

# Rich Agriculture and Poor Farmers: Land, Landlords and Farmers in Flanders in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

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**Abstract** This article focuses on the property relations in Belgian and Flemish agriculture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The main question is: what was the relationship between land use, land ownership and land rents? By analysing the position of the (small) farmers and of the (small) landlords we could confirm that the dominance of small-scale farming coincided with a specific pattern of property distribution and surplus extraction. The high and increasing returns of the land were almost entirely pruned away by private landowners. The extreme fragmentation of the land, the large proportion of leaseholds and the high rents grew to a maximum in the second half of the nineteenth century due to competition both on the property market and on the leasehold market. This put the Flemish farmer in the worst possible situation, with a sad contrast between brilliant harvests and the miserable existence of those who generated them.

The land question is not only a matter of distribution of economic wealth; it is as much one of economic power.

(Dovring, 1956: 1-2)

## **The paradox of small farms**

‘There are too many tenant-farmers, and too few peasant-proprietors, the leases are excessively short, and the rents are excessively high’. This observation was made by the renowned liberal economist and rural sociologist Emile de Laveleye on the eve of the late nineteenth-century agricultural crisis in an extensive report on Flemish and Belgian agricultural organisation (de Laveleye, 1881, quotation: 468). His treatise is a long plea for small-scale farming, which he deems superior to ‘la grande culture’ both on economic (land productivity, food supply), social (a restraint on impoverishment), and moral grounds (as it promotes order and stability). De Laveleye voiced the opinion of many of his contemporaries, who saw family-run farms as the main barrier against ‘modern’ pauperism. In order to confirm his arguments, de Laveleye made a telling comparison between Flanders: ‘yet having nearly all of them a little plot of land to work, they are at any rate kept from starving’ and England: ‘and, supposing there were 200,000 small farmers more than there are now, might there not be 500,000 fewer paupers less to be

supported?’ (*Ibid.*, 477 and 479). And yet, according to de Laveleye, one important reservation had to be made. Small-scale farming could only play this role if the profits could remain largely within the farm itself. Or, in other words, if the pruning away of the profits as a result of lease prices did not exceed all limits. And, as de Laveleye had to conclude as well, this was certainly the case in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Flanders. The extreme parcelling-out of lands seemed to encourage excessively high rents. In all his works, de Laveleye kept struggling with this paradox of small-scale farming.

In this article, I will further examine the central point of the above-mentioned paradox, viz. the property relations in Belgian and Flemish agriculture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I will take a look at land ownership from three different angles. First of all, attention will be paid to the *farm structure*. In this part, the use of land and farms takes up a central position. Although this angle provides me with a clear insight into the distribution of farms according to size and property position, it does not bring into the picture the role of the landlord in all this. This is why attention is focused upon him in the second part, which deals with *property structure*. In this part, the distribution between proprietors is examined, without taking into account the use of real estate. In the third part I will reconstruct several parameters of *land rent*. Which leases and taxes were paid and who received the profits?

This leads us to the central question in this article, viz. what is the relation between land use, land ownership, and land rents in eighteenth and nineteenth-century agriculture in Flanders? In other words: does the dominance of small-scale farming, which is characteristic of Flanders, coincide with a specific pattern of distribution of property and surplus extraction? Can we find an explanation for the important contrast which characterises nineteenth-century rural Flanders, viz. a prosperous agriculture with poor farmers?

In contrast to nineteenth-century commentators such as de Laveleye, agricultural historiography about the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has, strangely enough, hardly paid any attention to the above-mentioned questions.<sup>1</sup> For a short while, the matter was raked up in the margin of the proto-industrial debate, but the relations between farmer, land, and landowner in the ‘long’ nineteenth century were never a central theme on the research agenda (cf. Dekezel, 1988 for an exception; see also Lis and Soly, 1979). The Flemish case is no exception in this. In international historiography no systematic research has been done into agricultural and rural property relations. Thus, hardly any references are made to property, leasehold and capital transfers in the international debate about the standard of living (emphasising wages, prices, consumption and family budgets). Apart from the inevitable problems of a heuristic nature, this gap is also responsible for the virtual absence of international comparative research.<sup>2</sup>

An indispensable requirement for doing research about property relations on the level of households is the existence of sources which, first of all, disclose quantitative data that can be compared over time and which, secondly, cover the whole of the (rural) population. From the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, Belgian historians have two excellent instruments at their disposal which meet these criteria: the (published) agricultural censuses (relating to the farm structure) and the cadastral survey (relating

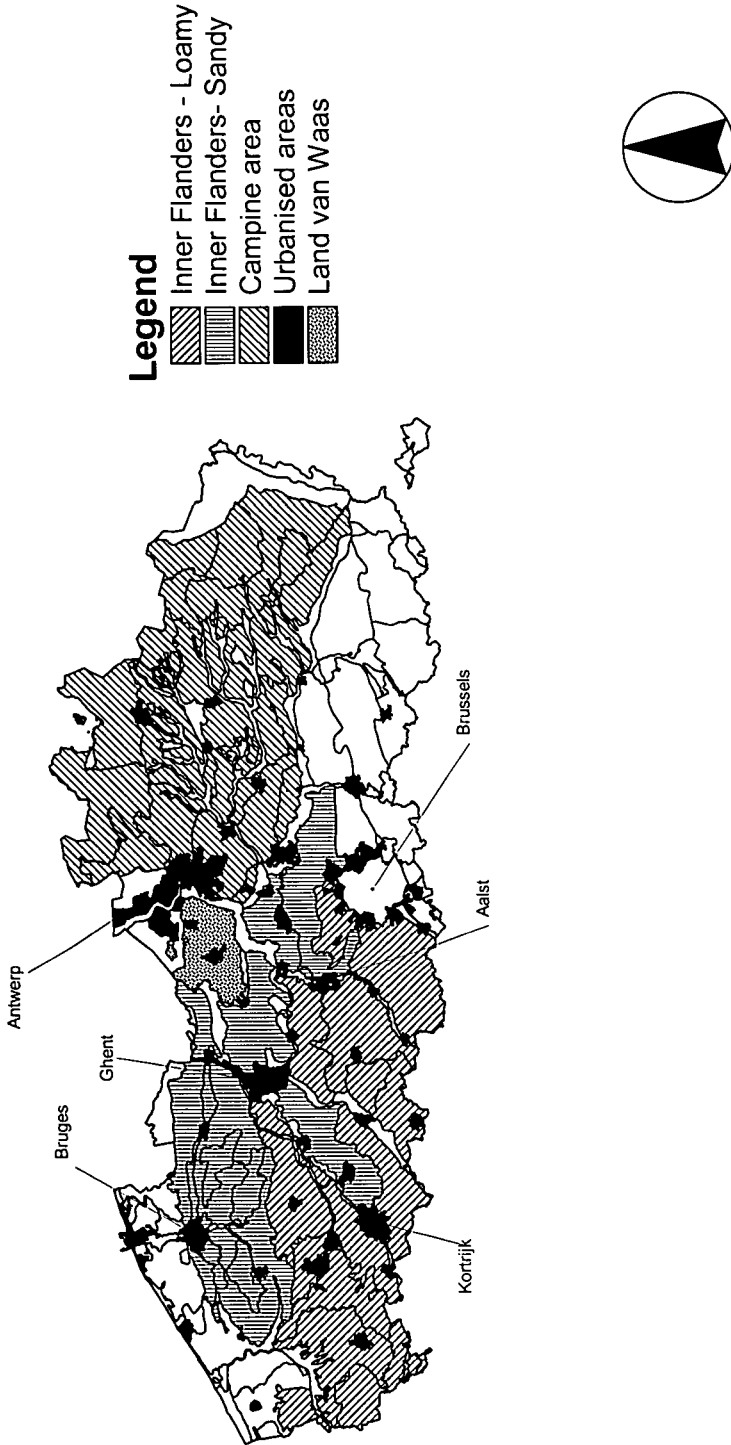


Figure 1. Agriculture Regions in Flanders.

to the property structure).<sup>3</sup> As far as the previous periods are concerned, one has to fall back on local micro-investigations. It is only thanks to the examination of many of the lists of users and owners of land and houses that have been preserved in the municipal archives, that generalising statements can be made about rural property in the period before the mid-nineteenth century (Vanhaute, 1993; Vanhaute, 1996).

