

# Bosmans-Hermans, An

---

## The International Economic Expansion of Belgium and the Primary School (1905-1910)

---

Rozprawy z Dziejów Oświaty 25, 179-186

---

1983

Artykuł umieszczony jest w kolekcji cyfrowej Bazhum, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych tworzonej przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego.

Artykuł został zdigitalizowany i opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie ze środków specjalnych MNiSW dzięki Wydziałowi Historycznemu Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.



AN BOSMANS-HERMANS

## THE INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC EXPANSION OF BELGIUM AND THE PRIMARY SCHOOL (1905—1910)

Exactly 75 years ago, from the 24th to the 28th of September 1905, an international congress on "expansion économique mondiale" was held in Mons, Belgium. This congress, among other things, set off a process of innovation in Belgian primary education. In this communication, I will discuss some of the moments and aspects of this process.

The Mons congress was organized at the initiative of Leopold II, then the king of Belgium<sup>1</sup>, and was part of a series of congresses, exhibitions, and festivities held on the occasion of the 75th jubilee of Belgian independence (1830—1905). With this congress, the Belgian government and the leading class wanted to confirm the national economic and material growth before an international forum and to investigate the possibilities for more favorable international relationships. The central themes of the congress were the development of commercial relationships with foreign countries and particularly the relations between "les pays neufs et les pays de vieille civilisation"<sup>2</sup>—in other words, the colonization policy. About 2,500 participants from various countries took part in the activities, and thirty-four states sent official representatives. By way of preparation for the discussions, approximately 400 reports were submitted and distributed. The activities were classified into six divisions: 1. Education (subdivided into primary, secondary, and higher education); 2. International Statistics; 3. International Commercial Relations; 4. Maritime Shipping; 5. Civilizing the

<sup>1</sup> King Leopold II (1865—1909) exercised an important influence on the industrial development of Belgium. With the help of the Belgian government, he acquired the Congo region in Central Africa and had himself recognized as the sovereign of the Independent Congo State. After more than twenty years of personal rule, he transferred the Congo to Belgium as a colony in 1908.

<sup>2</sup> Minister A. Beernaert in the opening speech to the congress (24 September 1905): *Congrès international d'expansion économique mondiale tenu à Mons du 24 au 28 septembre 1905 sous le haut patronage de Sa Majesté Le Roi Léopold II et du gouvernement Belge. Documents préliminaires et Compte rendu des séances*, vol. II, *Compte rendu des séances*, Brussels 1905, p. 11.

“New Countries”; 6. Persons and Resources Intended for Economic Expansion.

These subjects are significant indications of the international interest of the congress participants. But what did Belgian primary education have to do with these broad international problems? What was expected of primary education in function of international economic development? How was the primary school involved in these problems?

After an official commission was charged on February 17th 1905 with the preparation of the congress and a general program was worked out on February 28th<sup>3</sup>, the Belgian Ministry of Internal Affairs—then responsible for public education—began to participate actively in the preparation of the congress. At the end of March, the Minister of Internal Affairs stated that, after the example of other Western European countries, Belgium had to resolutely orient itself in the future toward a world perspective. By means of an adapted system of education, young Belgians must be prepared to play a role in this new economic orientation. This preparation consisted not just of specialized professional training in advanced education. The primary school, too, would be assigned a task.

To involve the teachers from the very beginning in the new orientation of primary education, the Minister decided that the subjects planned for the pedagogical conferences of the Summer of 1905 would be replaced by discussion of the theme of the Mons congress<sup>4</sup>. The teachers were asked the following general question: “Must the preparation for economic expansion of a country begin already in the primary school?”

The congress commission had divided this general question into various sub-questions and, by so doing, already suggested elements of the answer. They ran as follows: 1. What are the most efficient means to induce a spirit of enterprise in the children (professions to which the attention of the present generation needs to be attracted, ways of stimulating the desire for expansion, special courses, special occasion education, libraries, lectures, etc.)? 2. What are the methods of preparing the young both in adult schools and in professional schools for the expansion (teaching foreign languages, initiation to professions and trades that have application in overseas areas; school museums; museums for industrial arts, etc.)? 3. What are the means by which teachers may be prepared for their new task: a) in teacher training, b) in supplementary education of teachers already working?<sup>5</sup> The answers

---

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. XXXI—XL.

<sup>4</sup> Ministerial circular letter of 29 March 1905.

