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Political Sustainability during the First Years of Belgian Independence and Its Depiction in Belgian National History Textbooks in the First Half of the 20th Century

Abstract

Über das Thema „Nachhaltigkeit“ wird heute oft im Zusammenhang mit Umweltproblemen, wie Luftverschmutzung und globaler Erwärmung, diskutiert. In Bildungsmedien ist dann häufig vom notwendigen Engagement für eine „nachhaltige Entwicklung“ die Rede, bei der es um die Sicherung einer gesunden und lebenswerten Umwelt geht, insbesondere in Sozialkunde- und Geografie-, aber z. B. auch in Religionsbüchern. In der Vergangenheit wurde dieser Begriff teilweise in ganz anderem Sinne verwendet. So wurde beispielsweise in der belgischen Geschichtsschreibung unter „Nachhaltigkeit“ lange Zeit vor allem das politische Bemühen um einen politisch stabilen und sozialen Staat verstanden, der Frieden und Wohlergehen für seine Bürger*innen anstrebte. In diesem Beitrag wird mithilfe einer qualitativen Inhaltsanalyse belgischer Geschichtsbücher aus den Jahren 1910–1960 und vor dem Hintergrund der offiziellen belgischen Geschichtsschreibung untersucht, wie diese Darstellung von „nachhaltiger“ Politik konkret aussah.

Keywords: political sustainability, Belgian History education, state and welfare, nation building, biographical history

1 Introduction

The attention paid to the topic of sustainability in Belgian education at all levels has never been greater than in recent decades. Nowadays, the term ‘sustainability’ is often associated with all kinds of environmental problems, such as air pollution, global warming, and so on. In response, pedagogical materials then link the term ‘sustainability’ to a pursuit of ‘sustainable development’ that aims, among other things, to recreate a healthy and livable environment for both current and future generations, through a focused and environment-friendly economy. Unsurprisingly, in secondary education, these themes mainly come to the fore in Social Studies and Geography textbooks. For example, the textbook *Telescoop* [Telescope] (Rondeaux et al., 2021), widely used within Catholic education, for the subject Geography at the third year of all levels of secondary education, exclusively zooms in on these issues throughout the whole school year. But also in contemporary Catholic Religious Education one can easily point at a still growing and diversified focus on these

issues at all levels. This is shown, among other things, by the more than 700 results quickly generated by the search term 'milieu' ['environment'] on the Thomas website, the most widely used learning platform for Flemish Religious Education teachers,¹ with numerous references to relevant model lessons, relevant topics and documentation. Care for the environment is apparently simply part and parcel of being a Christian, and the educational focus on it is partly driven by recent Church documents, such as the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* from 2004, which devotes one of its twelve chapters entirely to environmental responsibility, and especially by the late Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si* from 2015, which focused exclusively on environmental care.

However, linking the terms 'sustainability' and 'sustainable development' to the protection of the environment seems to be a fairly recent phenomenon in the pedagogical context. In this entire discourse, however, there is increasing interest in a concentric approach, in which ecological problems are increasingly studied from and in connection with other relevant dimensions (see especially, e.g., Grober, 2012; Santander et al., 2022). For example, Lintsen et al. in their pioneering study *Well-being, Sustainability and Social Development. The Netherlands 1850–2050* (2018) both examine the link between economic progress and global well-being in the Netherlands (see, e.g., pp. 7, 31–41) as well as the relationship between sustainability, well-being and the presence of social measures, such as a policy aimed at realizing the right to housing, good health care, etc. (see, e.g., pp. 13, 364, 465). Also from a more nuanced and broader approach, several other authors have nowadays carried out research into the so-called more specific political dimension of sustainability, trying to find out how, at the current local and/or regional institutional level, one can contribute to a greater or lesser extent to what is called a livable society, and again not only on an ecological level (see, e.g., Adebayo et al., 2022, pp. 5–11). Many of these studies invariably reveal in one way or another that politically stable, independent and well-organized states and nations do indeed perform significantly better in terms of sustainability, and this from multiple perspectives (see especially, e.g. Scoones, 2016, pp. 293–296). From a broader international perspective, it is perhaps interesting to note here that this broadening of perspective in academic circles runs curiously parallel to the same broadening of perspective within key international umbrella organizations in their pursuit of a sustainable society. For example, the current United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs' manifesto for achieving sustainable development includes the following goals: "3. Good Health and Well-Being"; "8. Decent Work and Economic Growth"; "16. Peace, Justice and Stable Institutions".²

This emphasis on the political dimension in the whole theoretical discussion of sustainability prompted me to investigate whether traces of this can also be found in Belgian History education. More specifically, this was done through a limited case study of a few widely used Belgian secondary school National History textbooks between 1910 and 1960, with help of a qualitative content analysis in the light of the surrounding Belgian official historiography (see, e.g., Depaepe & Simon, 2003, Van Wiele, 2011). The focus hereby was on the treatment of Belgian history since Belgian independence in 1830 until the death of the first Belgian king in 1865. As such, this is a follow-up study to our recent previous research on specifically nationalistic tendencies in these textbooks, but from a completely different perspective (Van Wiele, 2022).

