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Janet L. Polasky

University of New Hampshire, Durham, Janet.Polasky@unh.edu

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Transplanting and Rooting Workers in London and Brussels: A Comparative History*

Janet Polasky
University of New Hampshire

Teeming, chaotic, and congested cities troubled reform-minded British and Belgian observers at the end of the nineteenth century. Reformers in the first two industrialized nations of Europe recognized that they faced a common crisis. Industrial production required a concentrated labor force, but the ever-increasing number of workers and their families who huddled in blind alleys and rookeries threatened urban order. The tumbledown tenements and malodorous hovels, hidden from light and the gaze of passers-by, frightened the middle class. There epidemics and debauchery were spawned, and criminal conspiracies and rebellions bred.

The British and the Belgians watched each other as they struggled to control the working class sheltered in their troubled cities. Reformers on both sides of the Channel shared dreams of a respectable working class residing outside a reconfigured urban space. The Belgians and the British alike adopted residential dispersion as the solution to their shared crisis of urban overcrowding. Toiling masses by day, Belgian and British workers and their families would be separated each night in individual cottages spread through the countryside.

Neither the Belgian nor the British reformers expected these residential patterns to develop or to stay in place on their own. Despite the entrenched liberal, laissez-faire convictions that checked the growth of government in nineteenth-century Belgium as well as Britain, the reformers introduced strategies of government intervention. The Belgians planned to root the laborers in their an-

* Theodore Barker, Martin Daunton, Bruno De Meulder, Eliane Gubin, Suzy Pasleau, Jean Puissant, Jean Stengers, Patricia Van den Eeckhout, Bart Vanderherten, Herman van der Wee, and Leen Van Molle provided advice as I explored the archives. I would also like to thank Martin Daunton, Jeffry Diefendorf, Laura Frader, Eliga Gould, Nancy Green, Nicoletta Gullace, J. William Harris, Patricia Hilden, Aline Kuntz, William Lyons, Alexander Murphy, Donald Reid, Mary Rhiel, Lucy Salyer, Mary Stadel, Laurel Ulrich, the late Gordon Wright, and four anonymous readers for *The Journal of Modern History* for their helpful comments on the all too numerous drafts of this article. I presented an earlier version of this article to the Faculty Seminar of the History Department at the University of New Hampshire. I am grateful to my colleagues for their comments. Initial research was funded by grants from the University of New Hampshire and a Fulbright Research Fellowship to Belgium.

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cestral villages by subsidizing daily travel on workmen's trains. The British built garden suburbs for the artisans and elite workers outside of the overcrowded cities. Their pioneering transportation and housing schemes redefined the role of the state between 1869 and 1914.

Although they are not the usual subjects of historical comparison, in fact nineteenth-century Belgium and Britain were often linked by contemporaries who compared the first two industrialized, urbanizing societies. The Belgians looked to Britain where "the transformation began" as they struggled to deal with the overcrowding of their cities wrought by the industrial revolution. Belgian Socialist Emile Vandervelde prefaced his study of "the rural exodus" in Belgium with a vivid depiction of London, "the gigantic city . . . attracting and consuming" rural laborers with "its network of iron rails that projected into the distance like tentacles."¹ In the last third of the century, Belgian reformers sensed keenly that where Britain was going, Belgian cities might soon follow. The population of the administrative county of London grew from 959,310 in 1801 to 2,363,341 people in 1851, increasing by another million people, or 34 percent, between 1861 and 1881. The city of Brussels also experienced its most significant population growth in the first half of the nineteenth century, with the population rising from 66,000 in 1801 to 150,244 in 1856.² Both capitals reached what contemporaries identified as saturation points in the second half of the nineteenth century. The suburban rings of the two cities subsequently absorbed the influx—the Brussels suburbs or "faubourgs" mushrooming from 142,164 residents in 1866 to 328,953 in 1890 and London's ring of suburbs growing from 414,226 residents in 1861 to 1,405,852 in 1891.³ Despite the comparable increase in the density of their two capitals in the last third of the nineteenth century, contemporaries readily acknowledged the differences that distinguished Brussels from London. London's population and built territory dwarfed Brussels.

The manufacturing centers of northern England and southern Belgium surpassed Brussels and London in industrial output, but it was the menace of urban disorder in the two capitals that commanded contemporary attention.⁴

¹ Emile Vandervelde, *L'Exode rural et le retour aux champs* (Brussels, 1901), p. 45.

² J. N. Tarn, "French Flats for the English in Nineteenth-Century London," in *Multi-Storey Living*, ed. A. Sutcliffe (London, 1974), pp. 19–40; Paul Meuriot, *Des Agglomérations urbaines dans l'Europe contemporaine* (Paris, 1898), p. 160, *Les Recensements de 1910* (Brussels, 1912); County of London, *Census of London 1901* (London, 1903); and Omer Tulippe, *Atlas de Belgique, Planche 23* (Brussels, 1962).

³ Meuriot, *Les Recensements de 1910*.

⁴ On the importance of capitals, see Anthony Sutcliffe, "Environmental Control and Planning in European Capitals, 1850–1914: London, Paris, and Berlin," in *Growth and Transformation of the Modern City*, ed. Ingrid Hammarstrom and Thomas Hall (Stockholm, 1979), pp. 71–73; and Ken Young and Patricia Garside, *Metropolitan London*

In this article, I will focus on Brussels and London rather than attempting to survey Belgian and British housing and transportation reforms in general.⁵ I have chosen the municipality rather than the nation-state as my unit of comparative analysis.⁶

My comparative study of urban reform in Brussels and London begins with an investigation of the shared Belgian and British fears of urban overcrowding. Historians Martin Daunton, Colin Pooley, Nicholas Bullock, and James Read have identified common perspectives on public health and poverty that underlay housing reform movements in France, Britain, Germany, and the smaller European societies.⁷ Like their counterparts throughout Europe, reformers in Brussels and London concluded that overcrowded, frenetic, and filthy cities bred the chronic poverty that stunted the urban working class.⁸ The Belgian and British reformers shared a common understanding of the urban problems that threatened their society at the end of the nineteenth century.

Reformers in Brussels and London adopted two distinct solutions to their shared crisis. They addressed their fears of urban overcrowding and the degradation of the working class with very different programs of governmental intervention. The differences in their governmental strategies intrigued the reformers. With their privately owned, competing railways, the British monitored the development of the national Belgian railway scheme that allowed laborers to reside in rural villages while they worked in urban factories and mines. At the same time, the private-property-respecting Belgians visited the innovative housing estates constructed by British municipalities, philanthropists, and private builders for skilled workers and artisans on the suburban

(London, 1982), p. 1. When Fernand Braudel dismissed the economic significance of the capitals, he failed to acknowledge the role of the service sectors in generating economic prosperity and overlooked the manufacturing that developed in Brussels as well as London. For summaries of this economic activity, see Roy Porter, *London: A Social History* (Cambridge, 1995); and Jean Puissant and Michel De Beule, "La première région industrielle belge," in Arlette Smolar-Meynard and Jean Stengers, *La région de Bruxelles* (Brussels, 1989), pp. 262–91.

⁵ While I recognize the importance of housing schemes in cities such as Birmingham and Verviers, the constraints of an article make such a wider investigation impossible.

⁶ See Nancy Green on the choice of the unit of analysis for comparative study. Nancy Green, "L'histoire comparative et le champ des études migratoires," *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 45, no. 6 (1990): 1337.

⁷ M. J. Daunton, ed., *Housing the Workers: A Comparative History, 1850–1914* (London, 1990); Colin G. Pooley, ed., *Housing Strategies in Europe, 1880–1930* (London, 1992); and Nicholas Bullock and James Read, *The Movement for Housing Reform in Germany and France, 1840–1914* (Cambridge, 1985). See also Michael Ball, Michael Harloe, and Maartje Martens, *Housing and Social Change in Europe and the USA* (New York, 1985).

⁸ See Gareth Stedman Jones's discussion of the theory of degeneration in Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London* (Oxford, 1971), p. 313.

fringe of London. The reformers in London and Brussels assumed that they had much to learn from their divergent approaches to a common problem. The complex interplay of similarity and difference defines my comparative method as well.

The Belgian and British reformers translated each other's essays on urban degeneration, traveled back and forth across the Channel to tour projects, and cited innovations in housing and transportation for emulation in their own country. They looked to the distinct national traditions of taxation and property ownership and the relationship between municipal authority and national legislation, rather than citing the different size and complexity of the two cities, to explain their divergent paths of urban reform. My locally focused comparative study will suggest that it was the complex and evolving relationship between national and municipal authorities that led to the adoption of different reform strategies for reasons that at the time seemed pragmatic.

My investigation of these different approaches to urban reform is framed within the context of recent work by comparative historians and sociologists on the divergent evolution of welfare systems in Europe and the United States before the First World War. These social scientists have focused on national political differences, contrasting the strategies and support of policy-making groups and institutions in two societies to explain the divergent course of governmental reforms. For example, Susan Pedersen has investigated why, even though the French and the British faced "the same problem of the lack of fit between wages and family needs," the French adopted a system of family allowances while the British held to "'a male breadwinner' logic."⁹ Comparing maternal and infant health politics in France and the United States between 1890 and 1920, Alisa Klaus has explored the "political circumstances specific to each nation" to understand why, even though the American women's movement was stronger, the French government first extended greater entitlement to women.¹⁰ And Theda Skocpol and Ann Orloff have investigated why Great Britain pioneered industrial accident insurance, disability coverage, old age pension, and health and unemployment insurance while the United States took only the smallest of steps toward building a welfare system.¹¹ Like these "con-

⁹ Susan Pedersen, *Family, Dependence, and the Origins of the Welfare State: Britain and France, 1914–1945* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 413.

¹⁰ Alisa Klaus, *Every Child a Lion: The Origins of Maternal and Infant Health Policy in the United States and France, 1890–1920* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1993), p. 283.

¹¹ Ann Shola Orloff and Theda Skocpol, "Why Not Equal Protection? Explaining the Politics of Public Social Spending in Britain, 1900–1911, and the United States, 1880s–1920," *American Sociological Review* 49 (December 1984): 726–46; Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992); Dietrich Rueschemeyer and Theda Skocpol, *States, Social Knowledge, and the Origins of Modern Social Policies* (Princeton, N.J.,

trast-oriented comparative histories,” this article will ask why reformers with the same ideology confronting shared urban problems set out on such different paths of government intervention and reform.¹² Both sets of urban planners expected that the construction of housing and the provision of adequate transportation would diffuse the urban overcrowding that threatened their capitals. How then did their pioneering government reforms create the unique demographic patterns of a suburban British working class residing in subsidized housing estates and a densely populated Belgian countryside from which workers traveled daily on subsidized trains?