<sup>5</sup> The suggestion regarding the relation between professional education and the economic expansion was included in the questionnaire on primary education

the teachers formulated to these questions served both as preparation for the pedagogical conferences and as preparation for the Mons congress. A commission of educational experts appointed by the Minister<sup>6</sup> collated the answers and drew up a common report. In addition, a considerable number of individual reports were submitted to the congress by primary and secondary school teachers and other interested parties.

How did the Belgian teacher corps react to this new theme introduced by the authorities? According to the commission report, the Belgian teachers expressed themselves virtually unanimously for preparation for economic expansion from the primary school on<sup>7</sup>. They did not want the preparation to be understood in the sense of stimulating emigration to overseas areas. The primary school must contribute to the promotion of the economic situation of Belgium on the world market by the formation of physically, morally, and intellectually more competent workers. The commission placed the orientation of the primary school toward economic expansion in the framework of the attempts to make the primary school "l'école pour la vie". The primary school must teach the children of the people to know better the society in which they live. The school must particularly instill a number of social virtues so that the children will be able to play an exemplary role in this society. To the degree that the problem of economic expansion is a social problem for the entire population, the primary school must also contribute to forming the children of the people in this new perspective. What could the primary school do concretely to accomplish this new task? The commission, first of all, stressed the imparting and promoting of various character traits and attitudes: rectitude, enthusiasm, a spirit of enterprise, will power, perseverance, zest for work, civic spirit, and the like. For this, the primary school must, among other things, accustom the children to effort and discipline and provide opportunities for arousing and possibly channeling their interests and giving them the experience of the importance and power of co-operation. To fulfill its new task, the program of the primary school must not be expanded. Education in function of economic expansion was first a question of the sphere in the class (wall posters, documentation material) and of the general mentality of the teacher. The teacher can profit from numerous opportunities to turn the attention of the pupils to the various aspects of economic life. In special lessons and at nume-

---

by the congress commission, which was composed mostly of politicians, high functionaries, and industrialists. It was hardly treated, however, in the subdivision "primary education", and was only treated cursorily in the subdivision "secondary education".

<sup>6</sup> Composed of high functionaries of the public education administration, inspectors, directors, and teachers in the teacher training institutes.

<sup>7</sup> The report was drawn up by A. Famenne, a teacher at the state normal school at Verviers.

rous points in the courses in language, arithmetic, geography, history, natural history, hygiene, etc., the teacher can introduce aspects of the problems of economic expansion. Appropriate school posters, readers, a small school museum, showing lantern slides, visits to factories, the establishment of an organization for world expansion, and the like were suggested as aids<sup>8</sup>. Of very great importance for the implementation of the new orientation of primary education was, according to the reports, the attention that economic expansion would receive in teacher training<sup>9</sup>. Here, too, the new emphases were primarily to be included within the existing courses, but the commission also proposed the addition of a new course in political economy. In the education of girls, it was not only expected that they would be formed into competent and virtuous women, but that they would also be accustomed to the idea that, as wives, they would leave the land of their birth without fear to go elsewhere to establish their families.

Can this summary report be considered a sign that Belgian teachers were unanimously positive about the introduction of the problems of economic expansion into primary education, that they recognize its importance, and that they were immediately prepared to go to work in this new direction? I do not think so, and this for a number of reasons. First, the questions directed to the teachers did not simply have an informative character. They were formulated in advance to elicit a positive answer. The teachers, moreover, had to draw up the answers as an obligatory preparation for the work of the conference. There is no doubt that the teachers knew that their superiors did not expect a negative position. Still, several found it necessary to formulate their hesitations, their uncertainty regarding the contribution of the primary school to economic expansion, much more explicitly in their answers than is reflected in the summary report. Some teachers even expressly distanced themselves from the broad orientation of the questions and wrote what they did in their schools to prepare the children for the economic activities of the local population<sup>10</sup>. Finally, various contributions reflect ignorance of the subject. The teachers found it necessary to give definitions of economic expansion, to mention in passing that they lacked information on the Belgian economic situation,

---

<sup>8</sup> *Congrès international d'expansion économique mondiale...*, *Rapports. Section I — Enseignement*, vol. I, pp. 1—27.

<sup>9</sup> Not only the teachers but also the teaching staff of the teacher training institutes responded to the question regarding the function of teacher training with respect to the problematic of economic expansion.

