# The transnational dimensions of the early socialist pillars in Belgium and the Netherlands, c. 1885-1914. An exploratory essay

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The term 'transnational' has become so pervasive in the past decade that some scholars fear it has turned into the latest 'buzzword [...], more a label than a practice, more expansive in its meaning than precise in its application, more a fashion of the moment than a durable approach to the serious study of history'[[1]](#footnote-1). In this article we will reflect on the so-called 'transnational turn' of history by exploring the possible transnational dimensions of the early pillarization process in Belgium and the Netherlands, concentrating on the role of Belgo-Dutch socialist contacts in the *belle époque*. As pillarization has mainly been studied within different national contexts or in international comparisons, this essay raises the question what new insights might, or might not be gained from taking a transnational look at pillarization. Given the state of research, this contribution is a mere exploration identifying past trends and hinting at future research avenues.

Historians are relative late-comers in the domain of transnational research - as in pillarization research. They made the transnational turn - or at least they started to use the term explicitly - after it had become common in other fields of the humanities and social sciences[[2]](#footnote-2). What constitutes the 'transnational turn' in history? The most general description of transnational history is as an approach that focuses on individuals, goods, ideas and processes that transcend the nation-state. In its broadness this definition does not clearly distinguish transnational history from earlier scholarship. International history and comparativism, for instance, although often nationally biased, have displayed in some of their incarnations a clear interest in cross-border contacts between non-state actors. The research into socialist internationalism is a good example[[3]](#footnote-3).

Gleaning the growing body of work that presents itself or is widely considered as transnational, we have singled out two common characteristics. First, transnational history exhibits an acute awareness of spatiality as part of a more general spatial turn in the humanities and social sciences. This implies a heightened sensibility both towards the social construction of space and towards the different spatial scales on which historical phenomena and processes take place. Historians can use any of a number of spatial levels (local, regional, national, continental or global) as starting point for their analysis, yet they should pay particular attention to the interconnectedness of these levels. As such, transnational history moves away from the narrow nation-state perspective. It often focuses on a spatial dimension beyond the nation-state system in which non-state actors (both persons and institutions like labour organizations) are active and in which broad societal processes unfold that overarch several nation-states or that are continental or global in scope. In this respect transnational history is often and explicitly aimed against 'traditional' comparative history. Comparativism, so its transnational critics claim, reifies national differences by taking the nation-state as a given unit of comparison, it leaves little room for diachronic historical developments (being often synchronic in nature), nor does it study contacts between the units of comparison. Here, the second common characteristic of transnational historical research comes into play, viz. the attention to movements, flows and circulations of goods, persons and ideas across borders. The trans-boundary interconnectedness of historical phenomena and processes through contact and exchange is embodied in the notion of cultural transfer[[4]](#footnote-4) and *histoire croisee* (entangled history or *Verflechtungsgeschichte*)[[5]](#footnote-5). The *dynamics* and the *process*, rather than the end product, of cross-border contacts are an integral part of transnational history.

These two characteristics of transnational history – attention to non-national societal processes and to transfer and international contacts – certainly seem promising for studying the early pillarization process in the latter third of the nineteenth century. This was a time of modernisation, heightened internationalism, and increasing cross-border movements following the creation of an international railway system. The formation of new organisations and ideologically based pillars must have been a dynamic process, influenced by local, national and international developments, which all deserve attention. However, how promising exactly the transnational turn will be for the study of pillarization remains to be seen. Our exploratory foray seems to nuance the current enthusiasm for transnational history as it reiterates the importance of local socio-economic and municipal cultures, but also the influential role of the national state in providing the context for social pillarization.

In the following paragraphs we will first discuss the nation-state orientation of the historiography on pillarization and the possible gains of a transnational look. Subsequently we will look at the interaction of continental, national and local developments in the early stages of socialist pillarization and finally the cross-boundary flows between Belgian and Dutch socialists during the *belle époque*.