My resolution to this comparative puzzle follows the lead of two labor historians who focus on “comparison as similarity.”¹³ In *Manufacturing Inequality: Gender Division in the French and British Metalworking Industries, 1914–1939*, Laura Lee Downs has underlined the parallels in the gender-based response of French and British employers that prevailed “despite differences in political culture, in industrial organization, even in level of industrial development.”¹⁴ Nancy Green’s *Ready to Wear and Ready to Work* has demonstrated that the garment industry was “globally more similar across space than different, in spite of varying rhythms of development and different perceptions of the industrial ‘other.’”¹⁵

Although the British and Belgian reformers followed different paths, they were guided by the same goal of housing the respectable working classes amidst greenery beyond the urban capital. The workmen’s trains together with housing developments resulted in similar social patterns. The Belgian and the British reformers dispersed the families of the skilled workers beyond the urban centers. The residuum remained behind, squeezed among the urban monuments and wide boulevards. Marginally employed and dependent on local labor markets, they continued to squat in their hovels, while the construction workers, bookbinders, metal workers, and bakers commuted daily through their midst to reach their urban work sites. Ultimately, the government-sponsored mobility and the rehousing of workers in these two industrialized societies restructured urban space in remarkably similar ways.

Similarity and difference are intertwined in my comparative analysis just as they were interwoven in the understanding of the reformers themselves. The

1996); and Ann Shola Orloff, *The Politics of Pensions: A Comparative Analysis of Britain, Canada, and the United States, 1880–1940* (Madison, 1993).

¹² Theda Skocpol and Margaret Somers, “The Uses of Comparative History in Macrosocial Inquiry,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22 (April 1980): 181.

¹³ Green, p. 1342.

¹⁴ Laura Lee Downs, *Manufacturing Inequality: Gender Division in the French and British Metalworking Industries, 1914–1939* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1995), p. 2.

¹⁵ Nancy Green, *Ready to Wear and Ready to Work* (Durham, N.C., 1993), pp. 123–24.

self-conscious and continuous interaction between the London and Brussels reformers allows me to write a comparative municipal history with a single narrative rather than alternating between competing national case studies.

“HOTBEDS OF FEVER AND VICE”

Observers in London and Brussels in the middle of the nineteenth century warned of the degeneration of the urban working class and the threat it posed. George Godwin, Thomas Beames, Henry Mayhew, and John Hollingshead, among other British authors, described the “hotbeds of fever and vice” infesting and threatening to spread through “this wealthy and luxurious city.”¹⁶ Belgians translated these works into French and Dutch.¹⁷ The official Belgian “Inquiry into the Condition of the Working Classes and Child Labor” of 1846 revealed the dank, cramped, airless chambers in which Brussels workers slept, ate, and died.¹⁸

These images rallied individuals and philanthropic institutions to action in London. The Charity Organization Society investigated, guided, and assisted the “deserving poor,” Octavia Hill’s bevy of lady rent-collectors oversaw moderately priced apartments in the heart of London, and the Peabody Trust and the East End Dwellings Company constructed housing blocks.¹⁹ The Brussels bourgeoisie shared British fears of uncontrolled urban growth and the resulting contagions of disease and revolt. However, there are remarkably few examples of charitable endeavors in Brussels during a period when philanthropy flourished in London.

Surveying the deleterious results of four decades of neglect, Belgian reformers in the 1880s asked how their forefathers could have observed the growing misery of the urban workers and yet failed to respond.²⁰ They sug-

¹⁶ George Godwin, *London Shadows: A Glance at the “Homes” of the Thousands* (London, 1854), p. 2.

¹⁷ Henry Roberts, “Efforts on the Continent for Improving the Dwellings of the Labouring Classes” (Florence, 1874).

¹⁸ *Enquête sur la condition des classes ouvrières* (Brussels, 1846).

¹⁹ For discussions of these projects see, among others, Sean Damer, “State, Class and Housing: Glasgow, 1885–1919,” in *Housing, Social Policy and the State*, ed. Joseph Melling (London, 1980); Enid Gaudie, *Cruel Habitations: A History of Working-Class Housing, 1780–1915* (London, 1974); Hugh Quigley and Ismay Goldie, *Housing and Slum Clearance in London* (London, 1934); Henry Roberts, *Improvement of the Dwellings of the Labouring Classes* (London, 1859); John Nelson Tarn, *Five per Cent Philanthropy: An Account of Housing in Urban Areas between 1840 and 1914* (Cambridge, 1973); and J. A. Yelling, *Slums and Slum Clearance in Victorian London* (London, 1986).

²⁰ Conseil supérieur d’hygiène publique, *Habitations ouvrières* (Brussels, 1887). The same questions are posed today as Belgian television commentators and newspaper

gested that, in Belgium, “the exaggerated respect for private property caused public authorities to tolerate the most glaring abuses.”²¹ It would be difficult to support their claim that the respect for private property was any less fervent in Britain than in Belgium. However, unlike the British philanthropists who sought to expand affordable rental options for the working poor, the Belgian bourgeoisie believed that frugal, hard-working laborers should aspire to home ownership.

Frustrated reformers in Brussels also suggested, with hindsight, that the unparalleled Belgian commitment to positivism had served to justify inaction by political leaders who counted, observed, and compiled facts endlessly before moving to action.²² Another part of the explanation for the dearth of Belgian counterparts to the British philanthropists lies in the differences between Protestant and Catholic benevolent traditions.²³ Many of the British philanthropists had been mobilized by evangelical benevolence societies. In Belgium, Catholic reformers channeled their efforts through Catholic organizations such as the Societies for Mutual Assistance and the workers’ clubs. Belgian welfare, like all of Belgian public life in the nineteenth century, was divided along ideological lines. Public health reformers such as E. Ducpétiaux debated the more conservative leaders such as Charles Woeste over the role of government and of individual initiative and employers’ paternal responsibility at national Catholic congresses in 1886, 1887, and 1890.²⁴

In fact, the British reformers were no more likely to advocate interference with “the laws of political economy” by offering charity as a long-term solution than the Belgians in the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s.²⁵ But for the short term, in

editors continue to probe the striking lack of volunteerism and of charitable contributions in their country.

²¹ Ville de Gand, *Proposition du Collège concernant la construction d’habitations pour les ouvriers* (Ghent, 1868).

²² De Camps, *L’évolution sociale en Belgique* (Brussels, 1890). Historian Patricia Hilden explains that, while other European governments met threats of unrest with reforms, the Belgian government instead appointed commissions to study the problems. Patricia Penn Hilden, *Women, Work, and Politics: Belgium, 1890–1914* (Oxford, 1993).

²³ Roger-Henri Guerrand, *Une Europe en construction: Deux siècles d’habitat social en Europe* (Paris, 1992).

²⁴ Charles Woeste, “Les Catholiques belges et les intérêts ouvriers,” *Revue générale* 65 (April 1897): 481–501; Charles Cambier, *Het Boek der goede Werklieden. Handboek van Voorzienigheid of Middelen tot Verbetering van den Toestand der Werkersklassen* (Ghent, 1887); E. Vliebergh, *De Boeren en de maatschappelijke Zaak* (Eerdegem, 1894), pp. 12–13; Paul Berryer, *De 1884 à 1900* (Bruxelles, 1900); Carl Strikwerda, *A House Divided: Catholics, Socialists, and Flemish Nationalists in Nineteenth-Century Belgium* (Lanham, Md., 1997); and Leen Van Molle, “Katholiken en Landbouwpolitiek in België, 1884–1914,” *Symbolae facultatis literarum et philosophiae lovaniensis*, series B/vol. 5 (Louvain, 1989).

²⁵ See, e.g., Bernard Bosanquet, *Aspects of the Social Problem by Various Writers*

response to the overwhelming urban crisis, women and men from the upper and middle classes struggled mightily to improve the lodging conditions of the respectable poor in London. The conviction and optimism of reformers such as Octavia Hill overcame the strong philosophical objections to “unnatural” intervention on her side of the Channel.²⁶

“THE HOUSE FAMINE”

In the 1880s, for a brief moment, the approaches of reformers in London and Brussels converged in response to the accelerating deterioration of their cities. Propelled by economic depression, threats of worker unrest, and the emergence of socialism, reformers on both sides of the Channel challenged the prevailing understanding of the relationship between poverty and morality.

Not to be outdone by the Belgian positivists, Charles Booth and a multitude of other British social scientists and activists set out to gather data on urban poverty in London.²⁷ They intended to measure poverty as well as to describe how the urban poor lived. Booth investigated the influence of the material environment on social activities. In particular, he pursued the connections between individual poverty and social conditions. Following Booth, legions of British visitors and observers categorized and classified the poor in the center cities. Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree studied York in 1901 and confirmed Booth’s findings about the poverty line. The “deserving poor” could be pulled up to the morality of the middle class, but below them, the residuum resided in “the hell of savagery.”²⁸

The British Royal Commission of 1884–85 collected evidence showing that, despite “the great improvement” accomplished by philanthropists over the preceding thirty years, “the evils of overcrowding, especially in London,” remained “a public scandal.”²⁹ Although the British Housing of the Working

(London, 1895); and S. Collini, “Hobhouse, Bosanquet, and the State: Philosophical Idealism and Political Argument in England, 1880–1918,” *Past and Present* 72 (1976): 86–111.

²⁶ Gauldie, p. 20; and Jones (n. 8 above), p. 196.

²⁷ Charles Booth, *Life and Labour in London* (New York, 1969). Reprint of 1889 edition. E. P. Hennock reminds us that the *Pall Mall Gazette* had undertaken a house-to-house survey of East London in the same month in which Booth launched his study. E. P. Hennock, “Poverty and Social Theory in England: The Experience of the 1880s,” *Social History* 1 (1976): 67–91. See also Rosemary O’Day and David Englander, *Mr. Charles Booth’s Inquiry* (London, 1993); T. S. Simey and M. B. Simey, *Charles Booth, Social Scientist* (London, 1960); and Martin Balmer, Kevin Bales, and Kathryn Kish Sklar, *The Social Science Survey in Historical Perspective, 1880–1940* (Cambridge, 1991).

²⁸ Robert A. Woods, cited by H. J. Dyos, “The Slums of Victorian London,” *Victorian Studies* 11, no. 1 (September 1967): 18.

²⁹ London County Council, *The Housing Question in London* (London, 1900).

Classes Act of 1885 did not break the legislative ground envisioned by some members of the Royal Commission, subsequent legislation, including the Local Government Act of 1888 establishing the London County Council and the Housing of the Working Classes Act of 1890, encouraged unprecedented intervention by municipal authorities.³⁰

Shortly after riots shook the industrial centers of Belgium in 1886, the Belgian Parliament followed the British example and established a commission that asked many of the same questions as those pursued by the British Commission.³¹ The Belgian commissioners lauded the work of the British philanthropists, complaining that during the same decades the Belgians had “demolished, embellished, but, on the whole, from the point of view of sanitation, little improved.”³² The Belgians would have to act expeditiously to catch up with the British reforms.

