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Urban studies of Belgian geographers at the turn of the millennium

Walter De Lannoy and Stefan De Corte

- 1 Urban geography has been a very exciting branch of social science during the last decade of the 1900s. Perspectives and approaches toward the city have become much more diversified. Several subjects such as urban decay, deprivation, increasing segregation, but also economic and social revitalization have been studied in relation to the processes of globalization. Positivist methods of research have been supplemented with structuralist, post-structuralist and postmodern theories. There seems now to be a widespread conviction that large, post-industrial cities are becoming much more important as the powerhouses of the globalized economy. Although cities are regarded as the motors for the development of national economies, they still face a lot of troublesome social and environmental problems.
- 2 In this paper we aim to highlight the contributions of Belgian geographers on the subjects and approaches mentioned above. Although the number of Belgian geographers in the academic world is very small, the field of urban studies was well represented during the last five years. We will try to give syntheses of significant bodies of research and mention what we consider to be representative papers of the respective themes.

Cities in networks

- 3 Large cities have proved to play an increasingly important role as command and control centres in the globalizing economy. Headquarters of transnational companies and international institutions are spatially concentrated in major metropolitan areas, where they can have a maximum profit of face to face contacts and modern communications networks. The position and the future development of these large metropolises is rather determined through their relations in the European and global urban network than by their traditional regional hinterland. Swyngedouw (1997b and 1999) has described the

changing role of cities in the global economy and has provided a well-documented argument about the lack and the need of an urban growth coalition for Brussels that should be embedded well in the local and regional institutional framework. Vandermotten *et al.* (1999) have documented the position of the large Belgian cities (essentially Brussels, Antwerp, Liège, Gent and Charleroi) in the European urban network. Although not a very large city (1.3 m residents in the morphological agglomeration), Brussels ranks high in the European hierarchy based on its important international functions. Only London, Paris and Milan have a clearly higher rank in the European hierarchy, Brussels being in a class with much larger cities such as Madrid, München, Frankfurt, Rome and Barcelona. Tertiary functions are extremely important in the Brussels economy and especially European and national governmental functions are prominent. The manufacturing sector is clearly more important in the urban economies of Antwerp, Liège, Gent and Charleroi.

- 4 There is an already long tradition of research on the hierarchy of Belgian cities. Van Hecke (1998) has updated the urban hierarchy in Belgium and the delimitation of spheres of influence of urban centres, using quantitative data on a wide range of functions and on consumer flows. The resulting classification of 'major' and 'regional' towns does not differ from previous classifications based on data of 1965. However there are important changes in the urban hierarchy as far as small towns are concerned. One type of change is related to a different methodological approach (treating all municipalities individually, also when they are part of an agglomeration), while the second type is related to the fact that a number of centres with an insufficient equipment are no longer classified by Van Hecke as cities. Cabus (1999) and Allaert (1999) have shown the importance of cross-border interactions between Brussels, Flanders and Wallonia on the economical, social and cultural level. They argue for an institutional recognition of the Brussels city region and for a much stronger cooperation between the three regions in federal Belgium.

The ongoing decentralization of cities

- 5 The ongoing decentralization of cities has been one of the most important urban developments during the last decades. The economic boom of the sixties and early seventies and a loose planning system made urban sprawl the dominant mode of urban growth in Belgian cities until today, despite the economic slow-down in the eighties. Medium-sized and large cities have grown into city-regions. In general, suburbanization has led to increasing contrasts between an impoverishing central city and a rich urban fringe.
- 6 Van Der Haegen *et al.* (1996) published an updated delimitation of the Belgian city-regions based on census data of 1991 on housing, population, income, migration and commuting. 17 city-regions were identified, housing 57% of the national population on little more than one fourth of the national territory (see map). In a monograph on urbanization in Belgium the demographic evolution, the employment structure and the socio-spatial patterns of these city-regions are documented (Mérenne-Schoumaker *et al.*, 1998). Five city-regions are clearly dominant in terms of population numbers : Brussels (by far the largest with 1.7 million residents in 1991), followed by Antwerp (900,000), Liège (624,000), Gent (391,000) and Charleroi (390,000). If we take also the wider commuter areas into account more than three quarters (77%) of the Belgian population lives in an urban area. This makes Belgium one of the most urbanized areas in Europe. The same monograph