### Small farmers

Around 1900, the English sociologist *avant-la-lettre* B.H. Seebohm Rowntree described Belgium as ‘un pays de petites exploitations’ (Seebohm Rowntree, [1910]). With an average farm-size of 2.3 hectare, as he calculated, Belgium, compared to the other Western European countries, lagged significantly behind (Denmark 14 ha, Great-Britain 12 ha, Germany 8 ha, and France 6 ha). If we do not take into account mini-farms of less than 40 ares, the size of the farming land that was cultivated on a typical farm in Great-Britain became 26 ha, in Denmark 20 ha, in Germany 14 ha, in France 10 ha, and in Belgium merely 6 ha. While in Belgium exploitations smaller than 20 ha accounted for two thirds of the agricultural area, this figure in England became a mere 15%. It was not a coincidence that during the decades before and after the turn of the century small exploitations in Belgium were the subject of an ideologically coloured debate: ‘c’est une garantie pour le maintien de l’ordre social actuel’ (de Laveleye, 1878. See also Vandervelde, 1902 and Seebohm Rowntree, [1910]).

The ‘general agricultural censuses’ organised since 1846, allow a probing look into property relations from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards. Two angles of approach can be distinguished: the share of the productive area that is either one’s property or held on lease, and the property relations on the level of the individual farm. The first approach divides the total area of agricultural land over the municipalities.<sup>4</sup> The second approach focuses on the farm structure. For every holding, it is examined whether it is held on lease completely, more than half, less than half, or not at all. The total productive area that is under the control of the farm is taken into account, irrespective of its location. What is important is that everyone who cultivated even the smallest piece of land, had to fill in a census form. Thus, by ‘farm’ I mean both gardens of less than 50 are and large exploitations of 50 or more ha. The limit of 2 ha is used in order to be able to make a (rough) distinction between independent holdings and households in which farming provides a sub-income (possibly the main one) (Vanhaute, 1993). The table below presents an overview of the farm structure in the middle and at the end of the nineteenth century.

Table 1  
*Farm structure in Belgium in the second half of the nineteenth century.*

	mid-nineteenth century	end of nineteenth century
% families with a farm	64%	53%
% families with a farm + 2 ha	19%	13%
% farms + 2 ha	30%	24%
% farms held on lease completely	41%	52%
Cultivated area on lease	66%	72%

In 1846 two thirds of the cultivated area in Belgium was exploited on lease. In total, 572,550 agricultural enterprises were counted, which means that minimally 64% of all households were at least partly dependent on an income from farming. Only three out of ten farms were larger than 2 ha. Hence, approximately 19% of the Belgian households disposed of a sufficient agricultural income. More than four out of ten families active in agriculture cultivated less than half a hectare of land and 41% of the exploitations were held fully on lease. Only one out of seven farms operated entirely and one out of five operated mainly on own lands - in total not more than 35%. Hence, in the mid-nineteenth century leasing was clearly the dominant system with regard to private exploitation. It is significant that almost a third of all holdings were 'lilliput' farms (less than 0.50 ha) that were entirely held on lease.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the total number of farms rose by as much as 45%. This was accompanied by a strong decrease in average farm acreage. At the end of the nineteenth century, on average 4328 farms can be counted per 10,000 hectare agricultural land - which is one third more than in 1846. In 1895 three out of four farms were smaller than 2 ha, and in more than half of the cases, the agricultural area constituted even less than 50 are. In absolute figures, there was still a slight increase in the total number of independent farms (+2 ha), but the relation to the number of households dropped from 19% to 12.5%. A second important shift took place to the advantage of leaseholds. In Belgium, the share of leasing in the acreage of cultivated land increased from 66% in 1846 to 72 % around 1900. At the end of the century, more than one out of two agricultural enterprises was fully leased. The sharpest increase can be observed in the group of mini-farms, mainly or completely cultivated on lease (+95%). This category constituted the largest portion (77%) in the overall growth of agricultural holdings between 1846 and 1895.

Figures 2, 3, and 4 illustrate the regional spread of property relations in Flemish villages in 1846 and 1895. In the middle of the century, the percentage of leaseholds amounted to 50% and higher in the western part of the country, and in the region between Antwerp and Brussels. Low proportions were characteristic of the eastern part of East Flanders (east of the river Schelde) and in the eastern part of the Campine region. The larger proportion of dark shades on the map of 1895 indicates a strengthening of the position of the leasehold. This was especially the case in regions where exploitation in ownership previously had taken up a strong position, such as in the Land of Waas and in the Campine region. The geographical distribution of the share of agricultural land cultivated on lease reveals a similar situation (figure 4): in the west 50% to even 90% of the land was leased, whereas this was 30% and less in the eastern part.

We cannot calculate 'national' averages for the period before the middle of the nineteenth century. Figure 5 summarises a number of regional trends.<sup>5</sup>

In the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, leaseholds came to occupy an ever stronger position in Flemish farming. As we have been able to observe before, the practice of leaseholding grew especially in regions where there had traditionally been a great deal of farming on own land. Thus, in the Campine region (east of Antwerp) the share of leaseholds increased from 10 to 20% in the eighteenth century to an average of 40% at the end of the nineteenth century. Before 1800, scarcely one out of five farms