## The national slant of pillarization research

Pillarization or pillar formation ('verzuiling' or 'zuilvorming') refers to the organization of secular social functions on an ideological/confessional basis. It involves the institutionalization of societal cleavages and the compartmentalization or segmentation of society into separate ideological communities. These so-called pillars comprise a host of social organizations like unions, mutual aid societies, consumer cooperatives, sports and leisure clubs, that cater to all social needs of their members 'from the cradle to the grave'. The pillars also have an electoral outlet: every pillar has a political party of its own. The pillars supposedly only interact at the top where political leaders meet and work out compromises. As such pillarization functions as conflict regulation in highly segmented, plural societies.

Historically, the roots of pillarization stretch back to the nineteenth century and, in the Belgian case, more specifically to the *belle époque*. The process culminated after the First World War. The term 'verzuiling' itself originated in the Netherlands. The first recorded public reference to the 'zuilen' dates from 1940, by a journalist of the Dutch newspaper *De Telegraaf*[[6]](#footnote-6)*.* In the Netherlands, scholarly research into the phenomenon started in the 1950s, in Belgium at the end of the 1960s[[7]](#footnote-7). It is unclear how exactly the term came to be used in Belgium. Ironically, the possibility of a transfer from the Netherlands to Belgium has not yet been examined, one of the first research goals a transnational study of pillarization might set itself. Despite our limited knowledge about the origin of the term, Belgium is widely considered to be a prototypical pillarized society, almost on a par with the Netherlands. The concept has also been applied to other highly segmented Western-European countries such as Switzerland, Germany, Austria and Italy[[8]](#footnote-8). Sociologists and political scientists were early users of the concept, historians followed their lead belatedly. Overall, Dutch historians have been more prolific in studying pillarization than their Belgian colleagues[[9]](#footnote-9). Especially in the last two decades historical research in Belgium has focused more on the linguistic than on the ideological divide. Moreover, the historiography of pillarization itself has long been pillarised, with most books on the Catholic pillar being written by Catholics, etc.

Many, often contradictory definitions of pillarization exist. Some scholars stress the organizational, bureaucratic processes involved over the ideological identity of the members, or they focus on the primacy of politics within the pillar rather than on the symbiosis of secular and confessional spheres. Pillarization has alternately been qualified as a process of emancipation aimed against the domination of liberalism or as a mechanism of social control by the pillar elites in reaction to modernization, secularization and national integration[[10]](#footnote-10). The result is a rather diffuse concept whose usefulness as an analytical tool has been called into question. The Dutch historian Blom, for one, has argued to simply use it as a metaphor[[11]](#footnote-11).

In the historical study of pillarization the nation-state perspective has long been dominant, although from the start it was heavily inspired by international currents within sociology and political science (such as comparative research of political systems, consociational democracy and conflict regulation). An interpretive tension often manifested itself: the pillars were either regarded as obstacles or catalysts of national integration. On the one hand, some scholars affirmed that the pillars presented an alternative social order to the nation-state[[12]](#footnote-12). Ideological loyalty, so they claimed, replaced or precluded national loyalty. Yet even this view had an important national bias as it was presented as a *Sonderweg* in European history; in the case of the Netherlands "as a development that sat astride the European pattern of nationalism and nation building"[[13]](#footnote-13). Within the dominant interpretive framework of the nation-state, international comparisons with other highly segmented societies often served to single out the peculiarity of Belgium or the Netherlands, thus strengthening the national character of pillarization[[14]](#footnote-14).

