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(Re)structuring American studies in Belgium¹

Serge Jaumain and Frédéric Louault

- 1 Presenting a panorama of the institutions organizing American studies in Belgium cannot disregard the institutional situation of the country: the two major linguistic communities have their own institutions in charge of matters related to culture, research and teaching. In recent decades, university strategies and policies have therefore evolved differently in the North and South of the country. In the scientific field, as in many others, there are no longer national organizations and, despite the small size of the country, collaborations between institutions on either side of the linguistic border are not evident. This context is undoubtedly one of the reasons for the contrast between the weak structuring of centers active in the field of American studies in Belgium and in neighbouring countries.
- 2 Given the separation that has long marked the two fields of study, we have chosen to present them separately: the first part provides an overview of North American studies and the second offers a synthesis of Latin American studies. However, the last part presents a recent initiative to open up American studies and to consider them from a continental perspective.

North America

- 3 After the First World War, the creation of the Belgian American Educational Foundation (BAEF) facilitated the reconstruction of Belgian universities and then exchanges with American universities². By allowing young graduates to complete their education in the United States, the BAEF, like the Fulbright Foundation, played an essential role in developing expertise on American society within the Belgian academic world.
- 4 This interest led to the creation, in 1965, of the Center for American Studies³, which became a department of the Belgian Royal Library where the Library of American Studies today offers more than 30,000 books on the United States. This center played an important role in the development of studies on the United States but also in the

creation of the Belgian Luxembourg American Studies Association (BLASA) which brought together some specialists in North American studies⁴.

- 5 In the aftermath, several universities chose to bring together researchers active in this sector. A « Centre d'Enseignement et de Recherches en Études américaines » (CEREA) was created at the University of Liège. In 1990, its American studies program offered no less than thirteen courses⁵. It ceased its activities about fifteen years ago, but the study of American politics and institutions is today one of the objectives of the center "Democratie" linked to the Department of Political Science of the Faculty of Law of the University of Liège.
- 6 The University of Mons has an American Studies Center created in 1993. The centre is linked to its Faculty of Translation and Interpretation and has enabled the acquisition of nearly 3,000 books, mainly on American culture and institutions.
- 7 On the Flemish side, the interest in the study of the United States led to the creation in 2000, at the University of Antwerp, of an inter-university master program in American Studies (MAAS). In the best years, it brought together about fifteen students but not enough to create full-time staff positions. The MAAS, which was taken over by Ghent University in 2011, ceased its activities in 2016. The Katholieke Universiteit Leuven still mentions the existence of an "American Studies Center" but it is a section of the library of its Faculty of Arts (ARTES) located on its Antwerp campus.
- 8 Belgian universities therefore no longer offer any master's degree in North American studies but continue to propose numerous courses dedicated to the literature, culture, civilization or institutions of the United States, supported by a wide variety of research in these fields.
- 9 Academic centers and institutions related to the study of the United States have thus mainly developed around a library or a few researchers working in a specific disciplinary field. Many of these centers have subsequently been incorporated into larger structures.
- 10 A fairly similar observation emerges from the analysis of the development of Canadian studies in Belgium. Canadian studies grew significantly in the early 1980s, when Canadian federal authorities decided to make the study of Canada abroad one of the components of their international diplomacy⁶. A Center for Canadian Studies was thus inaugurated in 1982 at the Université libre de Bruxelles. Equipped with a library of more than 6,000 books, it was for 30 years the focal point for Canadian studies in Belgium. It encouraged the development of research in a multidisciplinary and comparative perspective (with themes as diverse as federalism, urban studies, secularization of society, the coexistence of linguistic communities, etc.)⁷. It was notably to host its work that the collection "Canadian Studies" was created by the publishing house Peter Lang. In 2008, the Center for Canadian Studies expanded its field of interest to the United States and Mexico and was renamed the Centre for North American Studies. Four years later, the Canadian government's decision to cut funding to all of its programs severely slowed down the activities of the Center, which was merged into AmericaS, the interdisciplinary Center for the Study of the Americas mentioned below. On the Dutch-speaking side, a small Flemish association for Canadian Studies, now defunct, also organized some activities.
- 11 As a partly French-speaking country, Belgium naturally became interested in the study of Quebec: in 1976 a first Center for Quebec Studies was created at the University of

Liège and eleven years later a Center for Quebec and Franco-Canadian Studies was created at the University of Ghent. Moreover, a large part of the activities of the aforementioned Centre for Canadian Studies also focused on Quebec⁸. As in the case of Canada, this dynamic was encouraged by the Quebec government through the International Association for Quebec Studies, which, from 1997 on, had the mission of supporting research on Quebec throughout the world⁹. Today, the three centers have ceased or reoriented their activities.