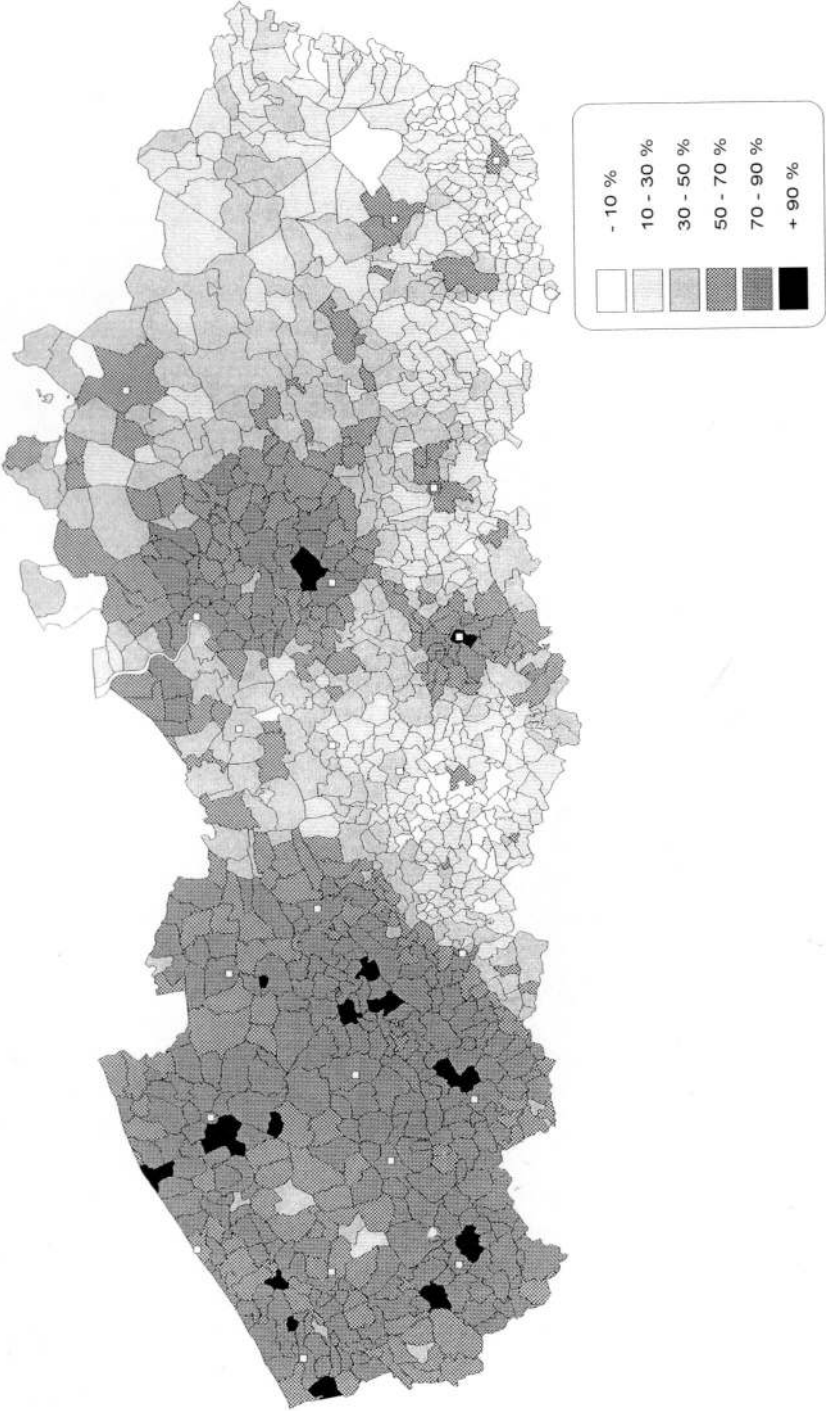


Figure 2. Leaseholds in Flanders, 1846 (% of farms).

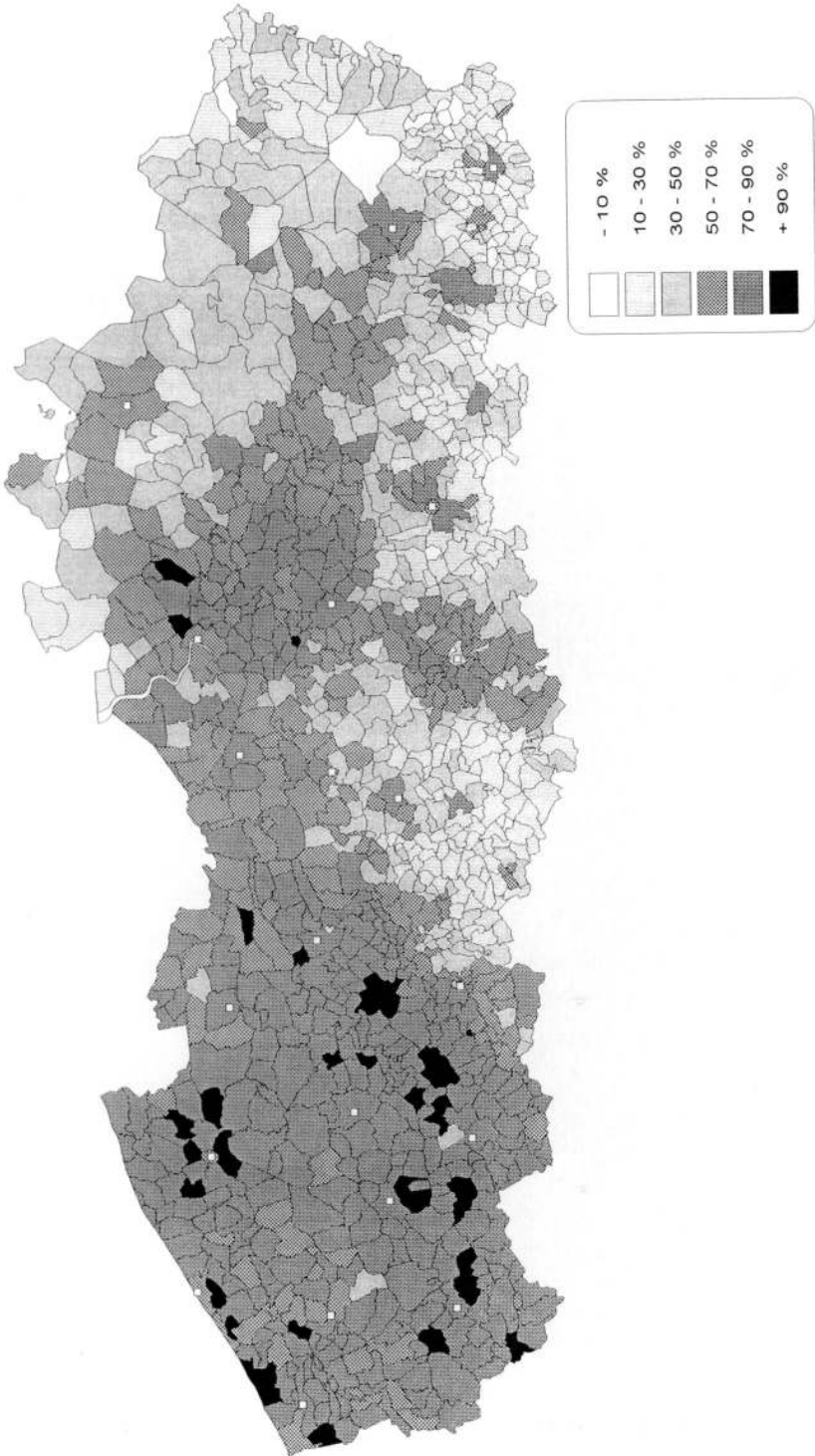


Figure 3. Leaseholds in Flanders, 1895 (% of farms).