The Catholic majority in the Belgian Parliament responded in 1889 by establishing Official Patronage Committees for Workmen’s Housing. Rather than building workmen’s housing themselves, the Patronage Committees were empowered to review plans submitted by private Housing Societies for loans from the semipublic Savings and Loan Bank (CGER). Their ultimate goal was not to provide rental housing like the British, but to offer housing for purchase by frugal working families. The promise of home ownership would “inculcate little by little into the working populations the special faculties that distinguish the bourgeois classes, the moral forces that have come through a long series of struggles, the traditions of a series of meritorious generations,” one of the reformers reasoned.³³ Ownership of a home inspired order and love of country. In particular, the Belgian Catholics believed that property ownership would root workers in their communities, forestalling a proletarian revolution.³⁴ Moreover, the Catholics relied on their rural Flemish base for votes.

As the Belgians embarked on a legislative scheme that relied on private enterprise to meet the housing challenge, a growing consensus in Britain ac-

³⁰ On the legislation, see Gauldie (n. 19 above); London County Council, *The Housing Question in London*; Quigley and Goldie (n. 19 above); Mark Swenarton, *Homes Fit for Heroes* (London, 1981); and Tarn, *Five per Cent Philanthropy* (n. 19 above).

³¹ Commission du Travail, *Questionnaire relatif au travail industriel* (Brussels, 1887). Emile Cacheux argued that the French and Belgian governments followed the British lead. Emile Cacheux, *Etat des habitations ouvrières à la fin du XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1891).

³² Commission du Travail.

³³ Hippolyte de Royer de Dour, *Les habitations ouvrières* (Brussels, 1889), p. 79.

³⁴ Ch. Cambier, *Réflexions sur la situation de la classe ouvrière* (Ghent, 1880), p. 15; and “Eigen Heerde is Goud weerd,” cited by Willy Steensels, “De Tussenkomst van de Overheid in de Arbeidershuisvesting: Gent, 1850–1914,” *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis/Revue belge d’histoire contemporaine* 3–4 (1977): 447–99.

knowledge that “private enterprise unstimulated, unregulated, unassisted, un-directed, has hopelessly failed.”³⁵ The majority of Belgians remained convinced throughout the period that the market would provide sufficient housing for the workers; British consensus on the housing question shifted over time from a reliance on the market to philanthropy to municipal action.³⁶

The newly established London County Council (LCC) took on the housing question as a pressing issue of public health in the last decade of the nineteenth century.³⁷ In this “city teeming with slums and rookeries, the outcome of generations of apathy and neglect,” Alfred Smith, head of the Housing Committee of the LCC explained, municipal intervention could coexist alongside private development.³⁸ There was more than enough work for both. The LCC appointed medical investigators, cleared unsanitary slums, built new blocks, including Boundary Street, and provided lodging houses to accommodate “the vast population of toilers.”³⁹ The Home Office and local authorities rejected an LCC proposal to build municipal housing itself for Hughes Fields, Deptford. However, the displacement of numerous poor tenants resulting from the construction of the Blackwall tunnel under the Thames caused the LCC to tackle again the question of municipal competition with private enterprise in 1892.

The Progressive majority elected to the LCC in 1898 resolved to construct cottages for laboring men and their families outside of London. Reformers had long suggested rehousing artisans and the regularly employed workers beyond the crowded central city, but their dreams had been thwarted by the lack of affordable transportation. In response to “the house famine,” Alderman William Thompson reasoned, if “half the workers could be induced to leave the congested districts of London, exorbitant rents would fall, overcrowding would be diminished, and the health of the people enormously improved with little or no cost to the rates.”⁴⁰ The land for Totterdown Fields in Wandsworth was purchased in January 1900 and building completed by June 1903. Subse-

³⁵ W. Thompson, *The Housing Handbook* (London, 1903), p. 9.

³⁶ C. M. Allan, “The Genesis of British Urban Redevelopment,” *Economic History Review* 28 (1965): 598–613.

³⁷ Henry Jephson, *The Making of Modern London: 21 Years of the London County Council: Progressive Rule, 1889–1917* (London, 1910); and Andrew Saint, “‘Spread the People’: The LCC’s Dispersal Policy, 1889–1965,” in Andrew Saint, *Politics and the People of London: The London County Council* (London, 1989).

³⁸ Alfred Smith, *The Housing Question* (London, 1900), p. 29.

³⁹ However, as Arthur Morrison recounted, the evicted tenants from the Bethnal Green and Shoreditch neighborhoods who could not afford the council rents within “the crude yellow brick of the barrack dwelling” crowded into rings of tenements surrounding Boundary Street. Arthur Morrison, *A Child of the Jago* (Chicago, 1896), p. 322.

⁴⁰ W. Thompson, “Powers of Local Authorities in the Housing Famine and How to Relieve It,” Fabian Tracts 101:19, as cited by J. A. Yelling (n. 19 above), p. 65.

quently, the LCC built two-storied cottages on the Norbury Estate near Croydon and developed the White Hart Lane Estate in Tottenham. The Old Oak Estate, lauded as the highest architectural achievement of the LCC, grouped houses around an open common area. In all, the LCC constructed 3,400 cottages and flats accommodating about 12,000 people.⁴¹ It should be remembered that, as Martin Daunton reminds us, although subsidized municipal housing prevailed in the long run as the solution to the British housing question, before 1914 most working-class housing was still supplied by private landlords.⁴²

The semiprivate Belgian initiatives served the same set of elite, regularly employed workers and artisans' families in Brussels as did the London County Council and British philanthropists.⁴³ Both housing schemes purposely segregated the "deserving poor" from the poorest, marginally employed families who remained behind, crowded in inadequate housing in the center of Brussels as well as London.

As envisioned by the Belgian and the British middle class, the workmen's homes beyond the city enveloped the affectionate parents and their children gathered around the hearth at the end of the work day. The editors of the Belgian journal *Le Cottage* rhapsodized in the first issue: "The home signifies . . . the habitation that is airy and joyous, surrounded by greenery in the middle of a big garden, truly healthy and comfortable, with morality brimming forth, the foyer where one lives happily and in the midst of which one is loved."⁴⁴ According to architects Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin, the LCC cottages similarly possessed "a simple dignity and beauty . . . which assuredly is necessary, not only to the proper growth of the gentler and finer instincts of men, but to the producing of that indefinable something which makes the difference between a mere shelter and a home."⁴⁵

H. D. Davies, who praised the LCC plans to remove "many of the labouring classes every night to more wholesome habitations and a purer air," complained "that many families are fixed to particular spots, . . . need to live near

⁴¹ Alan A. Jackson, *Semi-Detached London: Suburban Development, Life, and Transport, 1900–1939*, 2d ed. (Didcot, Oxon, 1991), p. 33.

⁴² Martin Daunton, *House and Home in the Victorian City: Working-Class Housing, 1850–1914* (London, 1983).

⁴³ For lists of occupations, see *Moniteur des comités de patronage et des sociétés d'habitations ouvrières* (December 10, 1893), and London County Council, *Housing of the Working Classes in London* (London, 1913), p. 158. Unfortunately, the Brussels list of residents in Ixelles housing does not provide numbers and the London list does not differentiate according to the housing development, so that lodging houses are included as well.

⁴⁴ "Notre programme," *Le Cottage* 1 (June 1903). The Belgians adopted the English word "home" without translating it into Dutch or French.

⁴⁵ Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin cited by Susan Beattie, *A Revolution in Housing: LCC Housing Architects and Their Work, 1893–1914* (London, 1980), p. 89.

their jobs, . . . have wives who work as charwomen or washerwomen, and . . . boys and girls [who] obtain little odd jobs whereby they eke out the week's income."⁴⁶ These marginally employed workers continued to dwell in the jumble of overcrowded tenements, where they remained as symbols of disorder. They were the so-called residuum, abandoned as beyond hope by both the British and the Belgian schemes. They attracted little attention from reformers in either Brussels or London.

The outcomes of the British and Belgian housing reforms were remarkably similar, but the strategies for achieving them differed dramatically from Brussels to London, a fact recognized by contemporaries who met regularly at international congresses on workmen's housing. One Belgian delegate to the London Congress of 1907 took an excursion to visit the cottages and blocks built for workers in and around London. "Observing these miracles and seeing the results, our delegates naturally asked what were the causes of this incredible development and the extraordinary efflorescence," he reported to his colleagues in Belgium.⁴⁷ Over the years, other Belgian housing reformers, including Mayor Charles Buls of Brussels, visited the LCC estates. They rarely speculated on the adaptability of municipal housing schemes to Brussels.⁴⁸ Despite the long Belgian tradition of municipal autonomy, few Belgian Liberals and Catholics considered "municipal socialism" of the British variety an acceptable alternative to private initiative stimulated by national regulation on their side of the Channel. Construction by local governments would disrupt the balance of supply and demand, driving private builders out of Brussels, they reasoned. Whereas the British empowered local authorities to compete with private enterprise, the Belgians established official institutions at a national level to facilitate loans from a central state bank to private builders and charitable societies.

It was therefore a question not just of government intervention versus reliance on private enterprise but also of the complex and evolving relationship between municipal and national authority in this period marked by the "polit-

⁴⁶ H. D. Davies, *The Way Out: A Letter Addressed (by permission) to the Earl of Derby, K. G., in which the Evils of the Overcrowded Town Hovel and the Advantages of the Suburban Cottage Are Contrasted* (London, 1861), pp. 16–17. See also B. Seebohm Rowntree and A. C. Pigou, *Lectures on Housing* (Manchester, 1914), p. 30.

⁴⁷ M. Harmant de Wasmès, Membre du comité de patronage de Boussu-Dour, Paturages, *Congrès national des habitations ouvrières et des institutions de prévoyance. Rapports et compte rendu des séances tenues à Bruxelles les 2, 3, et 4 juillet 1910* (Brussels, 1910).