On the other hand, an influential research current held that pillarization buttressed the nation-state because the pillars introduced people to a supra-local, national level, which made the fatherland more palpable to them. In his classic sociological study *Verzuiling, pacificatie en kentering in de Nederlandse politiek* (Pillarization, pacification and change in Dutch politics, 1968) Arend Lijphart formulated was has been known since as the pacification theory[[15]](#footnote-15). According to Lijphart, pillarization was the Dutch form of national unification because it integrated minority groups (Catholics, workers, reformed protestants) into Dutch society. In Lijphart’s view, pillarization only started after the political agreement of 1917 (the ‘Pacification’) when both neutral and religiously based education were financed by the state and universal suffrage was introduced. Most scholars nowadays seem to agree that, although pillarization did imply other perspectives on the nation, "in no way did it conflict with nation building, rather it ought to be considered as a form of integration"[[16]](#footnote-16). Nation and pillar were not caught up in a zero-sum stranglehold, they could and did complement each other[[17]](#footnote-17). Processes of national identification and pillarization were often sides of the same coin[[18]](#footnote-18).

The view that pillarization was a quintessentially national phenomenon, manifested itself in still another way. Through the 1980s many academics conceptualized the organizational development of the pillars as necessarily culminating in or emanating from a centralized, institutionalized and national political organization. Hellemans for instance - in his analysis of socialist pillarization in Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany, Austria and Italy - stressed the initiative of national political parties in creating a network of pillar organizations[[19]](#footnote-19). Yet, later research on Belgian socialism has shown this to be more of a bottom-up process, often initiated not by strictly political groups, but by consumer cooperatives[[20]](#footnote-20). Hellemans similarly dated the start of Catholic pillarization in the Netherlands after the First World War (in contrast to the Dutch reformed Protestants and the Belgian Catholics who became active due to the School War around 1880)[[21]](#footnote-21). Indeed, the Dutch Catholic party (the *Rooms Katholieke Volkspartij*) was founded in 1926[[22]](#footnote-22). Yet already prior to the First World War, Catholics cooperated in parliament, published several newspapers (including the semi-national paper *Centrum*) and organized themselves in different local, regional and even national associations, including trade unions.

## Pillarization and the interlocking of continental, national and local developments: Ghent

Since the 1980s the teleological idea of pillarization as a form of national political emancipation has been criticized, especially in the Netherlands[[23]](#footnote-23). Pillarization has been reconceptualized as a process without a fixed and strictly national outcome in which local and regional dynamics are of utmost importance. This decentred approach has led scholars to ask for more attention to international influences and cross-border contacts between pillars. The historian Henk Te Velde has recently suggested to de-nationalize the *Sonderweg* approach by conceptualizing pillarization as part of a broader, European-wide process: the complex process of the rise of mass democracy, party politics and ideological organization[[24]](#footnote-24). This approach, in which the Belgian and Dutch pillars are viewed as a result of the ‘associational mania’[[25]](#footnote-25) that characterized the nineteenth century, might be a starting point to combine pillarization research with the transnational turn.

Despite the overall nation-state orientation of pillarization research, several scholars, often but not always from outside the historical profession, have already looked into the broader, international dimensions of the phenomenon. The above mentioned international comparisons actively used the term pillarization, but this strengthened the idea of a *Sonderweg*. To be able to compare Belgian and Dutch pillars with similar organisations in other countries, it has been proposed to replace the word ‘pillar’ by the more general ‘social movement’[[26]](#footnote-26). Another possibility is to use the concept of 'weak' and 'strong' communities or Milieus[[27]](#footnote-27). In this way, the Belgian and Dutch situations can be viewed in their international context without having to think about a *Sonderweg*, while at the same time taking the early formative period of the pillars-to-be into account. In this article, we see pillars as 'strong' communities.

Most research has focused on the formation of a Catholic strong community, especially in Germany, but also in Belgium and The Netherlands. These scholars have explained pillarization as a reaction to the transnational conflict between church(es) and state and as a way to govern the gradual massification and democratization of European society by emancipating minority groups (in the Dutch case) and/or mobilizing mass support for political parties (in the Belgian case)[[28]](#footnote-28). The sociologist Hellemans described the pillarization process as a ‘struggle for modernity’, a struggle to use and dominate, ideally with complete state power, the possibilities of modern times[[29]](#footnote-29). The process started with religious groups, in most countries the Catholics, in the Netherlands the Orthodox Protestants. Socialists, generally a smaller group, are considered to have followed later.