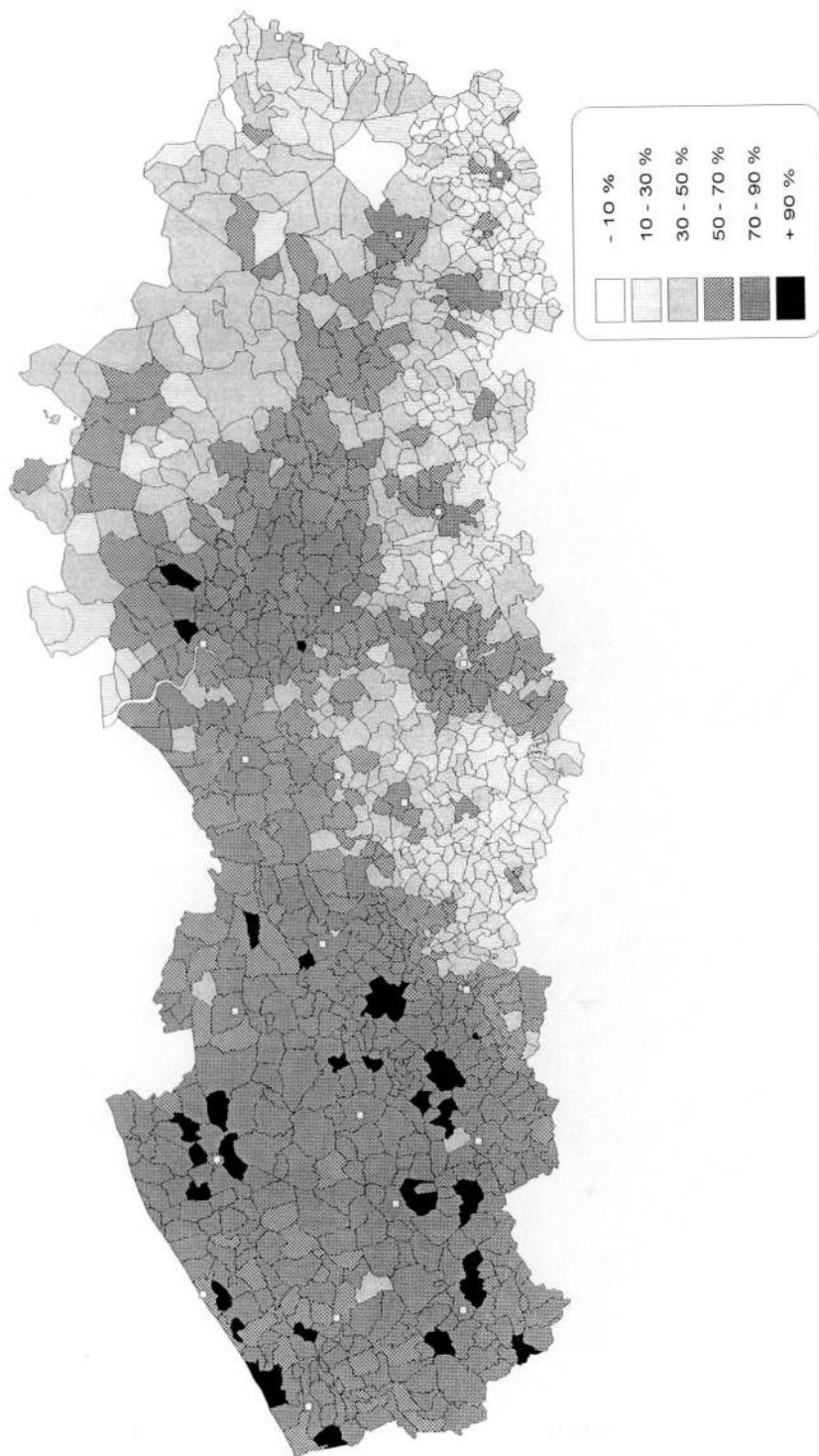


Figure 4. Leasehold land in Flanders, 1895 (% of agricultural area).



operated fully on lease. A century later, this applied to half of all cases. In eighteenth-century East Flanders, the share of leasehold land still fluctuated quite strongly, from 30% up to 70%. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, 70% to 90% had become normal values. The share of (small) leaseholds increased considerably in all regions. As the presence of leaseholds in the proto-industrial region between Gent and Tielst had been dominant already, the shifts which took place in this region were less spectacular – though not less meaningful. Only very rarely do we find a village with more than 10% of fully owned farms in the nineteenth century. In the century before, this figure sometimes was as high as one out of three. This development has a long history, even going back to the high Middle Ages (Thoen, 2001). In the sixteenth century, 50% of the land and farms in the region south of Gent was still owned by the farmers themselves. In the eighteenth century, it was still one third, but in the second half of the nineteenth century, this figure was reduced to 10%, maximum 20%. This increase of leaseholding was accompanied by a further fragmentation of agricultural lands. In the eighteenth century, 40% to 50% of all enterprises in the proto-industrial region of Inner Flanders were smaller than one hectare (a growth from 30–35% in the sixteenth century). By the middle of the nineteenth century, this figure had increased from 55% to 65%. In the region to the east of Gent and in the Antwerp Campine region this shift towards fragmentation was even more spectacular, from a maximum of one out of three ‘mini’-farms in the eighteenth century to more than half in the middle of the nineteenth century.

In the nineteenth-century Flemish countryside, agriculture continued to play a crucial role in the household labour and income strategies. Supported by processes of urbanisation and parcelling-out of the farming land, an irreversible shift took place nevertheless, whereby agriculture came to provide only an additional income instead of the main (possibly independent) income. Around 1900, the renowned socialist leader Emile Vandervelde reached the same conclusions in his analyses of rural households. In the course of the nineteenth century, the fragmentation of farms continued, and autochthonous ownership and direct exploitation further declined (Vandervelde, 1900, 265–323). What is interesting, are the regional differences pointed out by Vandervelde. The greatest shifts did not occur in the direct vicinity of the cities. As it happens, it was the local landowners in the more remote regions who lost their grip most quickly towards the end of the century.

### **Small landlords**

The question of who owned the cultivated land was a central one in the works of Seebohm Rowntree: ‘Le bien-être social d’une nation dépend en grande partie de la façon dont elle est répartie. . . . Ceux qui sont propriétaires de la terre sont donc à même de dicter leurs lois à ceux qui n’en possèdent pas’ (B. Seebohm Rowntree, [1910], 36). Ownership is not a synonym of wealth, however, especially not if this ownership is loaded with debts. Property inventories do not inform us about this aspect. Only a study in which data from cadastral registers and mortgage registers are combined can provide a decisive answer in this respect.<sup>6</sup> Data about the distribution of real property can be retrieved

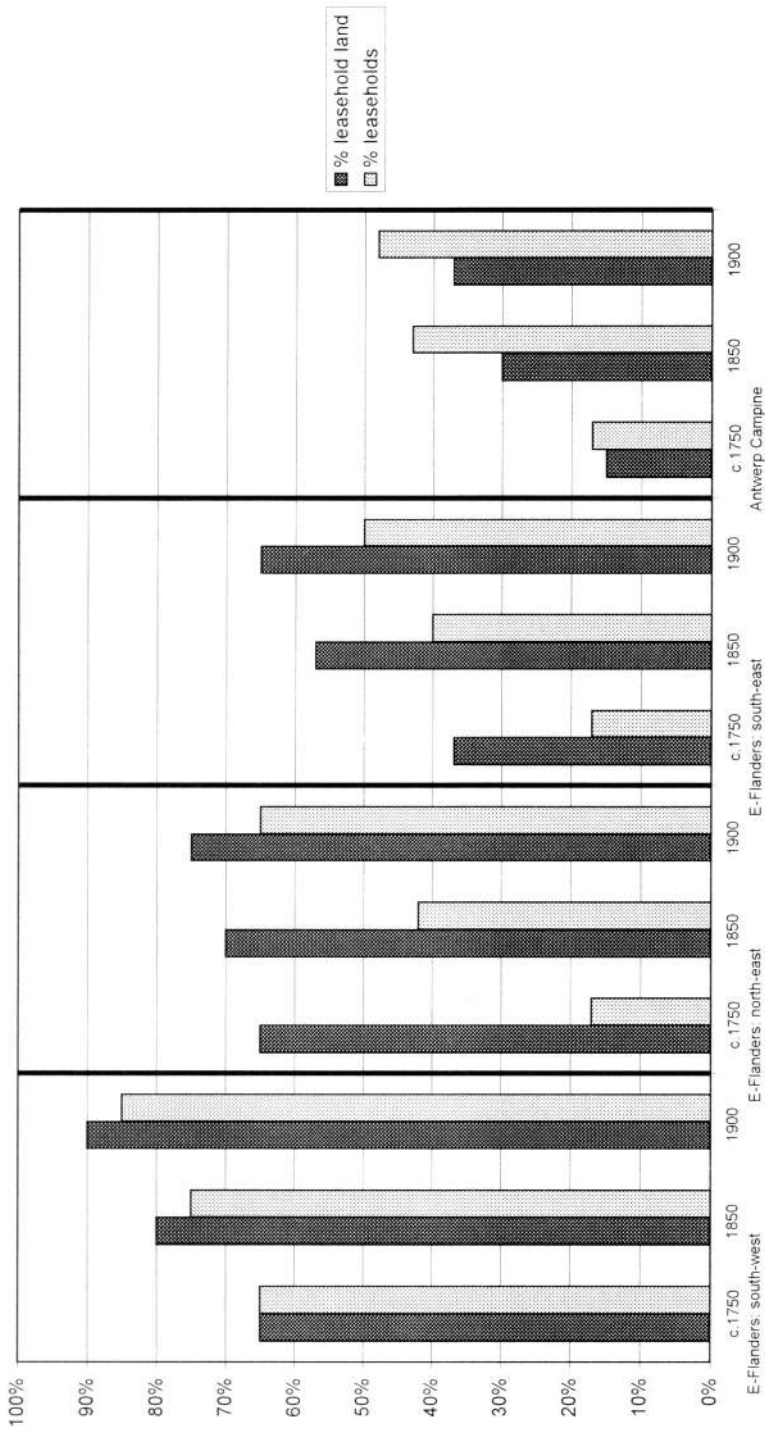


Figure 5. Share of leaseholds in Flanders, 1750–1900 (fluctuation margins of 10%)

from the cadastral registers. Studies at a local level are the only ones that can provide direct information about the social relations on the real estate market (Vanhaute, 1996).