⁴⁸ Fonds Charles Buls. III 20 A–D. "Habitations ouvrières et à bon marché," 1887–1914, Archives de la Ville de Bruxelles, Brussels. See also "Notes de M. Wilmart relative à la visite des logements collectifs et des maisons ouvrières à l'étranger," Ville de Bruxelles, *Bulletin Communal (1909)* (Brussels, 1911), pp. 606–19.

icization of social policy.”⁴⁹ British housing reformers advocated municipal action as an alternative to dependence on the state. According to historians Martin Daunton, Simon Szreter, and N. F. R. Crafts, after a period of low investment in the municipal infrastructure in Britain, local governments assumed a new legitimacy in the 1850s and 1860s as central taxation was depoliticized.⁵⁰ The London County Council, established on the rising tide of national reform, drew strength from its mandate to establish a municipal identity for London and to tackle the urgent social problems left untouched by national legislation.⁵¹ That never happened in Belgium, where the national government relied increasingly on indirect taxation. At the same time that the municipality was coming to be seen as the representative of the common civic good in Britain, Belgian distrust of city governments as dens of competing, self-interested politicians remained.⁵²

Until 1889, neither Brussels nor London had wielded power at a municipal level. Both cities lacked clear boundaries; London was simply “an amorphous lump,” in the words of H. J. Dyos.⁵³ These “geographical expressions” had no unitary government to define or defend their interests, either. The central commune of Brussels (the pentagon, as defined by its walls), like “the City” of London, had a jurisdiction covering only the small center of the ever-growing agglomerations. London’s Metropolitan Board of Works, chosen by the ves-

⁴⁹ Pedersen (n. 9 above), p. 47. During this same period, Pedersen contends, on questions of family policy, British reformers looked to the “high politics” of the national government for a solution.

⁵⁰ N. F. R. Crafts, “Some Dimensions of the ‘Quality of Life’ during the British Industrial Revolution,” *Economic History Review* 50, no. 4 (November 1997): 617–39; Simon Szreter, “Urbanization, Mortality, and the Standard of Living Debate: New Estimates of the Expectation of Life at Birth in Nineteenth-Century British Cities,” *Economic History Review* 51, no. 1 (February 1998): 84–112; and Martin Daunton in Valerie Braithwaite and Margaret Levi, *Trust and Governance* (New York, 1998). I am grateful to Martin Daunton for sharing his knowledge of municipal finance and initiative with me.

⁵¹ Young and Garside (n. 4 above); Sir George Laurence Gomme, *The London County Council: Its Duties and Powers according to the Local Government Act of 1888* (London, 1888); Jephson (n. 37 above); H. J. Dyos, “Greater and Greater London: Notes on Metropolis and Provinces in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” in *Britain and the Netherlands*, ed. J. S. Bromley and E. H. Kossmann (The Hague, 1971), vol. 4; and Susan S. Fainstein, Ian Gordon, and Michael Harloe, *Divided Cities: New York and London in the Contemporary World* (Oxford, 1992).

⁵² The progressive municipal spirit prevailed in London before the First World War, contemporaries explained, because “municipal life in London had been starved and frustrated for decades.” Sidney Webb, *The Work of the London County Council* (London, 1895).

⁵³ Dyos, “Greater and Greater London,” p. 94.

tries and district boards, created in 1855, had proved largely ineffective. No common administration united the central commune of Brussels with the other eighteen communes or “faubourgs.” The surrounding communes remained autonomous villages, linked by economic ties but separated by politics.

Self-government by the municipality was not an obvious response to the inability of the London vestries and the Metropolitan Board of Works’ inability to manage urban growth. The depth of London’s social problems as well as its mushrooming population and power worried provincial citizens.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, in 1889, progressive reformers succeeded in passing parliamentary legislation creating the London County Council. The Bruxellois were less successful, though no less energetic, in their appeals for union with the suburban communes.

Despite a century of attempts to annex the faubourgs to the central commune of Brussels, opposition from the national government and from the faubourgs prevailed.⁵⁵ Parliamentary leaders hailed the commune as the cornerstone of Belgian liberty and decried the centralization of power in the capital as a threat to the rest of the small nation. Fearing the ambitions of a strong Brussels mayor, the nineteen communes remained administratively separate, joined only informally by sporadic meetings of the mayors.

Initially, when the LCC operated on a nonpartisan basis, both Progressives and Moderates agreed on the importance of slum clearance. Subsequently, the Progressive majority (1898–1907) effectively organized the council to move beyond the housing obligations set by Parliament. These Progressives believed that municipal intervention would “provide an efficient collective response” to the social problems of housing and unemployment without “undue dependence on the state.”⁵⁶ The Municipal Reformers (formerly the Moderates) then continued the Progressive program until the First World War.

In contrast, Belgian national political agendas overwhelmed local affairs in the nineteen communal councils of Brussels. At one point, in exasperation, Brussels mayor Adolphe Max prefaced his urgent call for action with the

⁵⁴ Ibid. See also Young and Garside (n. 4 above).

⁵⁵ G. Jacquemyns, “Le problème de la ‘Cuve’ de Bruxelles de 1795 à 1854,” *Revue de l’université de Bruxelles* (1932): 347–75; Xavier Carton de Wiart, “Le problème des grandes agglomérations,” *La revue générale* 70 (December 15, 1937): 702–19; Pierre Gourou, “L’agglomération Bruxelloise: Eléments d’une géographie urbaine,” *Bulletin de la Société Royale belge de Géographie* 82, no. 1 (1958): 3–84; and Louis Verniers, *Bruxelles et son agglomération. De 1830 à nos jours* (Brussels, 1958). Belgian Socialists in particular called for the unification of the Brussels communes. Camille Huysmans, *Moniteur des comités de patronage et des sociétés d’habitations ouvrières* 415 (April 25, 1911).

⁵⁶ John Davis, “The Progressive Council, 1889–1907,” in Saint, ed. (n. 37 above), p. 27.

admonition: “On such questions, there should be no parties.”⁵⁷ But even a Brussels Council discussion of whether a proposed block of flats should have two or four stories stirred pronouncements on the dangers of collectivism (four stories), countered by Socialists’ denunciations of capitalist oppression (two stories). Wary of the relentless pitched ideological battles between the three political parties being waged at the municipal level, Belgians hesitated to invest their local governments with increased power.⁵⁸ On the Belgian side of the Channel, municipal building schemes therefore seemed to constitute an even greater threat to private initiative than did national legislation.

The urban historian Anthony Sutcliffe suggests that only “rarely do we fully appreciate the extraordinary ambition of specifically urban modes of intervention in economic and social process during a century in which the informed public was generally unsympathetic to administrative limitations of individual freedom.”⁵⁹ That municipal ambition seems all the more extraordinary in juxtaposition with the reluctance of Brussels reformers to follow the successful London example.

“UP BY THE WORKMEN’S TRAIN”

The comparative story of late nineteenth-century urban reform is more complicated than that told by historians of European housing, however. The Belgians did act to address the urban crisis, but on a national, not a municipal level. The most *laissez-faire* of all European governments intervened at the end of the nineteenth century to meet the challenge of urban overcrowding by harnessing the power of the state railway.

In 1869, Joseph Kervyn de Lettenhove, a Catholic deputy from the village of Ecloo, proposed the inauguration of a train service to transport “the industrious classes” between their homes in the countryside and employment in industrial centers. He explained that substantially reduced railway fares for workmen’s trains would halt the migration of working families from the countryside to the “large cities where they fall prey to the habits of corruption and disorder.” Each evening the workers would leave the cities, returning to

⁵⁷ Adolphe Max, Conseil Communal, *Moniteur des comités de patronage* (April 25, 1911).

⁵⁸ Louis Bertrand in Commune de Schaerbeek, *Construction d’habitations à bon marché par la commune* (Brussels, 1898). Louis Bertrand was one of the leaders in the municipal socialist movement in Belgium.

⁵⁹ See A. Sutcliffe, “The Growth of Public Interventions in the British Urban Environment during the Nineteenth Century: A Structural Approach,” in *The Structure of Nineteenth-Century Cities*, ed. J. H. Johnson and C. G. Pooley (London, 1982), p. 107.

“what the English call home,” to the moralizing influence of their wives and children in the countryside.⁶⁰

The Liberal minister of public works, Alexandre Jamar, supported the proposal. In a speech delivered the very next day in Parliament, he pledged that the government would organize “trains that will permit workers living in the countryside to return each evening to their residence and thus avoid the immoral influences of the large population centers.”⁶¹ No dissent disturbed the progress of the proposal through the Belgian Parliament and the ministry. The alliance of the Catholic deputy and the Liberal minister and the lack of debate over workmen’s trains in the politically charged atmosphere of late nineteenth-century Belgium is particularly noteworthy.⁶² A moderate, Jamar vigorously defended workers’ causes when he sat in Parliament. He was not an obvious ally for Kervyn de Lettenhove, a medieval historian with a reputation as an impenitent antiliberal polemicist and fierce combattant for ultraconservative causes.⁶³ The cooperation reflects a rare Belgian political consensus on the dangers of urban life as contrasted with the moralizing influence of the countryside.

The principal Belgian inspector of agriculture, Paul De Vuyst, drew the stark contrast between urban and rural environments, asking: “From the point of morality, do we even need to compare the city to the countryside? Here, there is clear air, moralizing work, watchfulness, and the encouragement of the family; [in the city] there is dirty air, disastrous promiscuity, loneliness in the midst of a world of indifferent and unknown strangers, evil examples, and, at every turn, the disastrous pressure of unhealthy temptations.”⁶⁴ Liberal and Catholic observers alike were convinced that peasants thrived in the wholesome rural environment, even if animals did occasionally share their housing.⁶⁵ Setting

⁶⁰ M. Kervyn de Lettenhove, *Annales parlementaires: Chambre des représentants, 1868–69* (April 21, 1869), p. 735.

⁶¹ M. Jamar, *Annales parlementaires: Chambre des représentants, 1868–69* (April 22, 1869), p. 765.

⁶² The lack of debate at the turn of the century is echoed today by a total historical neglect of the question. Since the publication of Ernest Mahaim’s monograph in 1910, the phenomenon of Belgian commuting has become such a part of everyday life that it goes unnoticed.

⁶³ Kervyn de Lettenhove had argued in Parliament three years earlier that: “The true mission of the government is to favor the development of local liberties and to appeal to individual initiative.” Joseph Kervyn de Lettenhove, *Annales parlementaires* (April 1, 1866) as cited by H. Kervyn de Lettenhove, *Le Baron de Kervyn de Lettenhove (1817–91), Notes et souvenirs réunis par un de ses enfants* (Bruges, 1900), p. 244.

⁶⁴ P. De Vuyst, *Le rôle social de la fermière* (Brussels, 1911), pp. 14–15.

⁶⁵ See, among others, L. Bertrand, *Le logement de l’ouvrier et des pauvres en Belgique* (Brussels, 1888); P. Thuysbaert, *Het land van waes. Bijdrage tot de geschiedenis der landelijke bevolking in de 19e eeuw* (Kortrijk, 1913); M. Mermillod, *Congrès des*

aside concerns about state interference in the economy, the Belgian government enacted workmen's fares to stop the dreaded "rural exodus" of laborers into the city.