The wave of secularization that swept over Europe during the second half of the nineteenth century threatened the power position of the church(es)[[30]](#footnote-30). An international movement of Catholic counter-secularization initiatives was created, partly made possible by the new mass media[[31]](#footnote-31). Among liberal anticlericals an analogue process was in full swing and the young socialist movement also contributed to the hectic climate of the Culture Wars[[32]](#footnote-32). During the papacy of Leo XIII (1878-1903), who encouraged accommodation with liberal regimes and Catholic interest in the social question, the ultramontane ideal of a complete restoration of the Catholic State was relinquished and a more activist intervention of the state in social affairs accepted.[[33]](#footnote-33) In Belgium the move away from ultramontanism starting with Leo XIII was eased by the 30 years of Catholic reign in the national government (1884-1914). The Catholic acceptance of pluralism, of the existence of two separate spheres - one secular and one religious - made the formation of 'a state within a state' – pillarization - possible.[[34]](#footnote-34)

All over Europe societies were confronted with the transnational processes of modernization, secularization and democratization. Yet, these alone do not completely capture the complex reality of the formation of pillars or of strong communities. The national and local context should also be looked into. In countries where a strong link existed between the state and the church(es) like Great Britain, the Scandinavian countries, Spain, Portugal and Ireland no strong religious subcultures and movements arose that began to function as a state within the state. This is for instance evidenced by the absence of a Christian labour movement in these countries[[35]](#footnote-35). Where tensions between the state and the church(es) ran high, the culture wars politicized religious elites and stimulated their creating a separate sphere, as happened in Belgium and the Netherlands.

Ever since the end of the unionist era in 1857[[36]](#footnote-36), ultramontane Belgian Catholics, who did not accept the primacy of the secular state over the papacy, had been displaying much organizational fervour. However, this activity did not yet amount to pillarization because it was aimed at the restoration of a Catholic Belgian state and the reversal of secularization rather than the creation of a Catholic sphere within a plural, secularized society. The crucial impulse for pillarization in Belgium, seems to have come from a different corner, at the local level and in the politically charged atmosphere following the school war (1878-1884), the rise of the social question and the red menace in the 1880s. Although the foundation in 1885 of a successful *national* socialist party, the Belgian Workers Party, was an important catalyst, pillar formation seems to have begun in earnest during the 1880s in the town of Ghent, where local, national and European developments produced the first pillarized organizations that catered to their members from the cradle to the grave[[37]](#footnote-37).

Because they were ostracized politically and socially, the Ghent socialists diverted all their energy towards the creation of their own socialist universe[[38]](#footnote-38). This is a case of what the German historian Dieter Grohe has termed 'negative integration'[[39]](#footnote-39). As social-democrats the Ghent socialists diverted all the negative energy they felt towards the 'bourgeois system' to the development of their own organizations (the so-called organizational patriotism or *Organisationspatriotismus*). A socialist state within the state arose in Ghent. The network of intertwined organizations was based on the consumer cooperatives which funded all other activities: the unions, political groups, mutual aid societies and leisure clubs[[40]](#footnote-40).

The Ghent socialists were very successful in their organizational drive because of the local circumstances in which their movement thrived. Before the First World War, Ghent was the capital of Belgian socialism and the country's most proletarian city (with the highest ratio of factory workers to the total population). The predominant industry in Ghent was textiles, but there was a relatively broad base of industrial activities, including metal works and docks. Because of the slow growth of its textile industry, Ghent had a low immigration rate. People hardly moved, and tended to live in the same neighbourhood from generation to generation. The result was a tight neighbourhood sociability which formed the basis for the strong organizational patriotism felt for *Moeder Vooruit* [Mother Forward] - the affectionate name by which the Ghent socialist movement came to be known, a name derived from its consumer cooperative and its paper, *Vooruit*.