Latin America

- 12 The Latin American studies have followed a trajectory comparable to that of the North American studies. Since the 19th century, Latin America has been the subject of real interest in several Belgian universities, fuelled by numerous academic circulations¹⁰. But collaborations are still limited and struggle to go beyond the symbolic border between the French and Dutch-speaking communities.
- 13 A few inter-university initiatives have however emerged, such as the Association of Latin Americanists of Belgium (LABEL, created in 1994) or the Encuentro /Belgian Latin America Network (created in 2018 by young researchers and students from the University of Ghent). They have created bridges between universities and between disciplines but have not succeeded in structuring effective collaborations nor in giving national visibility to Latin American studies.
- 14 Various courses on Latin America are offered in the main Belgian universities, particularly in the arts, humanities and social sciences. Some specific courses have been developed more recently, such as a course on Brazil, inaugurated in 2013 at the Université libre de Bruxelles, in the Faculty of Philosophy and Social Sciences. However, there is only one complete postgraduate course focused on the region: an Advanced Master of Iberian and Ibero-American Studies (at the KU Leuven). Taught in Spanish, this complementary program focuses on linguistics, literature, history and art history.
- 15 Research on Latin America is rich and diverse. It covers fields as varied as literature, sociology (gender, migration, social movements), development (rural/urban planning), history and history of art, political science (democracy and authoritarianism, elections, internal conflicts), international relations (geopolitics, regionalism, borders) and law (international law, customary law, criminality)¹¹.
- 16 These studies have been anchored in several institutional frameworks, more or less structured and sustainable. An interdisciplinary research group on Latin America (GRIAL) has been active since 1994 at the Université Catholique de Louvain. It brings together specialists in sociology, development sciences and literature. At the University of Liège, a Research Center on Europe and Hispanic America (CRÉAMÉ), founded in 1997, is interested in the history of literature and literary criticism. Research is also conducted on migration and international relations.
- 17 At the Université libre de Bruxelles, the Institute of Sociology has hosted a Latin American Studies Group (GELA-IS), whose research focused on political regimes and gender studies. Its activities have been integrated from 2017 in the AmericaS center mentioned below. Between 1981 and 2011, ULB also hosted a Center for the Study of Relations between the European Union and Latin America (CERCAL), whose activities

focused on regional integration processes. Also of note, on the same theme, is the work on relations between Europe and Latin America carried out by the United Nations University Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies (UNU-CRIS), located in Bruges. Research on Latin America is also carried out in all Flemish universities but without being integrated into specific research structures.

- 18 With regard to the countries studied, there is also a movement towards specialization. A Center for Mexican Studies (CMS) has existed since 1990 at the University of Antwerp; the Université Catholique de Louvain is particularly interested in the Andean countries (Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru) and a Belgian-Brazilian Chair was created in 2017 at the Université libre de Bruxelles. Publicly funded academic development cooperation programs have also fostered collaborations with a number of Latin American universities (Bolivia, Cuba, Haiti, Peru, Ecuador). A few institutional platforms have also made it possible to strengthen partnerships with Latin American universities: the CESAM (Central and South America) platform at the University of Ghent; the Working Group on Latin America at the Université libre de Bruxelles.
- 19 Besides these university structures, several associations are working to boost relations with Latin America. Created in Brussels in 1931 on the initiative of the Belgian-Latin American Chamber of Commerce, the Maison de l'Amérique latine organizes numerous events on the region every year. The Centre Tricontinental (CETRI), a non-governmental organization founded in 1976 in Louvain-la-Neuve, conducts research on Latin America, particularly on issues related to globalization, development and human rights. Its Alternatives Sud collection, produced since 1994 with the Syllepse publishing house (Paris), gives a large place to Latin American studies. At another level, the Interdisciplinary Institute for Relations between the European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean (IRELAC) connects decision-makers, diplomats and experts on economic issues.

What about "the Americas"?

- 20 Globally, whether in North America or Latin America, the trends mentioned above are very similar: in recent years many centers have significantly reduced or ceased their activities in these regions. This evolution is the result of the vagaries of funding, but sometimes also of the desire of university authorities to rationalize the organization of their research centers.
- 21 In this context, it is interesting to highlight some initiatives that stand out from the previous ones because they transcend the current divisions of the American continent. The first two were developed with reference to pre-Columbian America. The "Société des Américanistes de Belgique" was founded in 1927 with the aim of promoting archaeological and ethnographic studies of the indigenous civilisations of pre-Columbian America. The Second World War put an end to its activities, but it was re-launched in 1990 and since then it has brought together French-speaking people working on the indigenous cultures and civilisations of the Americas¹². The second initiative, the Instituut voor Amerikanistiek, brought together Dutch-speaking researchers working in the same field but seems to have ceased its activities in 2018.
- 22 A new experience has been set up at ULB in 2017: the creation within, the Maison des Sciences Humaines, of AmericaS, an interdisciplinary center for the study of the Americas based on the experience acquired at ULB in the field of (North and Latin)

American studies. This centre, led by the two authors of this text, focuses its work on what unites the different components of the American continent and more specifically on the circulation of ideas, practices and people in, to and from the Americas. This continental approach has logically led AmericaS to develop its collaborations with the Institut des Amériques (Paris, France).

