kapitalisme en van de centrale staat op een agrarisch grensgebied: de Noorderkempen in de 19e eeuw, 1750–1910, Brussels 1990; *Eric Vanhaute*, Heiboeren. Bevolking, arbeid en inkomen in de 19de-eeuwse Kempen, Brussels 1992; *Machteld De Metsenaere*, Taalmuur = sociale muur? De negentiende-eeuwse taalverhoudingen te Brussel als resultaat van geodemografische en sociale processen, Brussels 1988; *Sophie De Schaepdrijver*, Elites for the capital? Foreign migration to mid-nineteenth-century Brussels, Amsterdam 1990.

49 *Ron Lesthaeghe*, Moral control, secularization and reproduction in Belgium (1600–1900), in: *Historiens et populations. Liber Amicorum E. Hélin*, Louvain-la-Neuve 1991, S. 259–279; *Muriel Neven*, Epidemiology of town and countryside: mortality and causes of death in East Belgium, 1850–1910, in: *Revue belge d'Histoire Contemporaine* 27, 1997, S. 39–82; *George Alter*, Family and the female life course. The women of Verviers, Belgium 1849–1880, Madison 1988. See also the theme issue on »Labour migration« of the *Revue belge d'Histoire Contemporaine* 21, 1990, S. 297–638.

50 *Claude Desama*, Population et révolution industrielle. Evolution des structures démographiques à Verviers dans la première moitié du 19e siècle, Liège 1985; *René Leboutte*, Reconversions de la main d'oeuvre et transition démographique: les bassins industriels en aval de Liège, XVII–XXe siècles, Liège 1988.

51 One example: *René Leboutte*, Vie et mort des bassins industriels en Europe 1750–2000, Paris 1997.

52 *Peter Scholliers*, A century of real industrial wages in Belgium, 1840–1939, in: *Peter Scholliers/Vera Zamagni* (Hrsg.), Labour's reward. Real wages and economic change in 19th and 20th century – Europe, Aldershot 1995, S. 106–137; *Peter Scholliers*, The cost of living in nineteenth-century Belgium, in: *Studia Historica Oeconomica. Liber amicorum Herman Van der Wee*, Louvain 1993, S. 237–254.

53 *Peter Scholliers*, Arm en rijk aan tafel. Tweehonderd jaar eetcultuur in België, Berchem 1993.

54 *Patricia Van den Eeckhout*, Family income of Ghent working-class families c.1900, in: *Journal of Family History* 18, 1993, S. 87–110.

55 *Peter Scholliers*, Wages, manufacturers and workers in the nineteenth-century factory. The Voortman cotton mill in Ghent, Oxford 1996.

(publications of testimonies of Ghent textile workers)⁵⁶ and in its exhibitions and its journal, attention is devoted to hygiene, household comfort, child labour, labour relations, sport and women's history.⁵⁷

WOMEN'S HISTORY: A NEW SUBJECT, A FAMILIAR APPROACH

Internationally, women's history figures among the sub-disciplines in history which have contributed substantially to the transformation of the craft in the past decade. It was in these circles that the neutrality of objectifying categories and classifications was fundamentally questioned and that the interaction of discourse and daily practices in forging an identity was emphasised. For a substantial part of Belgian studies on women's history this angle offered hardly any inspiration. In fact, the bulk of research is conducted along the lines of social history with a strong political/organisational/institutional bias and it has quite a few affinities with the traditional history of the labour movement. The long march to political and professional emancipation, the attitude of political parties regarding these questions, the role of pressure groups, great figures and »pioneers«: these were and are favourite topics.⁵⁸ Amending and correcting the »male« view of (political) history appears to be their major ambition.

We encounter working women in all sorts of social history contributions, but if authors of the latter omitted the word »women« (or a term evoking the »female universe«) in their title, the research in question is in danger of passing unnoticed by the gatekeepers of women's history.⁵⁹ Among the studies, to be palpably recognised as women's history, hardly any deal with work and labour relations at shop-floor level. Working women are mostly treated on the aggregate level of population censuses (sometimes amended with aggregate figures of local taxes) and the outcome remains impressionist and superficial: little progress has been made since the subject was first explored.⁶⁰ One study deals with the disturbance of institutionalised labour relations by the female workers of a Walloon weapon factory.⁶¹ Where the »Alltagsgeschichte« of working women is concerned, the equality of the sexes is remarkable: research on this theme is marginal in Belgian historiography for women and men.