contains a typology of all Belgian municipalities according to their degree of urbanization based on both indicators of morphological and functional urbanization. The research by Mérenne-Schoumaker *et al.* (1998) confirms that suburbanization still dominates urban growth today. Although the total amount of people living in city-regions did hardly change between 1981 and 1991, the city-regions experienced a population shift within their boundaries away from the morphological agglomeration towards the urban fringe (which experienced a 9% growth). The population of several major central cities declined during that period with 5% to 10%, although that process seems to have slowed down during the nineties. De Lannoy *et al.* (1999) have shown that in the Brussels case the population in the central city has been stabilized mainly due to the international immigration that compensates the population lost through the ongoing suburbanization. This study also points to the consequences of the second demographic transition which is resulting in a greater diversity and a smaller size of households in city regions in general, and especially in their urban cores.

- 7 Compared to other European countries urban sprawl is very outspoken in Belgium (Vandermotten *et al.*, 1999). During the eighties the surface of the 17 Belgian city-regions grew with another 7%. It was noticed several times that the major Belgian cities have experienced an American-type spatial development, although typical American developments such as 'edge cities' are not yet to be found in Belgium. Historical reasons account for the particular Belgian development, like the specific post-war economic evolution (with rising real wages, job- and social security and an expanding credit system), state interventions promoting home ownership and covering part of the collective costs (new roads, sewers,...), a free housing market with few state-interventions and the absence of a restrictive planning practice (Kesteloot and Meert, 1999).

The socio-spatial structure of cities

- 8 The socio-spatial structure of Belgian cities and their housing condition has been discussed in several publications (Mérenne-Schoumaker *et al.*, 1998 ; Vandermotten *et al.*, 1999 ; Goossens *et al.*, 1997 ; Vranken and Ben Abdeljelil, 1998). The Brussels case has recently been documented by De Lannoy *et al.* (1999), Kesteloot (2000) and Thomas and Zenou (1999). The results confirm earlier conclusions on the intra-urban social structure and its link to the housing market. The spatial distribution of the population over the different sectors of the housing market suggests that income dominates the locational choice in Belgian cities ; household composition or ethnic affiliations are secondary factors. Vandermotten *et al.* (1999) produced a comparative atlas of 30 European cities using a criterium of population density to delimitate comparable metropolitan areas and showing different aspects of urban development (morphological, demographic, social and economic). A comparison of the socio-spatial structure of Paris, Brussels and Amsterdam shows the marked concentration of deprived neighbourhoods and the lower degree of gentrification in the central area of Brussels. Differences between the three cities are related to their particular historical development, the nature of the housing market and the urban policy of the state (Vandermotten and Vermoesen, 1995).
- 9 The increasing problems of social polarization in large western cities have recently given more importance to research concerning deprived neighbourhoods in cities. Many authors stress the point that processes of globalization and deindustrialization bring about new poverty and growing inequalities in large western cities. It is argued that the

internationalization of the economy is characterized by the growth of advanced producer services (finance, accountancy, insurance, publicity,...) and associated growth of professional and managerial jobs needed to staff them. But, it is also known that cities have seen a decline in their traditional manufacturing base (and consequently in skilled manual jobs) and a growth of low-skilled and low-paid service jobs (cleaning, fast food outlets...). The result is said to have been an expansion at the top and bottom of the occupational/income distribution at the expense of the middle. This polarization is linked to changes in housing demand leading to a gentrification of parts of the inner city and to a concentration of the less skilled and unemployed in the less desirable parts of the housing market. The problem of deprived neighbourhoods is most pronounced in large Belgian cities. The recent atlas of deprived neighbourhoods in Flanders and Brussels by Kesteloot *et al.* (1996) shows that more than half of the 300 statistical neighbourhoods (census tracts) which can be classified as deprived are located in Brussels, followed by Antwerp, Gent and some smaller mining towns.