Because of the socialist success, Ghent became the pre-eminent battleground of the Catholic counter-movement against secularization and for the 'soul' of the politically involved masses. The Christian working class movement copied the socialist model, explicitly naming itself 'anti-socialist', and organized their followers in a whole range of organizations. According to some scholars this was the crucial breakthrough of pillarization. The Catholic paternalist-corporatist initiatives before that moment were similar to those in other countries. The pillarized reaction against the Ghent socialists was different because it implied a declericalization of the Catholic labour movement: lay people from working class backgrounds began to play an active and leading role. In other words, this completed the separation of the ideological/religious and the secular spheres, which the concept of pillarization presupposes[[41]](#footnote-41).

Ghent offers another example of how the local level, and more specifically municipal regulations and policies, decidedly influenced the early development of pillarization. In 1900 socialist and Christian labour representatives succeeded in having their unions recognized by the Ghent city council. From that moment on union unemployment payments were subsidized by the municipality. This socalled ‘Ghent system’[[42]](#footnote-42) proved to be crucial in the development of ‘subsidized freedom’ (*liberté subsidiée*) at the national level. This involved the state creating social legislation but leaving the practical realization to the private sector, providing government funding for private initiatives which were in fact state responsibilities[[43]](#footnote-43). ‘This policy led to a unique Belgian situation: services, which in most other countries were undertaken by the state, were carried out by private organizations with community funds.’[[44]](#footnote-44)

Examples like these indicate that early pillarization was a process in which local, national and continental developments converged. As such they show the interlocking of historical evolutions on different spatial scales. Pillarization scholars have given due attention to each of these levels, less to their interaction, but what they have generally neglected (and what was a daily practice at the time) are exchange and contact – the second of the two characteristics of transnational history.

## Cross border exchanges and the formation of pillars: Belgo-Dutch socialist contacts

Scholars of the socialist labour movement have traditionally studied cross-boundary movements. Indeed, socialist internationalism presents a telling example of transnational contact between non-state actors The socialist rank and file often migrated across national boundaries. Thus, Belgian belle époque socialism presents a picture of an entangled history of transnational contact and exchange of persons, material and symbolic goods, practices and discourses with its Dutch, German and French sister movements[[45]](#footnote-45). What concerns us here is the relationship with the pillarization process. As there is practically no research on this particular theme, the subsequent outline is necessarily sketchy and tentative. Despite this dearth, there are sound reasons to look more deeply into this matter: the Ghent socialists played a central role in the early stages of the Belgian pillarization process, they developed a truly missionary zeal to spread their gospel across the Dutch border and focused particularly on introducing the basis of their state within the state model, viz. the consumer cooperatives.

Ever since the First Socialist International (1864-1872), local Dutch and Belgian socialist groups (especially from Ghent) were in close contact. Migration between the countries was very common and stimulated the spread of socialist ideas and practices across the border.[[46]](#footnote-46) For instance, Edmond van Beveren, one of the founding fathers of the socialist movement in Ghent, lived in Rotterdam in 1871[[47]](#footnote-47). Some of the busy Belgo-Dutch contacts were also stimulated by old, cross-border regional ties, for example between Ghent and Vlissingen (Zeeland) or between Liège and the Maastricht-region[[48]](#footnote-48). The example of the young typographer Willem Hubert Vliegen, who would later become one of the first historians of the Dutch socialist movement[[49]](#footnote-49), shows how the transfer of socialist ideas could be the result of chance and personal experience of migration.