More than on the shop floor or in their home, working women are present in the social historian's discussion of the discourse of men (philanthropists, politicians, trade unionists, physicians, priests, statisticians, artists etc.) and of women's organisations.⁶²

56 Hun werk, hun leven. Getuigenissen uit de Gentse textielwereld 1900–1950, Ghent 1980.

57 Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis van Techniek en Industriële Cultuur, Ghent, 1983 ff.

58 Denise De Weerd, En de vrouwen? Vrouw, vrouwenbeweging en feminisme in België 1830–1960, Ghent 1980; Denise De Weerd, De vrouwen van de Eerste Wereldoorlog, Ghent 1993; Yolande Mendes da Costa/Anne Morelli (Hrsg.), Femmes, libertés, laïcité, Brussels 1989; Ilse Gesquière/Catherine Jacques/Claudine Marissal, Dix femmes en politique. Les élections communales de 1921, Brussels 1994; Leen Van Molle/Eliane Gubin, Vrouw en politiek in België, Tielt 1998.

59 See for example the survey of Ria Christens, Verkend verleden. Een kritisch overzicht van de vrouwengeschiedenis 19de-20ste eeuw in België, in: Revue belge d'Histoire Contemporaine 27, 1997, S. 5–37.

60 See the contributions of Marinette Bruwier and Eliane Gubin in Eliane Gubin/Jean-Pierre Nandrin (Hrsg.), La ville et les femmes en Belgique. Histoire et sociologie, Brussels 1993. The same applies to the theme issues on »Travail« (1995) and »Métiers« (1996) of the journal Sextant, a periodical published by GIEF, an interdisciplinary group on women's studies of the Université Libre de Bruxelles.

61 Marie-Thérèse Coenen, La grève des femmes de la FN en 1966, Brussels 1991.

62 Ria Christens/Annie Dedecker, Vormingswerk in vrouwenhanden. De geschiedenis van de KAV voor de Tweede Wereldoorlog (1920–1940), Louvain 1988; Denise Keymolen, Le harcèlement sex-

It appears far more difficult to assess the interaction between discourses and women's lives.

THE RISE OF THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE CROWD

The gradual retreat of a clear-cut »structuralist« social history, with its emphasis on »anonymous« structures and social forces, has been accompanied by a growing interest in the life course of individuals. An increasing number of studies of the history of labour and women's movement include biographical excursions. As can be expected, focus is on the relationship of the individual with »his« organisation or movement. Elaborate biographies have been devoted to some of the political actors within the labour movement. While some attention is given to the »social and economic context« in which the former operated as well as to the milieu in which they were born and raised, they hardly differ from traditional political biographies, with little interest in anything beyond the policies of party or union.⁶³ Focus is on the militant (or at least the one »who made it«), but the figures that evolve do not really come to life, some exceptions notwithstanding.⁶⁴ The biographies of the catholic politicians Helleputte and Verhaegen, based on admittedly richer archives, offer a vast panorama of these men and their world and in the latter case the self-perception of the character is considered.⁶⁵ In general, however, the Belgian biographer has little interest in psychology. It does not therefore come as a surprise that the revival of biography has not been accompanied by explorations in the field of psychohistory. In 1997 an attempt was made to produce a theme issue of a history journal on the subject.⁶⁶ Besides a bibliographical survey, acknowledging the absence of this line of research in Belgium, two contributions (by psychologists) were published. They leave the reader baffled and wondering what psychohistory is all about.