- 10 The dominant position of Brussels within the Belgian context makes it an important case study. Over the last ten years geographers produced a vast body of research on socio-spatial polarization, deprived neighbourhoods, survival strategies and ethnic entrepreneurs in the Brussels metropolitan region (Kesteloot, 1994 and 2000 ; Kesteloot and Meert, 1999 ; Kesteloot and Mistiaen, 1997 ; Meert *et al.*, 1997 ; Mistiaen *et al.*, 1995 ; Vandermotten *et al.*, 1999). Kesteloot (2000) has analysed these topics from a historical perspective and focused on the socio-economic processes which shape the urban space. Three different time periods are considered to explain the present situation : the period of postwar suburban growth, the economic recession of the mid-seventies and the recent period of deregulation and flexible accumulation. Each of these periods is characterized by a specific spatial logic creating a particular geography of segregation and (more recently) deprivation. Postwar suburbanization is held responsible for creating a dual social structure at the level of the city region, with a clear segregation between the middle and high income groups of the urban fringe and the low income groups of the working class neighbourhoods around the city center. The dual structure of the city has been consolidated by the economic crisis of the second half of the seventies and the early eighties. High unemployment-rates and the structure of the housing market brought about the development of a 'poor crescent' in and around the inner city (reflected on map 'manual workers'). It is believed that the polarization of the labour- and housing market, the dismantling of the welfare state and the increase of new types of households are responsible for a growing 'underclass'. Meert *et al.* (1997) analyse survival strategies developed by the residents of deprived neighbourhoods in and around Brussels in response to social exclusion. Attention was paid to the effects of these strategies on integration (or exclusion) and to their spatial dimension. The research shows that deprived areas offer very different opportunities for social integration and community development depending on the heterogeneity of the neighbourhoods and the social cohesion of the residents. Since the second half of the eighties Brussels has experienced the development of so called 'underclass' neighbourhoods in some parts of the 'poor crescent' around the city center. These neighbourhoods are characterized by higher proportions of immigrants (mainly Moroccans and Turks), a high proportion of young people and a cumulation of problems such as poor housing, a very high degree of unemployment, 'surviving strategies' by selling drugs, young people leaving school before they reach the age of 18, and the processes of 'reproduction' of these life styles. The situation of social decline in these marginalized neighbourhoods has been linked to

Brussels becoming a world city of the second order (after London, New York and Tokyo), to the shift towards a flexible service economy (with increasing polarization on the labour market), the interurban competition and to urban regeneration in some parts of the central city (Kesteloot, 1999b and 2000).

Multicultural cities

- 11 A significant evolution in the social geography of major West European cities during the sixties and the seventies has been the immigration of large numbers of foreign minorities. A lot of research has been done by Belgian geographers concerning the residential patterns of foreigners in Belgian cities. The Brussels case is especially interesting because of the high proportion (30%) of foreign nationals in the total population and the large diversity of both affluent and poor minorities. The affluent group (the French, Britons, Germans, Dutch, Americans, Japanese, Scandinavians...) is rather large due to the presence of the international institutions (European Commission, NATO...) and transnational companies in Brussels. The poor group consists mainly of the Mediterranean 'guest workers' (Moroccans, Italians, Spanish, Turks, Greek) and their descendants. They filled up both the socio-economic and the spatial positions left by the suburbanizing Belgian higher and middle class. Kesteloot and Van der Haegen (1997) have analysed the residential patterns of both rich and poor groups as well as their evolution in terms of numbers and place of residence. The poor minorities have so to say no other choice than to live in the 19th century working class neighbourhoods in the central area of the city where relatively cheap dwellings can be rented (in the so called 'residual rental sector', the worst part of the private rental sector of the housing market). Within this belt in and around the inner city members of a specific ethnic group prefer to live close to their compatriots and have therefore 'preference neighbourhoods'. The affluent foreigners have a very wide choice on the housing market and choose the neighbourhoods that are perceived as best (in terms of quality of the dwellings and the environment). They show the highest percentages in the south-eastern sector of the city. In the last three decades the ethnic neighbourhoods have stayed remarkably stable and the increasing presence of immigrants has intensified the contrasts of the already existing socio-spatial structure of the city. The spatial concentration of the 'Mediterranean foreigners' has brought about the creation of many ethnic shops, restaurants and services in ethnic neighbourhoods (Kesteloot, 1999a; Kesteloot and Mistiaen, 1997).