<sup>10</sup> Teachers from communes with "seasonal workers" (workers who went to France each year for a considerable time) gave, among other things, an extensive report on what they did to prepare the children for their stay in a foreign country.

they themselves needed more preparation to be able to deal successfully with the matter of economic expansion <sup>11</sup>.

During the Mons congress in the education division, not only was the report of the special commission brought up for discussion, but also various other reports that were submitted. In them, the problem of education in general was introduced in addition to the function of the primary school in the framework of economic expansion. The then ongoing discussion on the function and approach of physical education in schools also was introduced at the congress and allotted a considerable amount of time. Some speakers also cautioned about the assignment of more new tasks to the primary school. They argued that the primary school should retain its general formative character and that the problems of economic expansion should be given a place in the primary school only within the limits of this general formation. A delegate from the "Ligue de l'éducation familiale" <sup>12</sup> offered the following consideration in the name of Belgian parents: "Il nous semble que chaque congrès demande une mission de plus à remplir par l'école primaire, les instituteurs sont invités à s'occuper de tout à l'école primaire et nous ne serions pas étonnés qu'à un moment donné, ils ne se trouvent en présence de tendances presque contradictoires..." <sup>13</sup>. She stated that the primary educational milieu in which the character of the child is formed remained the family. In this perspective, the family, too, can provide a not insignificant contribution to economic development. The recommendations proposed by the educational division and approved at the closing session of the congress concerned first of all the importance of gymnastics in education. The recommendations regarding the function of the primary school with respect to economic development were, so to speak, copied from the general report of the special educational commission. By including also the primary school and not just, for example, advanced commercial and professional education in economic

<sup>11</sup> The opening sentences of the conference work of J. Pétry, a teacher from Namur, are noteworthy in this regard: „Cette question a causé chez nous, comme chez beaucoup de nos confrères d'ailleurs, un effarement assez sensible. Confirmé, trop exclusivement peut-être, dans les études pédagogiques et psychologiques, très peu au courant des questions économiques et sociales, nous penchâmes résolument à priori pour le négative. Toutefois, dans notre désir d'étayer consciencieusement notre réponse, nous consacraâmes nos vacances de Pâques à la lecture d'ouvrages spéciaux, ce qui modifia petit à petit notre opinion première. Le travail nous apparut sous un autre aspect et nous nous félicitâmes de n'avoir point porté un jugement prématuré" (*Congrès international d'expansion économique mondiale...*, *Rapports. Section I. — Enseignement*, vol. I, p. 46).

<sup>12</sup> A Catholic organization established in 1900 with the objective of improving family education. It was oriented primarily to women from the middle class.

<sup>13</sup> R. Boreux, *Rapport de la Ligue de l'éducation familiale*, p. 3 (*Congrès international d'expansion économique mondiale...*, *Rapports. Section I. — Enseignement*, vol. I).

expansion, the congress hoped "de voir associer, par l'école, *le peuple tout entier à l'oeuvre de notre expansion*"<sup>14</sup>, en l'initiant prudemment et résolument à la réalité contemporaine, la lutte économique"<sup>15</sup>. This recommendation can be seen as a formulation of the ultimate objective of the introduction of the problematic of economic expansion into primary education. Finally, various recommendations were also made regarding the appropriate training of teachers.

Did these recommendations, these sometimes vaguely formulated objectives, have any significant effect on the Belgian primary school after 1905? While I could not investigate the degree in which the theme of economic expansion had concrete repercussions in classroom practice, it is clear that this theme was discussed regularly in the pedagogical journals for some years (from after the Mons congress to around 1910), and that it was a central theme of the program of teachers conferences. These conferences were the obvious means of assisting the teachers to put the "expansion ideas" into practice. Already at the end of 1905, the Minister of Internal Affairs announced that the teachers conferences of 1906 would take up the concretization of the problematic in the classroom. The inspectors were to discuss the results of the classroom. The inspectors were to discuss the results of the Mons congress with the teachers, and it would be considered how information could be given about Belgian agriculture, industry, and foreign trade in the various courses. To enable the inspectors to assist and stimulate the teachers, a course in political economy was set up in 1906 for them and for the teachers of the theory of education and geography in the teacher training institutes<sup>16</sup>. During the 1907 conferences, the inspectorate communicated the newly acquired knowledge to the teachers. The Minister of Internal Affairs, at the end of 1906<sup>17</sup>, found it necessary to warn the teachers against going too far in classroom practice in their zeal for reform. While the teachers themselves had to have some notion of economics, they should not teach it as such to the pupils. They should be able to use their acquired insights as a frame of reference in courses on geography, natural history, special lessons about the pupils' own environment, and so on. After 1907, the explicit concern of the authorities for the introduction of "expansion ideas" into primary education began to ebb.