On the verge of biography and the history of mentality we find the collective biography, an attempt to evoke the mentality of a social group. The worlds of Ghent social-democratic militants and of immigrant Jewish communist militants are thus explored and for once they are not treated as an appendix of their organisation.⁶⁷ A synthesis of

uel sur le lieu de travail dans la Belgique du 19eme siècle, Louvain 1990; *Patricia J. Hilden*, The rhetoric and iconography of reform: women coal miners in Belgium, 1840–1914, in: *The Historical Journal* 34, 1991, S. 411–436; *Eliane Gubin* (Hrsg.), *Norme et marginalités. Comportements féminins aux 19e-20e siècles*, Brussels 1991; *Luc Courtois/Jean Pirotte/Françoise Rosart* (Hrsg.), *Femmes et pouvoirs. Flux et reflux de l'émancipation féminine depuis un siècle*, Louvain-la-Neuve 1992; *Patricia Van den Eeckhout/Peter Scholliers*, The construction of women's paid labour. The Belgian inquiry of 1891 into working-class family budgets, in: *Tim Guinnane/Paul Johnson* (Hrsg.), *The microeconomic analysis of the household and the labour market 1880–1939*, Sevilla 1998, S. 73–86.

63 *Janet Polasky*, *The democratic socialism of Emile Vandervelde*, Oxford 1995; *Bernard Van Causenbroeck*, *Herman Vos. Van Vlaams-nationalisme naar socialisme*, Antwerp 1997; *Freddy Joris*, *Pierre Fluche et le mouvement ouvrier verviétois sous Léopold II*, Tubize 1997; *Hendrik Defoort*, *Mijnheer Slunse. Het socialisme van August Debunne (1872–1963)*, Antwerp 1998.

64 *Guy Vanschoenbeek*, *Mijnheer Emiel. De lotgevallen van een intellektueel in de arbeidersbeweging, Leven en werk van Emiel Moyson (1838–1868) vrijdenker, flamingant en socialist*, Ghent 1988.

65 *Jan De Maeyer*, *De rode baron. Arthur Verhaegen 1847–1917*, Louvain 1994; *Jan De Maeyer/Leen Van Molle* (Hrsg.), *Joris Helleputte. Architect en politicus 1852/1925*, Louvain 1998.

66 The *Revue belge d'Histoire Contemporaine* produced a theme issue on »Psychologie en geschiedenis. Histoire et psychologie«, 1997, S. 211–286.

67 *Guy Vanschoenbeek*, *Novecento in Gent. De wortels van de sociaal-democratie in Vlaanderen*, Ghent 1995; *Rudi Van Doorslaer*, *Kinderen van het getto. Joodse revolutionairen in België (1925–1940)*, Ghent 1996.

the leading figures of the renowned Belgian bank, the Société Générale, discusses their social origins, education, career, activities and family ties.⁶⁸ Biographical dictionaries of a variable quality translate this renewed interest in the role of the individual: they cover the labour movement (a sloppy publication that did not get further than the first two letters of the alphabet), political elites (succinct information shunning every kind of synthesis) and entrepreneurs, entrepreneurial dynasties and their networks (a more thorough and systemic approach).⁶⁹

The reaction against the absence of people of flesh and blood in »structuralist« historiography has not only led to a growing interest in individual life courses, but it has also engendered a rediscovery of the anonymous men and women in the street, those who never played a role in party, union or other organisation. Instead of picturing them as monolithic entities, utterly determined in their behaviour by a series of objective variables, the complex »moral economy« and the repertoires of their collective actions are explored.⁷⁰ This line of research is strongly influenced by the work of E.P. Thompson and Charles Tilly. Politics and the state appear here as well. Not a problem per se, but it can be, when the attention for the decision-making processes overshadows the role of »the street«.⁷¹

CONCLUSION

At the »Tomorrow's social history« conference in 1996, Peter Scholliers and myself proposed a critical survey of the practice of social history (19th and 20th centuries) in Belgium in the years 1985–1995.⁷² The tone of the contribution was critical and rather pessimistic and I see no reason to change this. Although I do not yearn for a restoration of the »social structure and stratification« ideals, their evaporation in the course of the 1980s has left an empty space in Belgian social historiography, which has been insufficiently replaced with other ways of practising social history.