The regeneration of city centres

- 12 The emergence of a consumerist society in the late 20th century is especially pronounced in cities. There is a growing interest in consumption within the social sciences and urban geographers should, among other aspects, study the relations between consumption and the changing form of cities. The redevelopment of city centres is probably less apparent in Belgium than in for example the UK, The Netherlands or Spain. There are no striking flagship developments like in London, Paris or Bilbao and no waterfront redevelopments like in Barcelona or Rotterdam. The gentrification of the inner-cities is also less prominent than in Paris, London or Amsterdam, although an interesting case has been studied in central Brussels. Van Criekingen (1996) has shown how the neighbourhood

Dansaert-St.Géry in the center of Brussels has been transformed during the 1980s and 90s from a run-down area into a very trendy place. The gentrification of this area can be related to post-fordist changes of the urban economy, to the sharp increase of non-classical households (an outcome of the so-called second demographic transition, see also De Lannoy *et al.*, 1999) and to specific local events. The location of exclusive shops in the fashion sector, the refurbishment of a housing block (a historical landmark) by the local government and the organization of cultural animation in the area have brought about a commercial gentrification first, followed by a movement of young, middle-class residents into the neighbourhood and a displacement of working-class households (including many Moroccans). Similar processes of displacement of low income groups related to urban renovation in deprived neighbourhoods have been shown by De Lannoy and Geets (1994) and Marissal (1994).

- 13 Cities have traditionally been important retail foci and function increasingly as places for fun, leisure, tourism and entertainment. Grimmeau (1997) was the principal organizer of a symposium in 1996 on the location of the retail sector that resulted in a special issue of *Revue Belge de Géographie*. Grimmeau analysed the relationships between retail structures and the urban hierarchy using the individual census data of 1991. Huff's model was applied to estimate the attracted populations in the catchment areas for each retail type and for each locality. In the same issue Van Hecke (1997) reported about retail clusters in Antwerp and Van Criekingen (1997) about gentrification and new retail shops in the inner city of Brussels. Recollete (1995) analysed the evolution of the location of office buildings in Brussels and Pillen (1995) reported about the boom of the hotel sector in the Belgian capital.

Urban sustainable development

- 14 At first sight research on urban sustainable development has been rather scarce by Belgian geographers despite the rapid increase of interest in the subject all over the world since the Bruntland Report (1987) and the Rio Conference in 1992. It should however be clear that a lot of the research mentioned above is necessary or at least helpful to think critically about future urban development in a context of sustainability. Research by geographers about the dynamics of the socio-spatial structure is without any doubt important as a basis for research work on the social aspects of urban sustainable development. Research by Verhetsel and Peetermans (1998), Dobruszkes and Marissal (1994) and Dobruszkes (1998) on urban transport contributes to an understanding of the huge transportation problems in urban areas. Recent work by Swyngedouw (1995a and 1997a) on the political ecology of water in urban areas is of great importance for the realisation of sustainable cities in developing countries. He argued that we can reconstruct - and hence theorize - the urbanization process as a political-ecological process with water as the entry point (Swyngedouw, 1996). Swyngedouw has explored the contradictions of urban water provision in Latin American cities and made a thorough examination of the situation in Guayaquil, Ecuador. Using a combined approach of historical geography and political ecology to analyze the process of urbanization and the provision of urban services, the author shows why in the early 1990s approximately 36% of the two million inhabitants of Guayaquil have no access to (underpriced) public water. These non-connected poor residents pay extraordinarily high prices for their water to private water vendors, which brings about a massive transfer of income to the middle-