When Vliegen left his small hometown in the Dutch province of Limburg in 1881 to see more of the world, he went to the Belgian city of Liège. As he later recalled, for him and many others from the same region ‘the world’ meant Liège, Verviers or Aachen. While going for a walk with a girl in Liège, he saw a group of demonstrators, carrying red flags and a banner saying ‘Vive le suffrage universel’ (Long live universal suffrage). The Dutch-speaking Vliegen did not understand this French slogan, but he was fascinated by the group and the atmosphere around it. His curiosity was stirred, but only two years later, when he was living and working in Amsterdam, he actually attended a meeting of the local socialist group: ‘This naturally revived my memory of my acquaintance with the socialist movement in Liège’[[50]](#footnote-50). At the meeting Vliegen met the leader of the Ghent socialists, Edouard Anseele, and he decided to become a member of the Dutch Social-Democratic League (*Sociaal-Democratische Bond*, est. 1881). For Vliegen, the experience with the Belgian socialists was decisive to become a socialist himself.

In general, the Belgian sections of the First Socialist International were more developed and organized than the only Dutch section in Amsterdam. From 1870 on, the Ghent socialist group organized a yearly Labour congress for ‘all friends of the people’s movement in the northern and southern Netherlands’.[[51]](#footnote-51) The Dutch-speaking sections felt so closely connected that in 1871 they considered creating one overall section for Belgium and the Netherlands, which eventually did not come about, perhaps because of the overall demise of the First International[[52]](#footnote-52). The contacts between the Dutch and Belgian socialists, however, continued, with the latter as the more organized serving as an example to the former. At the end of the 1870s, the local Ghent socialist party, the Flemish Socialist Workers' Party (*Vlaamsche Socialistische Arbeiderspartij*), was the ‘most important international orientation’ of the Amsterdam socialists, who by this time started to organize themselves in some sort of party structure[[53]](#footnote-53). The Amsterdam group took inspiration from the Ghent socialists copying the latter's programme (which itself had been copied from the Germans), while the Ghent socialists called Hendrik Gerhard (the Amsterdam member of the International) a main theoretical influence[[54]](#footnote-54). Instead of the traditional view of the German socialists functioning as an example for socialists all over Europe, a focus on the personal contacts between socialists shows that transfer of the German example to the Dutch socialists came about via Belgium. In this early period of socialist organisation, such close personal contacts were very important in the exchange of ideas and practices, perhaps even more so than the spread of socialist theory.[[55]](#footnote-55)

During the 1880s and 1890s, socialist movements all over Europe were forced to develop into social-democratic parties operating in the same national framework as their competitors. A joint transnational party for both Belgian and Dutch socialists had become illusory, but the tradition of contacts was kept alive. Ghent still harboured a large number of Dutch socialists – in 1892-1894 they were so many that the Belgian labour historian Vanschoenbeek called it the ‘Dutch connection’.[[56]](#footnote-56) Some local sections of the Dutch *Sociaal-Democratische Bond* even complained that the party paper *Recht voor Allen* (Justice for All) wrote more about Ghent and Brussels than about some Dutch sections[[57]](#footnote-57).

How do these transnational contacts relate to pillarization? First of all, pillars and pillarization are post factum terms. *Belle époque* contemporaries did not use them. We have to look for contemporary descriptions of what subsequently has been called pillarization. The Ghent socialists were very aware and proud of their network of interlinked institutions. In 1906 the local party paper wrote: “Vooruit and its institutions are so well known throughout the world: from far away in the ‘Far-West’ [...] to the other corner of the world: New Zealand. ‘Moeder Vooruit’ is a young mother! She is still young, fresh, blooming, full of life and love! [...] she has [...] given birth to many children, but her rich, supple and healthy loins will birth many more and her sturdy breasts, round and full, will suckle her many offspring."[[58]](#footnote-58) Contemporaries did not fail to notice Vooruit's organizational ardour. The liberal Ghent sociologist Louis Varlez commented in 1899: "The socialist federation in Ghent is truly a city within the city, a socialist *patrie* within the national homeland" and a "small socialist universe" in its own right. Varlez described the rank and file as "a constantly mobilized army, forever ready to march"[[59]](#footnote-59). In 1907, Anseele defined his ambition for the average worker as: "from cradle to grave, cooperation and socialism must never leave him"[[60]](#footnote-60). Clearly, there was a contemporary sense of an on-going process of social segmentation into separate and mutually exclusive communities on a strong ideological and political basis, in short: pillarization. From the perspective of transnational transfer, future research can investigate whether there was any conceptual exchange between the Ghent and Dutch socialists in this matter, whether the imagery of closed-off worlds was in any way the result of transfer.