A very tentative experiment with workmen's trains in London predated the Belgian parliamentary action. Six competing private British railways had laid tracks into central London termini between 1853 and 1885, demolishing entire working-class neighborhoods.⁶⁶ The British Parliament debated, but in the end it hesitated to legislate requirements that the private railways construct nearby replacement housing for the displaced workers. Instead, Parliament ordered the railway companies to offer reduced workmen's fares on their new suburban lines.⁶⁷

The British Parliamentary Select Committees on Artizans' and Labourers' Dwellings Improvement of 1881 and 1882 lauded the trickling migration out of London of skilled workers who rode the trains to the suburbs, but they noted the disparity in workmen's train service among the different private railways. In 1883, Parliament passed the Cheap Trains Act requiring all the railway companies to provide workmen's fares on trains running between 6 P.M. and 8 A.M. As compensation, the act provided a significant remission of the passenger duty paid by the railways.

Few Belgian workers took advantage of the new railway fares in the first years of operation. Only 14,233 daily workmen's tickets were issued in Belgium in 1870. But over the next four decades, the government constructed branch railroad lines linking rural villages in Flanders to the mines and heavy industries of Liège/Verviers and Charleroi, employers adapted their shifts to train schedules, and gradually more and more worker cars lined with wooden benches were coupled onto the Belgian trains. The government lowered fares on the trains in 1876, 1880, and 1897 and increased the range of the round-trip tickets from twenty to one hundred kilometers. Over 1 million workers' tickets were issued in 1889; by 1896 the number had more than doubled to 2,204,613 tickets.⁶⁸ More significant for comparative purposes, by 1900, 20 percent of all Belgian workers were commuting by train. Or, looked at another way, 43 percent of all travelers on the Belgian national railway used worker tickets in 1907.⁶⁹

oeuvres sociales. Liège, September 26–29 (Liège, 1886), pp. 130–31; M. le comte Goblet d'Alviella, *Annales parlementaires: Chambre des représentants, 1902–1903*: (January 22, 1903), p. 130; and E. Vliebergh, *De Boeren en de maatschappelijke Zaak* (Eernegem, 1894).

⁶⁶ H. J. Dyos, "Railways and Housing in Victorian London," *Journal of Transport History* 2 (1955): 14.

⁶⁷ C. E. Lee, *Passenger Class Distinctions* (London, 1946), pp. 49–58.

⁶⁸ Paul M. Olyslager, *De Localiseering der belgische Nijverheid* (Antwerp, 1947).

⁶⁹ Ernest Mahaim, *Les abonnements d'ouvriers sur les Lignes de Chemins de fer belges et leurs effets sociaux* (Brussels, 1910), p. 38.

In 1890, 257 workmen's trains operated daily between London and 270 suburban stations.⁷⁰ Workmen's trains ran from Enfield, eleven miles to the north of London, to Croyden, eleven miles south, and from Dartford, seventeen miles to the east, to Weybridge, nineteen miles to the west.⁷¹ While Brussels drew commuters from a national labor market, most rode trains from the nearby villages of Hal, Vilvorde, Mechelen, Ternath, Lebbeke, La Hulpe, Wavre, and Alost.⁷² The average daily commuter in Belgium traveled nineteen kilometers (or about twelve miles) as compared to the typical London worker, who commuted from suburbs six to eight miles from central London.⁷³

The Belgian Socialist Auguste De Winne rode the worker trains and conversed with the commuters, many of whom he found asleep on the hard wooden benches.⁷⁴ He interviewed laborers who left their homes to catch trains at 4 A.M. and who did not return until nine or ten in the evening. They ate their morsel of bread for breakfast in the train before falling back to sleep, and they consumed their dinner on the platform between trains. Many workers lived in villages one and a half hour's walk from the nearest train stations. Except in the summer, they trekked back and forth in the darkness.

Construction workers constituted 4,073 of the 9,233 workers traveling to Brussels in 1896. They came from Waterloo, Rixensart, Woluwe St. Pierre, Tervuren, Genval, Watermael, Boitsfort, Braine l'Alleud, and Rhode St. Genese.⁷⁵ Similarly, George Dew of the London Committee for the Extension of Workmen's Trains testified that many of the riders on the workmen's trains to London were employed in the building trades.⁷⁶ Like their Belgian counterparts, their places of employment shifted constantly. Without easily compa-

⁷⁰ The British railways provided statistics to Parliament on train rather than passenger miles. That makes direct statistical comparison between the Belgian and the British systems difficult. One economist complained: "In plain English our railway managers have landed us completely in the dark as to the passenger traffic." W. R. Lawson, *British Railways: A Financial and Commercial Survey* (London, 1913). However, the *Railway Gazette* responded to criticism of the British railways for not providing sufficient information by charging that the Belgian State Railways overburdened them with too many figures in their reports. *Railway Gazette* (February 25, 1910): 209.

⁷¹ London County Council Report on Workmen's Trains, *London Statistics* 2, no. 325 (1891-92): 299-317.

⁷² Mahaim, p. 80.

⁷³ H. J. Dyos, "Workmen's Fares in South London, 1860-1914," *Journal of Transport History* 1 (1953): 16; and Mahaim, p. 51. Again, it is difficult to compare statistically because the British counted trains rather than passenger miles. We know that 40 percent of all tickets issued at stations between six and eight miles from London were sold to workmen, as compared to 20 percent from stations in a twelve- to fifteen-mile radius.

⁷⁴ A. DeWinne, *A travers les Flanders* (Ghent, 1902), pp. 81-84.

⁷⁵ Mahaim, p. 67.

⁷⁶ George Dew, Select Committee on Workmen's Trains, *British Parliamentary Papers* (1904), p. vii.

rable numbers, qualitative evidence suggests that, in addition to construction workers, most commuters on workmen's trains to London were shoe and boot makers, bookbinders, bakers, and printers, while Brussels commuters included metal workers, textile workers, furniture makers, bookbinders, tanners, and employees in food processing, ceramics, and the chemical industries.⁷⁷

In contrast with Belgium, however, British workmen's service did not increase gradually and continuously in the decades before the First World War, nor was it widely accepted as socially necessary. Only as a result of sustained pressure from George Dew's National Association for the Extension of Workmen's Trains, the London Reform Union, and the London County Council did the British railways expand their workmen's train service. Working-class deputations as well as middle-class reformers persistently pressed the Board of Trade and Parliament to require the railways to run more trains at later morning hours for cheaper fares. The railways protested that trains that arrived in London after eight in the morning would add to the congestion of the commute hours and would drain passengers from the regular half-price trains.

The Great Eastern Railway ran so many of the workmen's trains into London, twenty-three out of a total of ninety-seven workmen's trains in 1883, that the London County Council dubbed it "the workmen's railway." And yet, explaining why he had allowed workers to take earlier afternoon trains home from London—a demand of many of the petitioners—the general manager, William Birt, betrayed the widespread company view of its passengers. He testified that when the workers congregated in great numbers on the train platforms in London, they frightened middle-class women who had been in London for a day of shopping. The workers "smoke a good deal, and in smoking they are apt to spit, and the platforms get in a very filthy state," he complained.⁷⁸ He had decided to run earlier workmen's trains to sweep the platforms clean of the workmen as quickly as possible, not to accommodate their schedules.

Other British railway directors openly voiced their preference for middle-class commuters. Unless the reduced-fare trains ran completely full, the British managers contended, they lost money. In contrast to the Belgian railway, which worked actively to increase ridership, the private British railways had always preferred to carry fewer passengers at higher fares. Contemporaries held up the British private railway companies and the state-owned Belgian railway as opposing poles in their comparisons of European rail service.

⁷⁷ Mahaim; *Les Recensements de 1910* (Brussels, 1912); Royal Commission on London Traffic: Report of the Royal Commission Appointed to Inquire into and Report upon the Means of Locomotion and Transport in London (London, 1905–6); and André-Claude Content, "L'habitat ouvrier à Bruxelles au XIXe siècle," *Belgische Tijdschrift voor nieuwste Geschiedenis/Revue belge d'histoire contemporaine* (1977): 501–17.

⁷⁸ Select Committee on Artizan's and Labourers' Dwellings Improvements, British Parliamentary Papers (1882).

In its 1897 report, the London County Council complained that “after eight years’ operation of the Cheap Trains Act, which was expressly intended as a remedy [for overcrowding] . . . the metropolitan railway companies have, as a whole, failed to carry out the intentions of the legislature, and have not fully acted up to their statutory obligations.”⁷⁹ The LCC figured that the mean rate per kilometer for travel with workmen’s tickets was .320 pence in London as compared to .127 pence in Brussels.⁸⁰ A group of commuting workers from Enfield grumbled: “Surely we are the most long suffering people in the world or the biggest fools” for putting up with the crowded trains that arrived in London hours before the opening of their places of employment.⁸¹

During the particularly cold winter of 1898–99, commuters from the London suburb of Edmonton signed petitions, assembled, and finally stormed barriers at their Great Eastern line station to secure later morning transport for workers. Women, whose shopkeeping jobs often did not begin until after nine, were among the most affected by the Great Eastern Railway’s insistence that workers who could not fit onto the 6:17 or the 6:21 A.M. trains should travel on even earlier trains.

Trackside observers for the London County Council estimated that 10 percent of the commuters on the workmen’s trains in 1899 were women. Although the railways were willing to include women within their definition of “workmen,” they refused to adjust their schedules to meet the women’s later morning starting hours.⁸² Much to the dismay of reformers, working women commuters not only left their homes before dawn; they were also forced to loiter in London on the streets around the stations, in coffee shops, and in churches for up to two hours every morning until their places of employment opened.⁸³

One Monday morning in January, when the company refused to issue all the assembled men and women tickets for the last workmen’s morning train from Edmonton, the commuters rushed the barrier—despite the contingent of police called by the company—knocked down the ticket collector and stormed the train. Four hundred commuters did the same the next day, January 24. They all piled off the train in Liverpool Street where they confronted the police.

⁷⁹ Workmen’s trains, General, CL/HSG/1/78, Greater London Records Office.

⁸⁰ “Third and Concluding Report of the Public Health and Housing Committee giving the results of a comparison of the cost of workmen’s and other privilege tickets on the London railways with those of the principal metropolitan cities on the continent.” LCC\MIN\7336 E 16, Greater London Records Office.

⁸¹ “The Workmen’s Trains: How They Defied the Act of Parliament,” *The Enfield Chronicle* (February 3, 1899): 1. See also, for an example of one among many grievances, Cockshoft, Great Northern Railway to Metropolitan Railway, October 14, 1881, RAIL 236 338 15, Public Records Office.

⁸² Andrew Bonar Law, Harry Samuel, Mr. Lough and Colonel Bowles, Select Committee on Workmen’s Trains (July 29, 1903), British Parliamentary Papers (1903), 7–8.

⁸³ CL/HSC/1/79, Workmen’s Trains, Misc. Printed Papers 1898–1902, London Reform Union and Great Eastern Railway Co., Greater London Records Office.