- 23 Unlike previous centers, AmericaS embraces the whole of the Americas and presents itself as a kind of crossroads where researchers from different scientific backgrounds are invited to share the fruits of their work and imagine new collaborations (AmericaS is open to all disciplines belonging to the human and social sciences). This structure also gives a very large place to doctoral students to whom it offers an original meeting point. The future will tell if such a formula better corresponds to the needs of research on the Americas.
- 24 In Belgium, many research or teaching centers and structures on the Americas have therefore gradually withered away. Pressure from donors and university authorities has often overwhelmed the determination of their facilitators, as has the difficulty of bridging the gap between researchers from very different backgrounds. The latter often withdrew to their disciplinary centers. However, the difficulty of institutionalizing the areas of study in a transdisciplinary perspective should not hide the fact that studies on the Americas conducted in Belgium remain as varied as they are dynamic. In this context, experiences such as AmericaS can pave the way for a new way of conceiving the structuring of American studies.

NOTES

1. Some of the information related to the institutions presented here is taken from their websites. The authors would like to warmly thank the colleagues who kindly accepted to complete this information.
2. Pieter Huistra, and Kaat Wils, K., "The Exchange Programme of the Belgian American Educational Foundation: An Institutional Perspective on Scientific Persona Formation (1920-1940)". *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review*, 131(4), 2016, pp.112-134; Kenneth Bertrams, 'The Domestic Uses of Belgian-American "Mutual Understanding": The Commission for Relief in Belgium Educational Foundation, 1920-1940', *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 13:4 (2015) 326-343.
3. In Belgium, as in many other countries, the term "American Studies" has generally been used to mean "North American studies"
4. We have not been able to find any trace of this association's activities in recent years.
5. 1880-1890. *Cent ans de Philologie germanique*, Université de Liège, 1990.
6. Serge Jaumain, *The Canadianists. The ICCS, 25 years in the service of Canadian studies*, Ottawa, ICCS, 2006.
7. Serge Jaumain, « Yvan Lamonde et l'étude des échanges socio-culturels entre la Belgique et le Québec (XIXe-XXe siècles) » dans Claude Couture, François Pageau et Srilata Ravi (dirs.), *Autour de l'œuvre d'Yvan Lamonde Colonialisme et Modernité au Canada depuis 1867*, Presses de l'Université Laval, 2019, pp. 147-165.

8. Madeleine Frédéric et Serge Jaumain «Les études québécoises en Belgique: un premier bilan», dans H.J. Niederehe, *Etudes québécoises: bilan et perspectives*, Tübingen, Niermeyer, collection Canadiana Romania vol.11, 1996, pp.187-198.
 9. Fernand Harvey, « Le développement des études québécoises dans le monde ». *Globe. Revue internationale d'études québécoises*, 2001 4 (2), pp.59-81
 10. Eddy Stols,, « Présences belges dans la modernisation de l'Amérique latine », in E. Stols, E. et R. Bleys (eds.), *Flandre et Amérique latine, 500 ans de confrontation et de métissage*, Anvers, 1993, pp. 229-42.
 11. Sur l'histoire des études latino-américaines en Belgique, voir notamment Yépez del Castillo, I., "Estudios latinoamericanos en Ciencias Sociales en Bélgica, 1981-2001", *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, No. 72, Major Trends and Topics in Latin American Studies in Europe (April 2002), pp. 33-48
 12. Sylvie Peperstraete, « De la Société des Américanistes de Paris à la Société des Américanistes de Belgique : historique et perspectives » in J. Contel & J.-Ph. Priotti (eds.), *Ernest Hamy, du Muséum à l'Amérique. Logiques d'une réussite intellectuelle*, Lille, Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2018. pp. 141-148 ; Peter Eeckhout, «El americanismo en Bélgica », in Robin Lefere (ed) *Memorias para el futuro. I Congreso de Estudios Hispánicos en el Benelux*, Bruxelles, Presses Universitaires de Bruxelles, 2005, pp. 185-192.
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