A few years after the foundation of the Belgian nation, the central administration of the land registry was started up. After three decades of fieldwork, set up by the French occupying forces, definitive lists of proprietors, property, and the estimated value were finally drawn up in 1835. For the first time, the government had complete and consistent inventories of real property at its disposal, subdivided per plot, and calculated per municipality. Crucial documents in the land registry are the land registers (*matrice cadastrale des propriétaires et des propriétés foncières non bâties et bâties*), or the calculation of possessions per owner. These land registers, which are drawn up on the basis of the registration of parcels in the designated register of real property (*tableau indicatif primitif*) and which are normally updated yearly by incorporating the transactional data (sale, acquisition, inheritance, alterations, etc.), inform us at any time about the distribution of land and buildings within a certain municipality. Furthermore, we learn the name, profession, and the address of the owner. The main disadvantage of the source is the municipal specification. In other words: the land register enables us to draw a complete picture of the distribution of property titles within a municipality, but does not inform us about possible possessions of its residents in other municipalities. Hence, municipal land registers do not provide a decisive answer about all the possessions of the households residing in it. In order to do so, all other land registers should be consulted. Whereas such a gap can be more or less compensated in micro-research (by checking the land registers of neighbouring villages), an overall view on the ownership proportions in Flanders or Belgium is quite problematic, to the annoyance of many sociologically or economically oriented analysts: 'Trotz der vorzüglichen Agrarenqueten, welche in Belgien veranstaltet sind, besitzen wir keine Angaben über die Zahl der ländlichen Grundeigentümer und die Ausdehnung ihres Besitzes. Es gibt genaue Statistiken der Betriebsgrösse, aber nicht solche über Besitzgrösse.' (A. von Chlapowo Chlapowski, 1900, 54–55).

These obstacles did not keep Seebohm Rowntree from setting up, in the beginning of the twentieth century, an ambitious, large-scale, and unique investigation into property relations in Belgium (Seebohm Rowntree, [1910], 36–55 and 559–563). Not surprisingly, his conclusions are very relevant. First of all, he and his collaborators calculated that around 1900 the Belgian territory was owned by 719,986 proprietors, i.e. a ratio of five proprietors per 9 cadastral articles. Secondly, his investigation confirmed the extreme parcelling-out of the lands and the enormous dominance of small-scale property with 69% of the proprietors possessing no more than one hectare of land and 95% possessing a maximum of 5 hectares. Thirdly, he emphasised the unequal distribution of real property for 70% of the owners (each possessing less than 1 hectare) took up only 5% of the surface area. A small group of people (1%) owned more than 50 ha, but controlled half of the Belgian surface area in private hands.<sup>7</sup> True large landownership scarcely ever occurred in these regions. Yet, 146 families owned more than 1,000 ha, and the two largest landowners together had a property of 12,800 ha. This led Seebohm Rowntree to the conclusion that: 'Il n'existe pour ainsi dire aucun "grand" propriétaire foncier, dans le sens anglais du mot' (B. Seebohm Rowntree, [1910], 535).

The proportions observed by Seebohm Rowntree were the result of a long trend of parcelling-out and of loss of ownership (Vanhaute, 1996). A calculation of the articles in the land registers gives us an idea about the number of families with or without real property.<sup>8</sup> Around the mid-nineteenth century, 57% of the families in Belgium had a title in the land register. In 1890, this was reduced to 49% and in 1910 to 41%. The national averages conceal extreme ratios, as is shown in the following table.

Table 2  
*Owners-households per province, Flanders 1845–1910*

	1845	1910
West Flanders	33%	34%
East Flanders	50%	41%
Antwerp	47%	26%
Brabant	58%	34%
Limburg	83%	87%

Whereas in 1850 only one out of three families was an owner in the western part of the country, this figure rose to more than eight out of ten in the Limburg Campine region. In the regions in between, the proportions fluctuated around one out of two. The process of proletarianisation was strongest in the regions with a high degree of urbanisation: around Antwerp and Brussels.

Did this trend of increasing loss of property go together with the concentration of property in the hands of ever fewer people? This question especially interested the socialist leader Emile Vandervelde (Vandervelde, 1910). He added up all articles in the land registers who owned more than 100 ha of land for the sample years of 1835 and 1898/99.<sup>9</sup> The portion of land owned by big landlords remained limited in the course of the nineteenth century, from 5 to 7% in the provinces of Limburg, East and West Flanders, to 13 to 15% in Antwerp and Brabant. The importance of large public domains was reduced, however, especially in regions which still had a large proportion of communal property (Antwerp and Limburg). As a result, the position of private large landownership remained almost stable in the course of the nineteenth century, despite the trend of extreme parcelling out.

The nineteenth-century property structures on the family level were characterised by two shifts. First of all, there was a substantial increase in the number of families without property. In the middle of the century, five or six Belgian families out of ten still exercised a right of ownership on their place of residence. Half a century later, this figure had been reduced to scarcely four out of ten. In Flanders, only Limburg did (far) better than the national values. Furthermore, I suspect a polarising trend in the ownership ratios. Whereas at the top of the pyramid the share of private large landownership remained stable, at the bottom there is an increased parcelling-out of land, accompanied by a further growth of small-scale landownership. The addition of all data about property and property holding shows that around 1900 only one out of eight families owned more than one hectare of land. Half a century before, this was still no less than one out of five.