According to the *Enfield Chronicle*, “the struggle was a most exciting one— young girls fainting and women screaming in the awful pressure, while the platform was strewn with hats.”⁸⁴

In February, after discussions with members of Parliament and public meetings in Enfield and London, in what the *Enfield Chronicle* dubbed “The Battle of Edmonton,” skirmishes broke out again between the police and workers denied tickets for later trains. When one hundred police reinforcements met the Enfield train at Liverpool station, crowds of spectators joined the men and women leaving the trains. Part of the jeering crowd rushed the barriers set up by the railway. When one young man was seized by the police, the crowd, now numbering 2,000, attempted to rescue him. They failed. In the melee, a number of women were crushed by the stampeding crowd. The skirmishes continued the next day, with the added feature of the launching of lunch pails and tea cans as weapons. A local poet recorded the battle:

Half a loaf, half a ham,
Sandwich-men onward!
Into the railway yard
Edmonton thundered;
Up by the workmen’s train,
More than six hundred!

Lunches to right of them,
Tea-cans to left of them,
Hard-boiled eggs right on ’em,
Constables wondered!

Charged by the working men,
Pelted, and charged again!
Up came the City train;
Off went the victors then,
Carried to town, but no,
Not the six hundred.

—Star⁸⁵

When the question was taken up several months later in Parliament, two additional trains were ordered, but the workmen’s trains running to Edmonton remained an issue of contention for years as the number of workers in the Enfield-Edmonton area continued to grow, attracted by the newly constructed cheap working-class housing.⁸⁶ According to the Later Workmen’s Trains

⁸⁴ *The Enfield Chronicle* (January 27, 1899).

⁸⁵ *The Enfield Chronicle* (February 17, 1899).

⁸⁶ A notice of a public meeting called by Edmonton Workmen’s Trains Committee for October 7, 1901, to protest the Great Eastern Railway’s cancellation of one of the

Committee, many of the commuting residents of Edmonton were laborers who had formerly resided in Shoreditch.⁸⁷ Their local voice was clearly overwhelmed in Parliament by national shareholders' lobbies.

The Belgian expert on workmen's trains, Ernest Mahaim, told the British that they could not expect to match the success of the Belgian workmen's trains. The low fares and convenient service "must be understood as a natural consequence of State management, which aims less at a profit than at furthering the public good," he argued.⁸⁸ Keeping workers away from the cities at night had been defined as in the national interest, so the Belgian Parliament had adapted fares and schedules to induce workmen to commute. Economists in Britain and on the continent readily supported his analysis that state-owned railways served the public interest, while private railways sought profits for their shareholders.⁸⁹

In the beginning, the British Parliament had granted entrepreneurs the right to lay the lines and operate the trains. The British industrialists and politicians argued that the uniqueness of insular Britain dictated a "native solution."⁹⁰ They cast state ownership of the railways as foreign, as belonging on the bureaucratic continent.⁹¹ Throughout the nineteenth century, the British Parliament encouraged the competition of the private railways and monitored public interests from the sidelines.⁹²

additional trains is in LCC/MIN/7378 38, Greater London Records Office. See also Select Committee on Workmen's Trains, July 25, 1904, British Parliamentary Papers (1904), p. vii.

⁸⁷ Later Workmen's Trains Committee, Enfield, April 24, 1893, Public Health and Housing Committee Papers, January 1893–December 1894, LCC/MIN/7336 E 16, Greater London Records Office.

⁸⁸ Ernest Mahaim, "The Belgian Experience of State Railways" (London, 1912).

⁸⁹ James Hole, *National Railways, An Argument for State Purchase* (London, 1893); Edwin A. Pratt, *Railways and Nationalisation* (London, 1911), and *State Railways: Object Lessons from Other Lands* (London, 1907); H. Cattin, *Etat ou compagnies: Etude sur l'exploitation des chemins de fer* (Cognac, 1907); F. Ulrich, *Traité général des tarifs de chemins de fer* (Paris, 1890); and Ch. L'Evesque, *La mobilisation du travail et le transport des ouvriers par chemin de fer* (Paris, 1905).

⁹⁰ Henry Parris, *Government and the Railways in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1965), p. 12.

⁹¹ Timothy Alborn, *Conceiving Companies: Joint-Stock Politics in Victorian England* (New York, 1998), p. 250.

⁹² As most British rail historians note in their explanations of the hands-off policy, ninety directors of railways or auxiliary companies sat in Parliament in 1886. P. M. Williams, "Public Opinion and the Railway Rates Question in 1886," *English Historical Review* 67 (1952): 52–53, 70–71; and P. S. Bagwell, "The Railway Interest: Its Organisation and Influence, 1839–1914," *Journal of Transport History* 7 (1965–66): 83–84. Opposing the railway interest in lobbying Parliament was the Railway and Canal Traders' Association.

The “native” British solution was challenged repeatedly but unsuccessfully by reformers. In 1893, James Hole, one of the leading critics of private railway companies, asserted, “Few social questions have been more warmly contested than this:—whether the State should own the railways of a country, or if not own them, to what extent it should control them.”⁹³ The increasingly vocal British critics of the private British railways pointed to the expanding service and reasonable fares of the Belgian system.

Belgian legislators from the beginning had conceived of the railway as a national project to promote the commerce and industry of their small, newly independent nation situated at the crossroads of Europe. Belgian engineers G. De Ridder and P. Simons modeled their rail network on the British one, but they did not emulate its management. The Belgian government built the arteries of the network financed by government bonds beginning in 1834. Most historians of the Belgian railways explain state ownership not as an ideological choice but as wise pragmatism.⁹⁴ Belgian politicians wanted to keep the railways out of the hands of foreign, especially British, capital. Dependent on export, the small country relied on the national railway to guarantee the transport of Belgian products at low rates.

Between 1843 and 1870, the Belgian government ceded the rights to develop secondary lines to private companies, but the competition between private and public lines eventually forced an abandonment of the experiment with private ownership. In a parliamentary debate in 1872, one deputy asked what kind of self-glorification could lead the Belgians to think that their state-owned railway made sense when no other country, large or small, had followed their example.⁹⁵ A number of speakers in Parliament acknowledged that Britain, “the country with which we are always compared,” had given free reign to private enterprise in the railway. Still, they argued, Belgium should not abandon its grand national experiment.⁹⁶ As a small, rapidly industrializing country dependent on trade with its neighbors, Belgium needed a national railway under state control. Rather than competing with private enterprise, the Belgian state played a key role in the development of industry and commerce.⁹⁷

Throughout the nineteenth century, the Belgian government adjusted freight and passenger fares to promote industrial development and international commerce. Belgian Catholics and Liberals alike framed their justification for the introduction of workmen’s fares and their gradual extension in these same

⁹³ Hole, p. xvii.

⁹⁴ Georges de Leener, *Les chemins de fer en Belgique* (Brussels, 1927), p. 10.

⁹⁵ M. Julliot, January 21, 1872, *Annales parlementaires*, Chambre des Représentants (1871–72), p. 317.

⁹⁶ Minister Van Hoorebeke, cited by Joseph Pauly, *Le chemin de fer et le parlement, 1835–1860* (Brussels, 1935), p. 125.

⁹⁷ Guy Vanthemsche, *Les paradoxes de l’état. L’état face à l’économie de marché de XIX et XX siècles* (Brussels, 1997), pp. 55–56.

terms. Workmen's fares secured a reliable work force for Belgian industry as they promoted the national interest by keeping the laborers in the countryside.

The Belgian Parliament readily pioneered social reform by manipulating fares on their national railway. As sociologist Theda Skocpol explains: "Government officials or aspiring politicians are quite likely to take new policy initiatives—conceivably well ahead of social demands—if existing state capacities can be readily adapted or reworked to do things that they expect will bring advantages to them in their struggles with political competitors."⁹⁸ And that is just what the Belgian Catholics and Liberals did, with little fanfare.

On the other side of the Channel, the discussion of workmen's fares in the British Parliament unleashed heated debates over state regulation of private industry. The so-called rail interest convincingly marshaled arguments against the intrusion of national legislation in their business affairs. Mirroring the questions raised in the debate over housing reform, opponents of the nationalization of British railways charged that state control would introduce party interests into the management of the railways. They characterized shareholders' governance as objective.⁹⁹

The national base of both railway company shareholders and directors and their representation in Parliament assured the predominance of their interests over those of the passengers, whose lobbies were local. Enfield workers, for example, could not even secure the vote or support of their own M.P. on the question. The petitioning of reformers, including the London County Council, National Association for the Extension of Workmen's Trains, and the London Reform Union, forced improvements in service but not a fundamental change in the assumption that the British railways should make profits for their shareholders.

An equally significant difference between the Belgian and British workmen's trains passed unnoticed by contemporaries. In contrast to the 1869 Belgian legislation intended to root laborers in their own homes in rural villages, British reformers expected the Cheap Trains Act to encourage the migration of the better-off sections of the working classes from the large and already overcrowded metropolis into rental housing in the suburbs. The Belgians were maintaining the status quo of small land holdings in rural villages while the British sought to induce change. From our comparative vantage point, that difference seems crucial.

"A CORNER OF GREENERY"

"I have thought of workmen until I have workmen on the brain," John Francis Gooday testified when asked whether the Great Eastern Railway had consid-

⁹⁸ Orloff and Skocpol (n. 11 above), p. 731.

⁹⁹ Alborn, p. 256.

ered adding service to new suburbs to stimulate migration.¹⁰⁰ Responding to the question of whether the railways had done all that they might to serve working men, the British managers explained that they had done all that they were ordered. The British Parliamentary Committee finally concluded that that was not sufficient. “We have no hesitation in coming to the conclusion that this is a question of such vital importance to the public that the limits of voluntary action should be exceeded, and that the State should require the companies to do more than they would be willing to do if governed by commercial considerations alone,” the committee declared, calling for further regulation of the railways and for effective enforcement.¹⁰¹ In considering the railway’s effectiveness in relieving overcrowding in London, British parliamentary select committees looked to the continent, and especially Belgium, to measure success or failure.

The Royal Commission on London Traffic of 1905 went further than the Select Committees of 1903, 1904, and 1905. Decisively rejecting rehousing the working class within the center of London as impractical, the Commission concluded that “the remedy for overcrowding is to be found in removal of the people to outside districts by providing additional facilities for locomotion.”¹⁰² Henceforth, the railways would have to anticipate demand in yet undeveloped suburban regions. The railways countered that they had no obligation either to operate a service at a loss or to run trains without guaranteed ridership. They had shareholders to consider.¹⁰³ But support for their position had eroded. The British Parliament proceeded to pass more than two hundred general statutes by 1914, making the railways, according to H. J. Dyos and D. H. Aldcroft, “the most regulated form of economic activity in Britain.”¹⁰⁴ By the outbreak of the First World War, one thousand trains were transporting working men daily from five hundred stations into London.¹⁰⁵ Trams, buses, and, in London, the underground also carried ever-growing numbers of commuting workers from the suburbs to the city center.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁰ Select Committee on Workmen’s Trains, July 20, 1904, British Parliamentary Papers (1904), pp. vii, 92. See also Rail 410 367, Public Records Office.