<sup>14</sup> Italics mine.

<sup>15</sup> *Congrès international d'expansion économique mondiale...*, Documents préliminaires et Compte rendu des séances, p. 263. Although it was an international congress, most of the recommendations directly concerned the Belgian situation. Several congress participants expressly did not want to endorse the international implications of the recommendations.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. the ministerial circular letters of 29 and 30 December 1905 and 18 June 1906. The courses were given in Liège from 23 August to 1 September.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. the ministerial circular letter of 10 December 1906.

On April 15th, 1909, the Minister of Arts and Sciences<sup>18</sup> explicitly stated that ideas on economic expansion should be touched on only occasionally in the primary school. He corrected the opinion of some too zealous reformers who considered it desirable that all of education be oriented toward economic expansion. He indicated the courses in which information about the economic development of Belgium and other countries should be given. This letter from the Minister to the directors of the teacher training institutes and the directors of the primary schools can be considered the administrative rounding off of the process that had been set in motion four years previously<sup>19</sup>. The qualitative improvement of primary education during the next few years would be mainly oriented to giving concrete form to the concept of "l'école pour la vie" by means of, among other things, the introduction of special occasion teaching.

Meanwhile, the pedagogical journals<sup>20</sup> played a rather important role with regard to "economic expansion" in the period of 1905—1910. Their function was multiple<sup>21</sup>. Some journals gave information and commentaries on the reform and published entire series of practical lessons. Several inspectors used the journals to communicate their ideas to the teachers. The conference assignments were also given extensive coverage. A few journals adopted a critical standpoint: journals that did not support the government such as "Le Ralliement" and "L'Enseignement pratique" considered this educational reform to be political. They argued that children had a right to neutral and scientific formation instead of tendentious propaganda about the colonial and commercial policy of the government. The influential Catholic journal, "De Christene School", went along with the reform only hesitantly, and warned against a succession of innovations. It deemed the entire project on economic expansion to be ill-considered. In addition to this supportive and sometimes critical function, the journals also served as sounding boards for the reactions of the teachers. Several journals

---

<sup>18</sup> Public education was transferred to the Ministry of Arts and Sciences in 1907.

<sup>19</sup> The political and economic situation in Belgium had changed considerably since 1905. King Leopold II, the great promoter of Belgian economic expansion, died in 1909. The Congo became a colony of Belgium in 1908. This general development presumably also had an influence on the interest for and the attitude toward the ideas of economic expansion in education.

<sup>20</sup> With regard to the pedagogical journals that appeared in this period, cf. M. De Vroede et al. *Bijdragen tot de geschiedenis van het pedagogisch leven in België in de 19de en 20ste eeuw. De periodieken*, 3 vol., Ghent—Leuven, 1973—1978.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. J. Moriau, *Werelduitbreiding, Pedagogisch-didactische vernieuwing in de lagere school, 1905—1910* (non-published license memoire, Katholieke Universiteit te Leuven, Faculteit der Psychologie en Pedagogische Wetenschappen, 1976).



reported the displeasure the teachers felt about having this new task thrust suddenly upon them. They contended that the essential tasks of the primary school risked being neglected while all the attention went to the study of rapidly evolving social phenomena. Thus, the pedagogical journals of the period provide us with a number of reverberations caused by the implementation of the educational reform. They allow us to conclude that the Belgian teachers undoubtedly tried to carry out the reform, which was introduced and promoted by the authorities. But this did not occur without questions or resistance. Education in a perspective alien to the educational milieu of the primary school placed the teachers before unknown tasks. Not all of them opened their classes to the world with equal enthusiasm. And was it not those teachers who rather hesitantly and carefully investigated the possibilities of education in function of economic expansion who turned out to be right in 1909? Although a complete evaluation of this innovation is lacking, I think we can conclude from the sources examined here that the authorities, for a short time, wanted to mobilize the primary school for the "expansion économique mondiale", but that they, together with a large number of teachers, realized after a time that the "world" of the overseas regions did not belong to the world of the child of the beginning of the 20th century. "L'école pour la vie" meant, in the first place, attunement of the school to the concrete reality in which the child lived his everyday life.