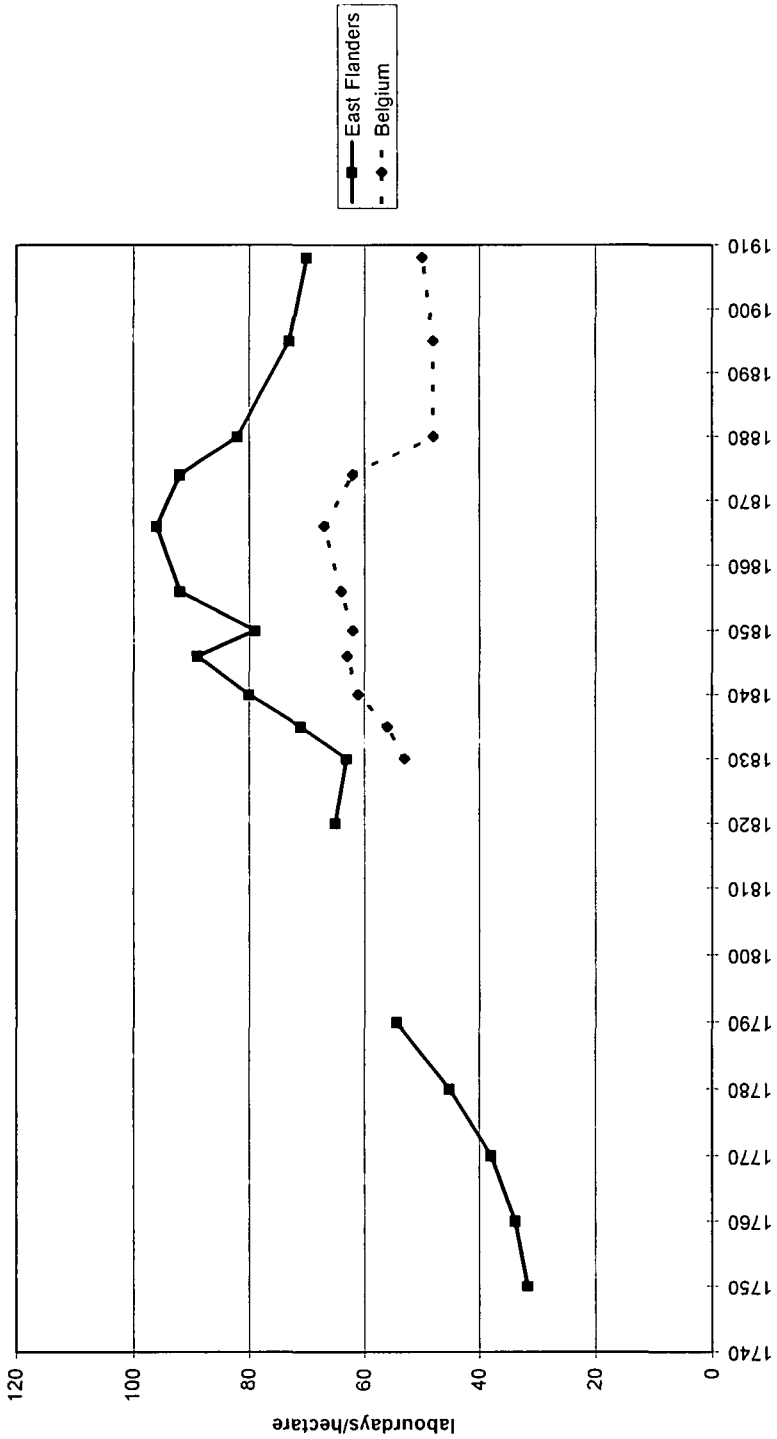


Figure 6. Lease prices of agricultural land, 1750–1910 (labour days/hectare)

A clearer insight into the social relations on the real estate market can only be gained by means of a micro-analysis of the data from the land register within one (or a few) communities. The advantage of this method is that we can break down these data to the level of individual households and that they can be related to social and economic relations on a local and regional scale. This advantage becomes a disadvantage, however, if one wants to analyse structures and processes within a larger framework. In addition, the number of comparable variables is limited. On the basis of the micro-investigations available, I collected data about four crucial variables (Vanhaute, 1996).

Around 1835, 25 to 40% of the families in the East and West Flemish countryside owned property *within* their place of residence. Low ratios are found in the proto-industrial region to the west of Gent, more specifically towards Kortrijk, whereas to the east of the city (Land of Waas and Land of Aalst) we can observe higher values. However, most land in rural villages – 60 to 75% – was owned by non-residents. If we move further to the east, the proportions indicate a break between the urban agglomerations on the axis Antwerp, Mechelen, Brussels, Leuven and the countryside of the Campine region. Whereas in the first region, proportions were recorded that are comparable to those in Inner Flanders (the share of allochthonous property is even higher), the Campine region reveals an entirely different picture. Over two thirds of the families had property in their own municipality. Land ownership by non-residents was limited to a maximum of one third of the area.

The shifts that took place in the further course of the nineteenth century ran parallel to those in the structure of the farms: the loss of autochthonous property was greatest in those villages where property proportions had been most favourable in the beginning of the century. This was most striking in the Campine region east of Antwerp and in the Flemish countryside east of Gent. In the course of the previous century, villages in these regions lost many plots of land to non-resident owners, which often coincided with a sharp increase in the number of families without any property. Thus, in these regions too, the group without property constituted the largest population group at the end of the century. The process of proletarianising was most marked in the region of Antwerp and Brussels, especially as a result of an expansion of the urban agglomeration and its concomitant influence. The ratios in Limburg confirm that this peripheral region had been able, at least for the while, to escape from this development. Summarising, we can conclude that in the course of the ‘long’ nineteenth century the position of autochthonous property either deteriorated considerably or remained stable at a very low level. When the share of the residents had already been reduced sharply in the eighteenth or early nineteenth century, there were only very few changes to this situation after 1850. In municipalities where a majority of the population still had property in their place of residence large negative shifts occurred. In just a few decades’ time, many households lost their property, mainly to non-residents.<sup>10</sup>

### High rents

An interpretation of property relations should take into consideration the returns of the land. How big were they and where did they go to? I calculated land prices, the ratio

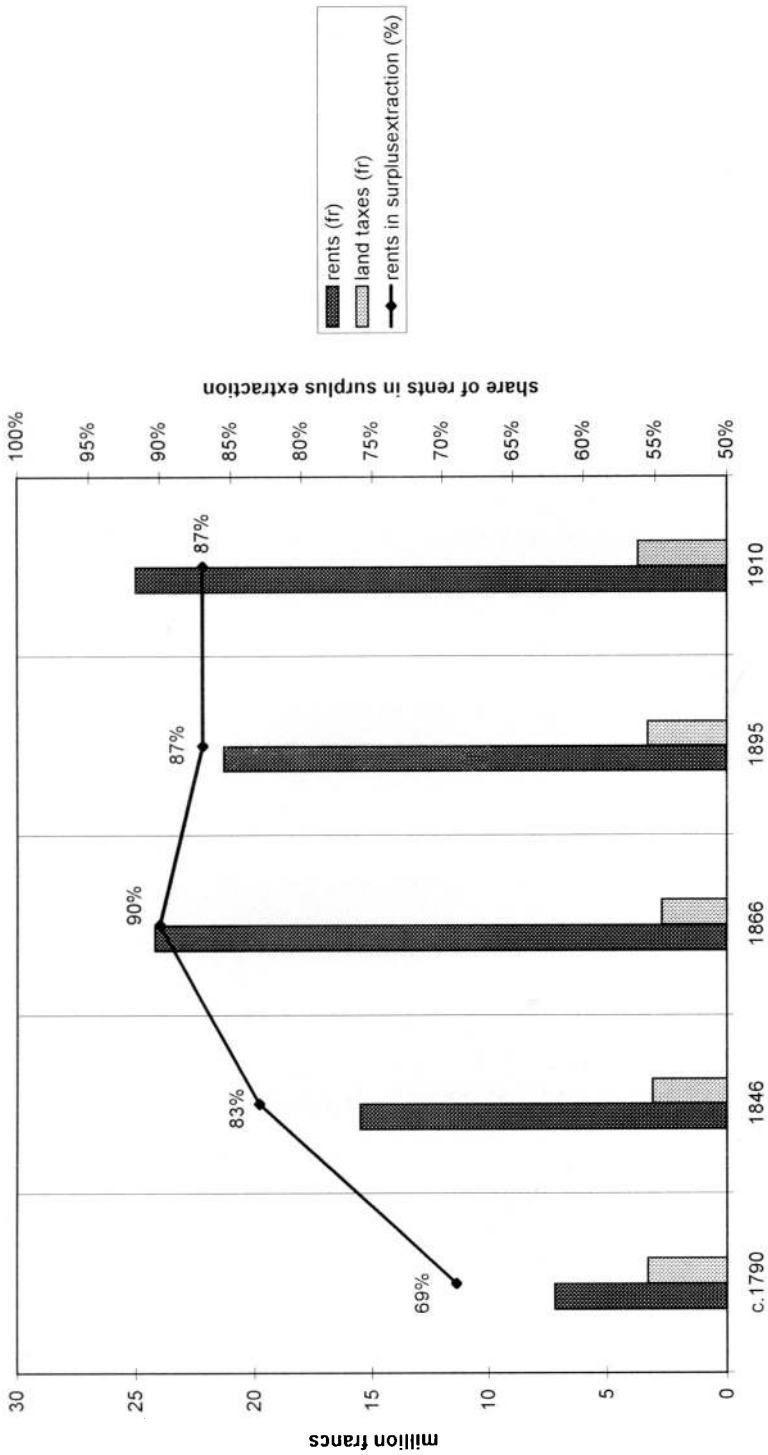


Figure 7. Weight of taxes and leases on agricultural land in East Flanders, c. 1790–1910

between taxes and private ground rents, and profit rates. Figure 6 shows the development of the real leases on farm land.<sup>11</sup>