¹⁰¹ Select Committee on Workmen’s Trains, British Parliamentary Papers, House of Commons (1905), p. viii.

¹⁰² Report of the Royal Commission Appointed to Inquire into and Report upon the Means of Locomotion and Transport in London, British Parliamentary Papers (1905).

¹⁰³ For examples of some of the correspondence and testimony of the Great Eastern and the Great Northern, see January 8, 1902, Minutes of the Board of the Great Eastern Rail, Rail 2 27/26, Public Records Office; Rail 236 373/4, Public Records Office; Rail 236 384, Public Records Office; Rail 410 367, Public Records Office; and Rail 235 353 6, Public Records Office.

¹⁰⁴ H. J. Dyos and D. H. Aldcroft, *British Transport* (Leicester, 1969), p. 157.

¹⁰⁵ C. E. Lee, *Passenger Class Distinctions* (London, 1946), p. 58.

¹⁰⁶ A comparison of the private Brussels trams and the semiprivate light Belgian rail with the municipal trams, the private buses, and the underground in London would be

At the same time that the British commissions were lamenting the shortcomings of the Cheap Trains Act of 1883 in transporting workers to the suburbs, Brussels communal councils reopened debates over the efficacy of the Belgian Housing Act of 1889 in meeting the threat posed by the increasingly crowded hovels lining the blind alleys of the central city. The Brussels Council had ordered the demolition of unsanitary buildings lodging between 15,000 and 18,000 tenants, but the population of the pentagon at the heart of the Belgian capital continued to grow, from 183,686 residents in 1900 to 196,882 in 1908. Charles De Quéker, the director of public assistance for Brussels and secretary of the Official Patronage Committee, reported that, after the clearing of unsanitary housing in the central St. Roch district, only 11 percent of the 175 evicted families had chosen to move to the faubourgs.¹⁰⁷ Sixty-two percent had crowded into lodging within 500 meters of the housing from which they had been evicted. The Liberals and Socialists sitting on the council were disturbed, noting that “the population has been gradually confined, condensed, and squeezed into old lodgings so that the men, women and children swelter in a stewing agglomeration of demoralizing promiscuity.”¹⁰⁸

Subsequently, guided by a vision of affordable municipal housing, the Brussels Council resolved to build the Cité Hellemans on the site of the tenements it had demolished. The tenants of the apartments constructed between 1906 and 1919 shared gardens, a nursery, and laundry facilities.¹⁰⁹ The Commune of Saint Gilles had set the precedent for municipal construction, building five houses in 1894 to avoid what councillors identified as the corruption of private interests. At the same time, the Socialist-Liberal coalition in the Brussels commune of Schaerbeek established the Foyer Schaerbeekois to construct municipal housing ranging from two-family units to apartment buildings scattered through their commune in conscious emulation of the London County Council. These two municipal projects remained the exception rather than the rule among the nineteen communes of the Brussels agglomeration. The only communes inspired to follow the Schaerbeek example, the Foyer Anderlechtois, built a block, “fraternité,” on K. Marxstraat.

an obvious addition to this study. The questions of municipal regulation, convenience of service, the opening of new areas to settlement, and the occupations and gender of commuters are all raised in different ways with the other modes of transport.

¹⁰⁷ Ville de Bruxelles, *Comité de patronage des habitations ouvrières et des institutions de prévoyance, Rapport sur l'exercice 1896* (Brussels, 1897), pp. 6–7.

¹⁰⁸ Ville de Bruxelles, *Bulletin Communal 1911*, vol. 1. Compte rendu des séances (Brussels, 1911), p. 581.

¹⁰⁹ Bruno De Meulder, “De ‘Cité Hellemans,’ 1906–1915,” *Wonen TABK* (November 1985): 27–36; and Bruno De Meulder, “Gallerijwoningen te Brussel,” *Eind verhandeling voorgedragen voor het behalen van de graad van burgerlijk ingenieur architect Katholieke Universiteit Leuven*, 1982–83. With thanks to Professor De Meulder for sharing his work with me.

By 1906, London authorities had abandoned the construction of congregate urban housing. As J. N. Tarn explains: “In an age which believed that high density was in itself unhealthy, the breakdown of urbanism, in the sense of physical buildings and their inevitable over-occupancy, was regarded as a necessary step to healthy living.”¹¹⁰ The British middle class assumed the “respectable” working class would prefer cottages to “cubicles in a huge barrack.”¹¹¹ The masses sheltered in high-rise urban blocks; individuals and their families resided in separate cottages. Suburban cottages confirmed the British self-image of a nation of quiet, content, garden-tending home dwellers. Large blocks of flats belonged on the continent, most British essayists concluded.¹¹² Both the reformers in the Garden City Movement and the municipal planners struggling to relieve the overcrowding of British cities agreed on that.

The Belgians were not so sure, although a number of Brussels authors did suggest that multistory urban dwellings belonged in Paris, not Brussels.¹¹³ If the practical British were constructing individual cottages, then the Belgians should learn from the experience of their “Anglo-Saxon cousins,” they reasoned.¹¹⁴ Catholic politicians, in particular, contrasted the “workers’ barracks, less healthy than prisons” with the “small well-aired houses lodging one family surrounded by a corner of greenery” that they suggested should be built in the outer ring of Brussels communes.¹¹⁵

A number of Brussels Socialists protested against the “rustic utopia” and championed the cause of workers who wanted to remain within the city.¹¹⁶ They added an argument rarely voiced in London. The workers had as much right to remain in the capital as the king or the new commercial establishments, they proclaimed.¹¹⁷ They were not surprised that the private Housing Societies could not entice workers to abandon their urban tenements even though the societies offered them larger homes outside the congested urban center. Marginally employed workers needed to live within walking distance of their employment and all workers preferred to remain close to their friends, they con-

¹¹⁰ Tarn, *Five per Cent Philanthropy* (n. 19 above), p. 117.

¹¹¹ R. Williams, *London Rookeries and Collier’s Slums: A Plea for More Breathing Room* (London, 1893).

¹¹² Tarn, “French Flats for the English in Nineteenth-Century London” (n. 2 above), pp. 19–40. See also Andrew Saint, *London Suburbs* (London, 1999).

¹¹³ Edouard Van der Linden, *Etude sur l’amélioration des habitations ouvrières et sur l’organisation du domicile de secours* (Brussels, 1875), pp. 26–27.

¹¹⁴ See, e.g., Charles Lagasse, *Quelques mots sur l’habitation ouvrière* (Brussels, 1889); and Charles Buls, *Esthétiques des villes* (1894; Brussels, 1981), p. 28.

¹¹⁵ *Moniteur des comités de patronage et des sociétés d’habitations ouvrières* (October 25, 1900).

¹¹⁶ Rene Schoonbrodt, *Sociologie de l’habitat social* (Brussels, n.d.), p. 35.

¹¹⁷ Charles De Quéker, “Des maisons ouvrières à appartements en ville” (Brussels, 1904), p. 4.

tended. One Schaerbeek deputy compared the Belgian bourgeois attempt to drive the proletariat from the cities into the suburbs with the American treatment of the Indians.¹¹⁸

At the 1907 London meeting of the International Congress of Affordable Housing, Charles De Quéker courageously challenged prevailing British and Belgian wisdom that workers should live outside of the cities. “We must not try to transport the worker out of his milieu, far from his friends, his customs, his workshops, etc., far from hospitals, relief agencies, and (but this is never said) from his favorite cabarets,” he declared.¹¹⁹ Few other middle-class observers in either Brussels or London saw the networks of assistance that sustained workers and even fewer recognized urban neighborhood sociability as beneficial.¹²⁰ They certainly did not defend the presence of pubs and cabarets.

Advertisements for the London County Council estates depicting children romping in gardens around stucco cottages appeared on the covers of British workmen’s train schedules.¹²¹ Residing in the suburb, surrounded by parks but lacking pubs, with public libraries and quiet tree-lined streets but without carnivals and street football games, and with clearly demarcated boundaries between public and private spaces, “respectable” London workers would come to live like the bourgeoisie under their watchful eyes.¹²² Similarly, the Belgian laborers’ families would maintain their innocence in the bucolic countryside. With the assistance of the CGER (the semipublic Savings and Loan Bank) and Patronage Committees, Belgian laborers could build their own houses in the countryside knowing they would be able to commute daily on the workmen’s trains to jobs anywhere in Belgium. The model “inexpensive self-standing house” built for the Exposition Universelle de Bruxelles in 1913 boasted ivy-covered balconies, bow windows, and a white brick facade to contrast with the overhanging red roof. Inside this “ménage modeste,” family life would “pivot” around a kitchen, although individuals could retreat to the privacy of

¹¹⁸ M. Dausi in Commune de Schaerbeek, *Construction d’habitations à bon marché par la commune* (Brussels, 1898).

¹¹⁹ Charles De Quéker, “Congrès international des habitations à bon marché” (London, August 1907).

¹²⁰ Ellen Ross, “‘Not the Sort That Would Sit on the Doorstep’: Respectability in Pre-World War I London Neighborhoods,” *International Labor and Working Class History* 27 (1985): 39–59; Elizabeth A. M. Roberts, “Women’s Strategies,” in *Labour and Love: Women’s Experience of Home and Family, 1850–1940*, ed. Jane Lewis (Oxford, 1986); Standish Meacham, *A Life Apart: The English Working Class, 1890–1914* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977); and Jones (n. 8 above).

¹²¹ London County Council, *Workmen’s Trains and Trams, with Particular Reference to the Council’s Dwellings for Workmen* (February 2, 1914), Greater London Records Office. The pamphlets and time schedules are filed under Workmen’s Trains as well as Housing at the Greater London Record Office, Minutes of the London County Council.

¹²² Dauntton (n. 42 above), pp. 12–15.

three separate bedrooms upstairs.¹²³ Like the suburban Londoners, the home-owning Belgian laborers would be safely removed each evening from the urban promiscuity that the bourgeoisie on both sides of the Channel so feared.