In his survey of recent developments of social history in the Netherlands, Maarten Prak observed that Dutch historians now focus less on social structures than on social relations between different social groups, between state and citizen, between men and women; that instead of trying to cover all people in a rather abstract way, historians strive to fathom the whole human being in all his/her facets, so that not only occupations but ideology, mentality and cultural aspects are also considered; that social relations are conceived less as univocal and »given« but are treated more as multiform and as objects of permanent negotiations; that the local monograph with a predictable con-

68 *Ginette Kurgan-Van Hentenryk*, *Gouverner la Générale de Belgique. Essai de biographie collective*, Brussels 1996.

69 *Dictionnaire biographique des militants du mouvement ouvrier en Belgique*. Tome 1, A-B, Brussels 1995; *Nicole Caulier-Mathy*, *Le monde des parlementaires liégeois 1831–1893. Essai de socio-biographies*, Brussels 1996; *Ginette Kurgan-Van Hentenryk/Serge Jaumain/Valérie Montens* (Hrsg.), *Dictionnaire des patrons en Belgique. Les hommes, les entreprises, les réseaux*, Brussels 1996.

70 *Marc Jacobs*, *Charivari en volksgerichten. Sleutelfenomenen voor sociale geschiedenis*, in: *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis* 12, 1986, S. 365–392. *Marc Jacobs*, *Charivaris, peasants and political culture in the Southern Netherlands in a comparative perspective, 18th–20th centuries*, in: *Stuart Woolf* (Hrsg.), *The world of the peasantry*, Florence 1993, S. 51–85; *Gita Deneckere*, *Sire, het volk mort. Sociaal protest in België 1831–1918*, Antwerp 1997; *Gita Deneckere*, *Het katoenoproer van Gent in 1839. Collectieve actie en sociale geschiedenis*, Nijmegen 1998.

71 *Gita Deneckere*, *Geuzengeweld. Antiklerikaal straatrumoer in de politieke geschiedenis van België, 1831–1914*, Brussels 1998.

72 See our contribution: *Van den Eeckhout/Scholliers*, *Social history in Belgium* (note 47).

tent has been replaced by community studies emphasising the interaction within those local communities etc.⁷³ This shift in the practice of social history to a more qualitative approach, usually still largely embedded within the overall »social structure« paradigm, has manifested itself insufficiently in Belgian social history. I am not arguing that it is absent, but it remains marginal.

Instead, a large part of the territory has been occupied by what I consider to be a form of political, organisational and institutional history. One may wonder whether this should be considered a problem. Doesn't Maarten Prak welcome the (re)introduction of politics as a contribution to the renewal of social history? He is, however, talking about an entirely different approach to politics from the one predominant in Belgian social history. As characteristic of the »new« entanglement of social history and politics, Prak mentions that institutions (and their archives!) are no longer considered the self-evident starting point of research. Earlier, I argued that in Belgium quite the opposite is happening and that organisations and institutions usually provide not only the starting point but the whole outlook of research. Implicit in Prak's appreciation of the reintroduction of politics into social history is the fact that social theory (mostly formulated by sociologists and particularly by historical sociologists) is an important source of inspiration. Here again, the Belgian experience is different. Pragmatism, fact-orientedness and the descriptive treatment of social legislation, social relations and social conflicts largely overshadow the few attempts to link history and theory. But neither is this kind of history writing interested in the daily experiences and practices of the people who »inhabit« these organisations and institutions.

Hence my plea against this »variant« of social history and against the obsession with digging up endless strings of details on the decision-making process, even if the latter deals with social policies, organisations and institutions. I have difficulties assessing the difference between this form of history writing and the old »histoire événementielle«. The ritual of placing this history of events and decisions in a so-called »wider« context, makes little impression, for this is usually reserved for the introduction and is then quickly forgotten. The (often futile) details and specifications on how social organisations or administrations decided what and when and who was involved, seldom serve the purpose of the social historian.

Under the influence of »Alltagsgeschichte« and the »new cultural history« people of flesh and blood, their daily lives, perceptions and practices, and the meaning of the latter have been explored. But again, this current is insufficiently strong to alter the overall picture of Belgian social history: one of a field in search of an identity, of a specific domain to call its own.

73 *Maarten Prak*, De nieuwe sociale geschiedschrijving in Nederland, in: *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis* 20, 1994, S. 121–148.