In 1750 one had to earn 30 daily wages in order to lease an 'average' hectare of agricultural land in East Flanders. This figure rose to over 60 days in the 1820s and over 90 days in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Belgian averages show a maximum of 65 daily wages in the 1870s. In the course of the last three decades before World War I the real lease prices dropped to a national average of 50 daily wages. The relation between the parcelling-out of the lands and the high rent prices is quite obvious. Seebohm Rowntree calculated that it was twice as expensive to rent land in Belgium as in Great Britain. The explanation for this, he continued, should not be looked for in the natural fertility of the soil, or in the population density, but in the high and ever increasing number of family farms in Belgium (Seebohm Rowntree, [1910]: 150–4).

Another method of converting nominal prices into actual values is the calculation of the value of land in equivalents of grain. These are then related to the gross yields of the land so as to be able to express the rent as a percentage of the gross yields.<sup>12</sup> I did this exercise for East Flanders and came to the striking conclusion that from the mid-eighteenth to the early twentieth century, the share of the lease in the gross return remained virtually stable: 33% of the gross yield of rye. In other words, during the whole of this period one third of the yield of rye had to be sold in order to pay for the rent of one hectare of land. This indicates that the increase in rent closely followed the increase in the yields of the land.<sup>13</sup> If this was more than just a coincidence – which I think it was – it suggests that there was an actual 'price policy'. This was based on a cost-benefit analysis or, in other words, it took into account the (growing) opportunities of the agricultural enterprise. Changes in the property relations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries can hence be viewed from a different perspective. Rather than being the result of 'anonymous' market processes, they were the result of a well-considered 'policy' of the landowners.

Taking into account the high share of leasehold land as well as the high rents in Flemish agriculture, we may expect a high flow of capital from agriculture into the hands of private landowners and investors. In Belgium in 1846, 87% of the combined surplus extraction went to the landowners. Scarcely 13% flowed into the treasury in the form of taxes. In the second half of the century, the proportion between leases and taxes became even more distorted. Between 1866 and 1910 leases took up 92% of the payments. Calculations for East Flanders show that the proportions in the second half of the nineteenth century were the result of a long-term development.

Strikingly, the nominal value of the land taxes at the end of the eighteenth century, was nearly the same as that in the second half of the nineteenth century (see figure 7). Could this be an indication of a 'psychological' upper limit, expressed in terms of money? Most notable, however, was the sharp increase of the value and share of the leases. At the end of the eighteenth century, 31% of the surplus extraction still flowed into the treasury. After 1850, it was hardly more than 10%. In the middle of the eighteenth century, the proportion is believed to have been 50/50 still (Vandenbroeke, 1981: 158).

The productivity profits which were made in eighteenth–nineteenth century Flemish agriculture were entirely pruned away by private landowners. This sharply contrasts



with the position of the government, which conceded ever more ground.<sup>14</sup> The direct capital transfer from agriculture to private owners can be estimated at 18% of the gross returns of the entire agricultural sector in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, rising to 25% in the years 1866–1880. In 1895–1910 the ratio is again 20%.<sup>15</sup> In nineteenth-century East Flanders too, this surplus transfer fluctuated between 20 and 25% of the gross agricultural production (Kint, 1989: 307–312). This is twice the level of the third quarter of the eighteenth century.<sup>16</sup>

This is not a satisfying explanation for the massive ambition to invest in agricultural land, however. To that end, we have to know the profit rate. A first variable is the land rent, the direct return on capital of landlords via rents. The land rent is expressed as a relation of lease to sales prices. In Flanders this figure fluctuated around 2.7% until the end of the nineteenth century, and between 3 and 3.2% in the period between 1895 and 1910. In the interbellum period, the proportion dropped back to approximately 2 to 2.5% (Lamartine Yates, 1940: 210). A second source of profit was the increase in prices of land, the surplus value of land. In the period between 1830 and 1880, sales prices increased by an average of 1.4% a year, between 1895 and 1910 by 1.8% a year. Hence, the total gross return of landowners rose to approximately 4% a year before 1880 and to 5% after 1895. After the payment of land taxes, net profits were lower, of course. Yet, this cannot have made much of a difference (at a rough estimate 10% of the gross return), as a result of the low direct land taxes and the low interests on for example mortgages.<sup>17</sup> All in all, nineteenth-century landowners obtained good returns, especially if we take into account the low risk factor of this type of investment.

### **In the worst of all situations**

In nineteenth-century Flanders, the rural real estate market opened up further, especially in the rather peripheral regions where property relations had previously been relatively stable. This had a double effect. On the one hand the area was parcelled out further, which promoted small-scale property. On the other hand, this led to an increase in the number of families without any property. Regions such as the Antwerp Campine, which was incorporated in the national and international economy at a heightened pace, lost a great deal of autochthonous property, while regions where proletarianisation was already the norm, could not recover lost ground. Consequently, in many regions of the nineteenth-century Flemish countryside the number of proletarian households exceeded that of families with a property title.

The relation between these specific patterns of fragmentation of the land and property of the land made several nineteenth-century commentators take up their pen. As a shrewd observer put it in the early nineteenth century:

In Flanders, people do the opposite [of what is customary in England, EVh]: 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, who often want to increase their own small usage. This is often the case in densely populated areas, where the spinning wheel and the loom are most in action; as a result, the landlord has to put less effort in the maintenance of his buildings, and obtains a better return of his lands. (Van Aelbroeck, 1823: 282).

According to Emile Vandervelde 'la décadence de la propriété paysanne' was a symbol of the accelerated erosion of the older income strategies that were integrated in a local and regional economy (Vandervelde, 1900, mainly 265–323). In doing so, he drew attention to the disappearance of traditional tools of resistance against proletarianisation (property, common rights, domestic industry) and to the substantial changes in the household income formation as a result of the establishment of the capitalist method of production. Much less evidence could be furnished by socialist militants, however, for the capitalist theory of concentration, *la thèse collectiviste*. The expropriation of an ever greater number of Flemish families did not go together with a substantial increase of large private estates.

And yet, the land owner is at the centre of this story. This becomes clear if we return to the central research question: what was the driving force behind the combined movement of extreme fragmentation of the land, loss of property, and the increase in lease prices? External explanatory factors are not satisfactory, as has been pointed out by Emile Vandervelde: 'ce qui tue la propriété paysanne, c'est bien moins telle ou telle cause, spécialement déterminée – lois successorales, infériorité technique, matériel défectueux – que le développement tout entier de la société bourgeoise, du mode de production capitaliste.' (E. Vandervelde, 1900: 292). Thus, the legislation regarding inheritance promoted an equal distribution among the children, but this does not suffice as an explanation for the long-term trend of parcelling-out of the land.<sup>18</sup>

At this point, the proprietor comes back into the picture. Similar to the land itself, the group of proprietors was very fragmented. Even in 1940 the Briton Lamartine Yates remarked that: '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 situation increased competition between landlords and stimulated a far-reaching parcelling-out of property so as to obtain the best possible price: '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 than if they were let 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).