This does not only go for discourses, but also for practices. Propaganda pence (*strijdpenning*), for instance, were subscription lists used to collect money from party members. To make these gifts more attractive the donors could formulate a short statement which was subsequently published in the party papers in a separate section[[61]](#footnote-61). Edouard Anseele thought this practice crucial to creating a tight and exclusive socialist community[[62]](#footnote-62). We know that the Amsterdam and Vlissingen socialists also used propaganda pence[[63]](#footnote-63). Was this a case of transfer?

More importantly with regard to the exchange of practices, there is the central importance of consumer cooperatives in the Ghent socialist model. From a local initiative this soon became the model for Belgian socialism. The Dutch socialist leader, Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis, having heard about the cooperatives but doubting their suitability for socialism, went to Ghent for the first time in 1879. A year later he wrote about the possibilities of cooperatives for the Dutch movement[[64]](#footnote-64). The Ghent socialists themselves were actively spreading the cooperative word across the border and in 1887-1888 Edmond van Beveren went on a propaganda tour with his brochure 'Cooperatives and socialism', bringing him as far north as Groningen[[65]](#footnote-65). It was not a one-way exchange, however. The success of the Ghent bread cooperative was partly due to Dutch innovations. In 1883 Van Beveren had witnessed a new type of oven at the 'Volharding' (Perseverance), the socialist cooperative of The Hague, which was subsequently introduced in Ghent[[66]](#footnote-66). The transfer of the socialist cooperative from Belgium to the Netherlands again shows the importance of personal contacts between people.

It seems clear that in the early period of socialist pillarization the process had an important international side. The people within the movements and the future pillars were influenced by foreign examples. As the developing pillars acquired a stronger identity and a rich associational life which covered every part of daily life, the existing transnational networks changed. Contacts often became more functional and institutionalized, but they continued nevertheless. At the invitation of the Ghent socialists, for instance, more than 800 members of the Dutch SDAP (*Sociaal Democratische Arbeiderspartij*, est. 1894) visited Ghent and Brussels in the summer of 1903 to recover from a failed strike[[67]](#footnote-67). The trip was meant as a consolation and was experienced as a moment of fraternization. This fraternization was reconfirmed at the International Socialist Congress of 1904, when both the Dutch and the Belgian speakers emphasized the special bond between the two movements that were crucial in maintaining the unity of international socialist movement.[[68]](#footnote-68)

The examples of the many international contacts and cross-border flows of goods and ideas between Belgian and Dutch socialists around 1900 show the potential of the transnational turn. At the same time however, we should not overestimate the impact of the transnational level on the development of pillarisation. Contact did not always imply successful transfer. For instance, the diamond workers of Amsterdam and Antwerp frequently moved between both cities. Around 1907 a group of Dutch socialists caused a big discussion in the Antwerp federation about the role of the trade unions. In the Netherlands, trade unions were not part of the socialist party, whereas in Belgium they were. The Dutch brought their own ideas and culture to Antwerp, wanting to change the local practices, but they did not succeed.[[69]](#footnote-69) This failure points to the local and national constraints on transnational transfer.