and upper class consumers and to commerce and industry. Swyngedouw convincingly demonstrates how the water supply system in Guayaquil is profoundly unjust and unsustainable due to the chronic problems of financial deficits of the public water company, the structural dependence on outside financing and the technocratic perspective on water supply without considering alternative or multiple uses or the sustainable management of natural resources.

- 15 In an inspired essay Swyngedouw (1997b) explores the continuous changes and reorderings of the city in the 20th century and especially in the last few decades as an outcome of the accelerating process of modernization. We borrowed some of the last sentences of that essay as a hopeful program for future urban geographical research :
- 16 ‘...The challenges that face planning into the next century revolve around recapturing the spirit of modernization by reasserting the need for a just and humanizing urban order that is sensitive to the excluded - to the “other“ who has become our neighbour - and to environmental justice that does more than pay lip service to potential remedies for deep (environmental) injustices.’ In search for possible humanizing urban worlds, David Harvey concludes that ‘the tensions of heterogeneity cannot and should not be repressed. They must be liberated in socially exciting ways - even if this means more rather than less conflict, including contestation over socially necessary socialization of market processes for collective ends. Diversity and difference, heterogeneity of values, lifestyle oppositions and chaotic migrations are not to be feared as sources of disorder. Cities that cannot accommodate to diversity, to migratory movements, to new lifestyles and to new economic, political, religious and value heterogeneity, will die either through ossification and stagnation or because they will fall apart in violent conflict. Defining a politics that can bridge the multiple heterogeneities, including most emphatically those of geography, without repressing difference is one of the biggest challenges of twenty-first century urbanization’ (Swyngedouw, 1997b, 120). And we fully agree with David Harvey’s conclusion : ‘If the current rhetoric about handing on a decent living environment to future generations is to have even one iota of meaning, we owe it to subsequent generations to invest now in a collective and very public search for some way to understand the possibilities of achieving a just and ecologically sensitive urbanization process under contemporary conditions’ (Harvey, 1996, p. 438).

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ABSTRACTS

An overview is presented of urban research produced by Belgian geographers in the last five years. The paper highlights contributions on the position of Brussels in the European urban network, on urban hierarchy in Belgium, on the dynamics of Belgian city regions, on the socio-spatial structure of European and Belgian cities, on the regeneration of city centres and on urban sustainable development. Several publications deal with the increasing social polarization in cities and the existence of deprived neighbourhoods. A lot of research has been done on the multicultural character of Belgian cities and the relation between residential patterns of foreigners and the structure of the housing market.

In deze bijdrage wordt een overzicht gegeven van stedelijk onderzoek van de laatste vijf jaar van Belgische geografen. De auteurs bespreken onderzoek over de positie van Brussel in het Europese stedennetwerk, de hiërarchie van steden in België, de dynamiek van de Belgische stadsgewesten, de interne structuur van Europese en Belgische steden, de regeneratie van stadscentra en over duurzame stedelijke ontwikkeling. Verschillende publicaties handelen over de toenemende sociale polarisatie in steden en over het voorkomen van achtergestelde buurten. Er werd veel onderzoek verricht over het multicultureel karakter van Belgische steden en over het verband tussen de ruimtelijke patronen van vreemdelingen en de structuur van de woningmarkt.

INDEX

Trefwoorden stedelijk onderzoek, België, stedelijke netwerken, stadsgewesten, sociaal-ruimtelijke patronen in steden

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