Few of the British observers who had so closely scrutinized the lives of the poor inside London in the 1880s followed the workers' families to the suburbs in the decades before the First World War. Charles Booth did visit the working-class housing estate of Queen's Park in 1899. He confirmed the hopes of the reformers: the rehoused skilled workers and artisans had adopted middle-class ways. Booth noted with pleasure: "The estate provided the same sort of retreat from urban temptations that the middle class suburb did, not only public houses but cookshops and restaurants being excluded. . . . It is a district of home-life and of comfort."¹²⁴ Men were not distracted by the pub, work was separated from the home, and women could not turn to cook shops to shirk their domestic duties. Working families, like their bourgeois counterparts, had privacy amidst greenery, he explained. They would thrive, frugal and domesticated.

Meanwhile, a multitude of Belgian social scientists fanned out into the countryside to observe the peasant-worker hybrid created by their workmen's trains. They wanted to see if the trains were preserving the traditional rural morality of peasant families or if urban vice had crept into the villages on the heels of the fathers returning from urban industries. In the words of sociologist Wolfgang Schivelbusch, what happened to the commuting villagers when "the railroads annihilated space and time" and destinations "collided"?¹²⁵

Ernest Mahaim's 1910 study of the social effects of the workmen's trains depicted working men as happy to be providing for their families but exhausted from their long day of travel and work.¹²⁶ Dispersed during the day, "thanks to the workers' fares, family members all return each evening, reunited under the paternal roof," Mahaim explained.¹²⁷ The men passed their evenings amidst the domestic peace of a quiet family supper and, like their peasant forefathers, devoted their free time to the cultivation of a kitchen garden. The lives of the rural families portrayed by Mahaim closely resembled the suburban havens idealized by the British reformers.

Apparently, Mahaim never saw the 20 percent of commuters who were women.¹²⁸ Like the government ministers and parliamentary deputies on both

¹²³ Caisse générale d'épargne et de retraite, *Une habitation à bon marché* (Brussels, 1910).

¹²⁴ Charles Booth, cited by Donald J. Olsen, *The Growth of Victorian London* (London, 1978), p. 289.

¹²⁵ Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, 1986).

¹²⁶ Mahaim, *Les abonnements d'ouvriers*. See also H. Demain, *Les migrations ouvrières à travers la Belgique* (Louvain, 1919).

¹²⁷ Mahaim, *Les abonnements d'ouvriers*, p. 141.

¹²⁸ *Statistique de la Belgique: Recensement général des industries et des métiers*

sides of the Channel, Mahaim had assumed that young men would ride the rails, returning in the evening to their domesticated wives. They did not imagine that the lives of peasant women differed from those of their own wives. They disregarded the statistics documenting the 10 percent of London commuters who were women or the 23.88 percent of Belgian women who worked in industry or commerce.¹²⁹ The cottage, the physical representation of idealized domesticity, needed a wife tending its hearth, in Belgian villages as in London suburbs.

“ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY, ECONOMIC GROWTH, AND SOCIAL EQUITY”

Reformers assumed the existence of the similarities that underlay the lives of the commuting British and Belgian workers in the first decades of the twentieth century. They were impressed by the contrasts that differentiated the suburban London renters from the landowning rural Belgian laborers. After a tour of Belgium, the prominent British reformer Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree visited Belgium and held up the Belgian experience with workmen’s trains for emulation by his British readers. Belgian workmen and their families lived in the countryside, where, Rowntree rhapsodized, “The life is healthier for his wife and children. He gets a larger house, probably for less rent, and he has the advantage of a plot of land where, besides growing vegetables, he can keep a pig, a goat, and a few hens.” Even though he was poorly paid in comparison to British workers, a commuting Belgian laborer often retired as “a small holder,” he reported. Rowntree noted the relatively high proportion of Belgian laborers who owned their own homes. “If there are certain things which Belgium may learn from Britain, there are many which she may teach her, for Belgium is in advance of Britain in many directions,” he concluded.¹³⁰

The Belgian Socialist Emile Vandervelde, traveling in Britain at the same time, observed: “Nothing is more striking for the visitor who goes from London to Brussels than the contrast between the deserted pastures of Kent and the animated fields bordering our major cities.”¹³¹ The Belgian landscape, in contrast to the British, was covered with little villages of red-roofed white houses. In the day, only old people, women, and children populated them. But

(October 31, 1896) (Brussels, 1902), and *Recensement de l’industrie et du commerce* (December 31, 1910) (Brussels, 1913–21). Mahaim’s precisely detailed charts and graphs included no category for women workers, although he divided and specified practically everything else.

¹²⁹ *Recensement de l’industrie et du commerce de 1910* (Brussels, 1913).

¹³⁰ B. Seebohm Rowntree, *Land and Labour: Lessons from Belgium* (London, 1911), pp. 292, 593.

¹³¹ Emile Vandervelde, *L’exode rural et le retour au champs* (Brussels, 1901), p. 138.

at night, after the long trains had disgorged their “human cargo,” the villages came to life. Rowntree had noted that the agricultural population per square mile of cultivated land in Belgium was at least three times that of Britain.¹³² Vandervelde approved, especially because that “human cargo” disgorged by the trains had been reading the Socialist paper, *Le Peuple*.

Ernest Mahaim proclaimed that the workmen’s trains made Belgium more homogeneous.¹³³ The distance separating destinations all but disappeared when the Flemish traveled to Wallonia and when the peasants experienced daily life in the cities. “Brutish peasants” were enlightened; workers became landowners. That the workmen’s trains fostered national citizenship has been accepted as conventional wisdom in Belgium since the publication of Mahaim’s 1910 study.

My comparative study of the Belgian and British transportation and housing schemes suggests that Mahaim’s conclusion was too simple. In both housing and transportation, the Belgians intervened on a national level. That contradicts the prevailing Belgian myth of a weak nation-state hovering awkwardly and phlegmatically above the strong Belgian municipalities.¹³⁴ I would argue further that this governmental intervention at a national level at the turn of the century resulted not in homogenization but in the accentuation of social divisions in Belgium, just as it did in Britain. Around London the development of working-class housing estates clearly promoted residential segregation—the division of home from work and the separation of neighborhoods by social class.¹³⁵ In Belgium, too, rather than fostering social integration, the workmen’s trains intensified the geographic particularism—local as well as regional—that continues to limit the development of a national identity in Belgium.

In this study based on the comparative observations of the reformers themselves, I have argued that their different strategies originated in a common set of observations and led toward similar goals. The Belgians and the British shared a common liberal culture dominated by faith in the market economy, but they developed different strategies to meet a common threat. Comparing the two paths taken by the Brussels and London reformers reveals that neither solution to the common dilemma of industrial overcrowding of their urban capital was obvious.

Marc Bloch explained that comparative history allows us to understand developments that have been dismissed as “natural” within the context of a na-

¹³² Rowntree, p. 526.

¹³³ Mahaim, *Les abonnements*, p. 205.

¹³⁴ Mahaim, “La législation sociale en Belgique, 1869–1919.”

¹³⁵ For an example of a contemporary aware of the social segregation engendered by the suburban development, see Henrietta Barnett’s justification for the garden suburb of Hampstead in which “the classes will not be estranged.” Henrietta O. Barnett, “A Garden Suburb at Hampstead,” *Contemporary Review* 87 (February 1905): 231–37.

tional history.¹³⁶ The Belgian and British strategies of governmental intervention now seem “natural,” above all because they have endured. Belgian commuters squeezed in packed train compartments or stalled each morning in their cars on the “Brussels ring” just assume that the small country has always been a national labor market; few Belgian social scientists bother to investigate the relatively recent origins of the uniquely Belgian demographic pattern. And at least until Margaret Thatcher, council housing seemed inevitable to the British, who cannot imagine cities without these terraced blocks.¹³⁷

Both the municipal housing scheme and the national subsidization of workman’s trains were pragmatic choices. The Belgians had a nationalized railway, the consequence of achieving independence at the crossroads of an industrializing Europe. Subsequently, the industrial and commercial priorities of the Belgian government allowed it to subsidize fare reductions for workers. The British Parliament empowered the London County Council at a time when it could effectively serve as a forum for the municipal dreams of progressive reformers who had been frustrated by decades of inaction.

The two alternative paths were chosen simultaneously from the same battery of possibilities. British rail reformers who compared fares and service among the competing British railways and the state railway of Belgium were stymied by a parliamentary majority that favored the unique British solution to transportation. Similarly, urban reformers in Brussels were frustrated in their efforts to consolidate the administration of the nineteen Brussels communes by politicians who feared the influence of a powerful liberal capital. The choices proposed by British and Belgian reformers and adopted by their governments fit the particular political conditions of the two societies.

In both societies, the reformers rather unwittingly propelled their societies toward a greater acceptance of governmental intervention. Reformers in London and Brussels pioneered practical strategies of governmental assistance in housing and transportation, albeit at different times and in different ways. Only later did they spin theories of state responsibility to justify the governmental intervention in transportation and housing.

¹³⁶ Marc Bloch, “Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes,” *Mélanges historiques* (Paris, 1983), 1:34. See also Henri Pirenne, “De la méthode comparative en histoire,” in *V^e congrès international des sciences historiques*, ed. G. Des Marez and F. L. Ganshof (Brussels, 1923), pp. 19–23; Raymond Grew, “The Case for Comparing Histories,” *The American Historical Review* 85, no. 4 (October 1980); and George M. Fredrickson, “From Exceptionalism to Variability: Recent Developments in Cross-National Comparative History,” *Journal of American History* 82, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 587–684.

¹³⁷ See Martin Daunton’s introduction (n. 42 above) for a discussion of the historians’ failure to acknowledge the private market’s construction of housing for the working class at the end of the nineteenth century.

Neither the Belgians nor the British fully resolved the questions of class, mobility, and space raised by their pioneering governmental intervention before the First World War. Between the wars, consensus in both societies shifted further away from laissez faire in support of further government intervention in both countries.¹³⁸ In 1919, the Belgian Parliament authorized the establishment of a National Society for Affordable Housing leading to the planning of model garden communities on the edge of Brussels. At the same time that the Belgians defined a municipal housing policy, the British nationalized their rails.

Over the last two decades, the British Conservatives' schemes to privatize the rails and to sell off council housing, like the unregulated urban redevelopment that continues to unbuild Brussels, have kept the questions of government intervention, poverty, and private property that were raised at the turn of the last century simmering. As the executive director of the Transportation Research Board recently commented: "The timeless debate about the interaction between transportation and land use continues today, but increasingly that debate is less about transportation or land use per se and more about how the combination of the two affects environmental quality, economic growth, and social equity."¹³⁹ Although no historian would argue that the transportation and housing debate is "timeless," certainly it is ongoing in these two urban European capitals.

¹³⁸ Ian Cole and Robert Furbey argue that there is a significant disjuncture between prewar government initiatives and those of the interwar period. Ian Cole and Robert Furbey, *The Eclipse of Council Housing* (New York, 1994).

¹³⁹ Robert E. Skinner, "The Transportation-Land Use Interaction," *TR News* 187 (November–December 1996): 6.