The most instructive example in this respect is the fate of socialist consumer cooperatives in the Netherlands. Although Domela Nieuwenhuis might never have propagated cooperatives for socialist ends without his visit to Ghent, the ‘vivid example’ of Ghent did not bring a radical transformation of the Dutch socialist movement. In the end, some socialist cooperatives were founded in the Netherlands, but none of them survived very long. Transnational exchange was enabled through a common language, but there remained obstacles to transfer.

These obstacles were of a political, socio-economic and cultural nature and were situated at the local or national level. For one thing, the Netherlands were a less industrialized country than Belgium. A proletarian city like Ghent with a high degree of neighbourhood sociability did not have a Dutch equivalent. The institutional context in which both socialist movements operated may also have hindered transfer. Two examples illustrate this point.

First of all, in Belgium the municipalities played an important role in the organization and funding of primary and secondary education. This made the municipal level into a more harsh ideological battle ground than in the Netherlands. From the moment Belgian socialists gained political footing on the municipal level (and this was the case in the industrialized and urbanized centres from the democratization of suffrage in 1893 onwards), the pillarization of education became crucial to them. In the Netherlands however, education was more centrally organized and funded. Moreover, it had a liberal (non-clerical) basis. Combined with the weak local footing of Dutch socialists this explains why the pillarization of education was less of an issue to them.

Second, the Belgian system of ‘subsidized freedom’ actively stimulated pillarization. This was only possible because the Belgian central state had withdrawn more radically from the public sphere than its Dutch equivalent[[70]](#footnote-70). The 1830 compromise between liberals and Catholics on which the country was founded, had consecrated the (relative) withdrawal of the state from the public domain in the name of freedom. That way liberals obtained a liberal-democratic constitution that sanctioned the separation between State and Church, but, in exchange, the Catholics did not have to fear a strong, pervasive laic state and they could retain their grip on society through their social institutions thanks to the freedoms of religion and education[[71]](#footnote-71). In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when the Belgian state began to outsource its early social policies, the pillars filled the vacuum. In the Netherlands the pillars took on state responsibilities to a lesser extent. Unemployment benefits were modelled on the Ghent system, but social security as a whole had stronger roots in the German example, with a more central role of the central state (albeit to a lesser extent than in Germany and with a firmer Christian dimension)[[72]](#footnote-72).

## Conclusion

Ideally, a transnational look at early socialist pillarization in Belgium and the Netherlands, holds a double advantage over the existing literature on the issue. On the one hand it implies a shift away from the nation-state perspective and from explanations in terms of a national *Sonderweg*, while still taking the national framework into account (not as the default choice, but as one of a number of actors or spatial levels that interact). On the other hand, it avoids the superficiality of broad, noncommittal similarities between different European cases because it focuses on contact and exchange between concrete historical actors. What is important from a transnational perspective are the cross-border relations between people and organizations and the possible transfer of ideas, norms and practices.

The innovative promise of this approach, however, still needs to be realised as actual research on the relationship between pillarization and transnational exchange is thin on the ground. Starting from the particular case of contacts between Belgian and Dutch socialists during the *belle époque*, this exploratory essay seems to indicate that local socio-economic and municipal cultures and the political and legal structures offered by the national state are stronger determinants for the development of pillarization than the transnational level.

However, further research is needed to explain the exact relationship between the international, national and local levels and the complex formation of pillars or strong communities. Investigating these issues from a broad comparative range of European socialists with whom the Belgians and the Dutch were in contact, might give pillarization research a new impetus.

**Abstract**

**The transnational dimensions of the early socialist pillars in Belgium and the Netherlands, c. 1885-1914. An exploratory essay**

Pillarization has mainly been studied in a strictly national context or in international comparisons. In this exploratory essay we ask what transnational history might add to the study of pillarization, focusing on early socialist pillarization in Belgium and the Netherlands. While acknowledging the need to study transnational contacts between and beyond states, this contribution shows the importance of local socio-economic and municipal cultures, but also the influential role of the national state in providing the context for pillarization.

Keywords: pillarization, Belgium, the Netherlands, socialism, transnational history

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