I have discovered four important connections in my research: a) the relationship between the increase in nominal leases and the yields of the lands (in rye), b) the relationship between the increase in agricultural yields and the increasing pruning away of the surplus by private landlords, c) the relationship between the fragmentation of the farming acreage and the proportion of the leasehold, and d) the relationship between fragmented land use and a fragmented ownership of land. Each time, I can descry an active landlord in the background. By means of a conscious policy of property management and price-fixing, the production profits in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Flemish agriculture were systematically appropriated by the landlords. This is confirmed by Emile de Laveleye, without any doubt the shrewdest commentator on nineteenth-century rural economy in Belgium:

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. (E. de Laveleye, 1881: 451; see also E. Ducpétiaux, 1855: 211).

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 property, as de Laveleye put it, combined with small leasehold, in a country with a high population density, put the farmer 'in the worst of all situations' (E. de Laveleye, 1863: 238):

Without any 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 the brilliant harvests and the miserable existence of those who generate them. Thus, a large number of small landowners, without any direct interest in agriculture, superimposed on the even more numerous class of those who exploit the land, cash in without interruption rents that are as high as an excessively competitive system can bear. Here we have the sad reverse that is offered by the organisation of Belgian agriculture, especially in its richest parts. (*ibid*: 234)

In England a reverse movement took place in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The scale of farms increased, mini-farms became a marginal phenomenon, and many families lost their landed property as a result of the enclosure movement. Large farms could develop thanks to long-term leaseholds and moderate rents. The main part of the agricultural land was cultivated on lease (on average 85% in the nineteenth century), yet there were no notable tensions on the real estate market (Mingay, 1994: 35–8, 143–53). In England, the social costs of commercialisation were passed on to the landless labourers. It is not a coincidence that these tensions provoked a long series of rural riots in the first half of the nineteenth century. In Flanders, it is hard to find any evidence of a similar situation. Here, small farmers acted as a social buffer, pressed between the diverging interests of small-scale farming and small-scale property.

In 1979, Lis and Soly defended the theory that in eighteenth century Flanders the urban bourgeoisie, out of reasons of speculation, deliberately multiplied the number of small farms in the countryside (Lis and Soly, 1979: 173–175). Our research puts back this 'theory of speculation' in the center of both economic and social history in the southern part of the Low Countries. In other words: are we faced in Flanders with a specific application of the land rent theory of David Ricardo? In any case, here too, the wealth of Flemish agriculture was largely pruned away by the little productive class of landlords. The harder the Flemish smallholder laboured on his piece of land, the more the landlord gained. Thus, Flemish small-scale farming ended up in a true *cul de sac* in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In the past, Flemish husbandry was praised highly because of 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, de Laveleye remarked (1863: 50). And yet, with its extreme parcelling-out of the land, its large proportion of leaseholds, and its high lease prices, the Flemish agricultural system forced rural households into an extremely high input of labour and an extremely low standard of living.<sup>19</sup> 'C'est seulement grâce

un labour incessant que l'agriculteur peut vivre' (Seebohm Rowntree, [1910]: 51). A twofold competition lay at the basis of the demanding system of surplus extraction in nineteenth-century Flemish and Belgian 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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## Notes

1. This is all the more remarkable in view of the great importance of the land in former agriculture. In 1846 land constituted 88% of the total agrarian capital, in 1929 still 79%. At the end of the nineteenth century, the production factor land still absorbed a quarter of the gross revenues in agriculture. This sum was equal to the intermediary inputs (such as manuring, feed) and was much higher than that of paid labour (12/15%) and the total of write-downs and interests (4%). It is plausible that this share was still higher in the first half of the century (30/35%) (G. Bublot, 1957, 28; J. Blomme, 1993, 216–18).
2. One of the rare comparative studies about land ownership and land use also mentions the lack of reliable comparable data: Dovring, 1956: 148–56.
3. The exceptionally informative character of Belgian agrarian and cadastral registers is also recognised by foreign researchers, cf. Dovring, 1956: 38–42, 148.
4. We opt, if possible, for a division of the actual *cultivated area* (arable land and pasture land). Forests and uncultivated lands, which are leased out very rarely, are not included. This distinction can be made only from district level onwards (*arrondissements*); the municipal data are based on the total *useful (productive) area*.
5. The proportions have been aggregated on the basis of local case studies, cf. Vanhaute, 1993. I collected comparative data for 17 villages. In 11 of these villages, leaseholds increased substantially (at least 10%) between the (end of) the eighteenth and the middle of the nineteenth centuries. In 10 out of 13 villages, the portion of holdings in full ownership had decreased sharply (at least by 10% and often by 50%). The relative number of leaseholds rose in 12 out of 15 villages, in 8 of which by no less than 50%.
6. Which has not happened so far, cf. note 18.
7. Around 1870, 82% of the Belgian land was in private ownership, 10% was owned by municipalities, 3.5% by public institutions, and 1.3% by the state (de Laveleye, 1878, LXV).
8. I adopt the ratio of five owners for every nine articles, cf. Seebohm Rowntree.
9. Hence, the concentration of land ownership of 100 ha or more in one municipality was the criterion, which of course does not render a complete picture about the large landownership that was often split up over many villages. Thus, the figures represent minimal values.
10. Here, I cannot go into the mechanism of property loss. Both an active and a passive mechanism played a role. The first one is a result of the widespread system of rent constitution (the bourgeoisie trading land for redeemed mortgage, cf. Thoen, 2001). The second one is a spin off of an increasing number of rural families.
11. Leases of arable land and pasture land.
  - a) lease prices eighteenth century: Vandebroek, 1977:162; 1830–1895: agricultural censuses; 1908: Seebohm Rowntree [1910].
  - b) average daily wage of a male agricultural labourer: Vandebroek, 1977: 162; agricultural censuses 1846–1910.
12. Rye prices: Vandebroek, 1981: 138–9.
13. Lindemans too pointed at the close relationship between increasing lease prices and higher land productivity. He attached great importance to the generalisation of the culture of clover (Lindemans, 1952, I: 430).
14. In comparison to the previous century, the per capita land tax burden in the Flemish districts had been 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% for

the end of the eighteenth century, at 7% for the end of the nineteenth century, and at a mere 5.3% for the beginning of the twentieth century. These proportions were only half as high as in Great Britain and France (Vandenbroeke, 1981: 153–8; De Visschere, 1935: 102–3; Seebohm Rowntree, [1910]: 343).

15. The agrarian production according to the estimates of Gadisseur, 1973: 46. The ratios do not include transfers through the hiring of buildings and the surrounding yards. To calculate total capital transfers out of agriculture, our figures must be raised by 5 to 10% (see e.g. Kint, 1989: 307–12).
16. Production figures based on recent calculations of G. Dejongh.
17. Seebohm Rowntree estimated that in the early twentieth century 31% of the agricultural land was mortgaged, the total mortgage being 13.5% of the value of the mortgaged land and less than 5% of the value of all the land. These figures seem to have been considerable lower than in England, where mortgage debts on landownership are thought to have amounted to 50% of the selling value of all properties (Seebohm Rowntree, [1910]: 52–5; de Laveleye, 1878: CX–CXIV).
18. According to Seebohm Rowntree, the heirs often avoided the splitting up of farms by means of buying-out operations. Furthermore, the generally prevailing legislation cannot explain the big regional differences. (Seebohm Rowntree, [1910]: 114).
19. It is even likely that, in spite of the higher yields of the land, labour productivity dropped, at least until the last quarter of the nineteenth century (cf. Thoen, 2001).