1 See Thomas – Godsdienstonderwijs.be. <https://www.kuleuven.be/thomas/page/>

2 See <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

A first and initial exploratory study quickly revealed that the concept of sustainability in its current ecological interpretation, together with its related modern problems and dimensions, is not explicitly and similarly addressed in these textbooks and in the surrounding Belgian national historiography, simply because they were written in a completely different context in which there was no contemporary debate about ecological sustainability at all. Yet, after a more in-depth study, it became equally clear that the narrative constructed in this pedagogical-didactic literature about the early history of independent Belgium since 1830, albeit using somewhat different terminologies, provided interesting insights into political and, in its wake, also social sustainability, especially from a time-bound political-institutional and nationalist-biographical perspective and initially centered around the figure of Leopold I, the first king of the Belgians. Remarkable parallels could be drawn between the way in which the political dimension of sustainability is conceived in contemporary theoretical literature and the way in which the story of the construction and development of the young Belgian state is narrated in the textbooks and national historiography studied, because in all cases the importance of creating and maintaining a stable, independent and well-organized constitutional political and social entity is always strongly emphasized in an implicit or explicit manner. In textbooks and surrounding historiography, this process is then further substantiated using aspects or order words centered around the free will of a people who sought, through targeted measures, peace, prosperity and welfare for all members of the nation and, if possible, beyond. What exactly this means in this case, then, and what aspects and elements are specifically and concretely provided by the textbook authors and in the surrounding Belgian historiography for this purpose, will be clarified in the content analysis below itself. The focus here will be on the figure of King Leopold I himself because, as one of the best-known textbooks puts it in line with the other textbooks examined, he “dedicated his best powers to the advancement and material welfare of the young state” (Gysels & Van Den Eynde, 1955, p. 698).³ In doing so, I hope to make a small and modest contribution to the theorizing within the current sustainability discourse, if only through a first and exploratory study to offer a better and more nuanced understanding of the multiplicity of the concept of political sustainability in the context of Belgian History education in the first half of the last century.

2 Sources and Method

2.1 Sample

An attempt was made to glance through the most used Belgian History textbooks for the secondary level, both in Catholic and in state-run education, as far as they report on Leopold I coherently, for the period 1910–1960. To this end, I searched the most important depository of textbooks in Belgium, namely the collection of textbooks in the former *Archief- en Documentatiecentrum voor Historische Pedagogiek* [Archive and Documentation Center for Historical Pedagogy], now incorporated in the *Historische Collectie Psychologie en Pedagogische Wetenschappen* [Historical Psychology and Educational Sciences Collection] of the Catholic University of Louvain, supplemented with a search in the section of History teaching education in the library of the faculty of Literature and Philosophy at the same university. I also had recourse to the special collection of textbooks in the ‘aggregation’

³ All translations from Flemish and French into English by J.V.W.

section in the library of the Ghent University. The universum was composed on the basis of all editions of the different textbooks found. Afterwards a spot check was made on the basis of the following criteria: only insofar as the different editions of the same textbooks showed modifications in view of the most recent available edition, were they included in the sample. Preference was given to the Dutch translations of originally French versions. The random check eventually resulted in eleven textbooks.

2.2 Method

In order to be able to classify the sources in their quantity and multidimensionality in a comprehensible way, I first constructed a content-related scheme of categories. This was based upon the Belgian educational and history-scientific structuralizing principle as it comes to the fore in the textbooks related to the first king of the Belgians I had gone through and also related to the parallel content in the surrounding official scientific Belgian national historiography. Initially, this resulted in the following content-related cluster of dimensions: Leopold's birth and family, his first years of life, his military and diplomatic actions, his marriage to the English crown princess, his refusal of the Greek throne, his assumption of the Belgian throne, Leopold's inauguration in Belgium, the 'Ten-days' Campaign', the *Treaty of the XXIV Articles*, Leopold's second marriage and family, internal politics, Leopold and the social issue, the Revolution of 1848, death of the queen, foreign policy, Leopold's attempts of colonization, 25th jubilee of Belgian Independence and, finally, the death of Leopold I.

Once the substantive content-related dimensions had been determined, a detailed descriptive-hermeneutical analysis in all texts in the retained textbooks and surrounding historiography brought together all those items that could in some way, implicitly or explicitly, be linked to the theme of sustainability from a political and social perspective. However, this initial research showed that the results could best be summarized into three normative clusters or dimensions, namely 1. Aspects of sustainability in the life of Prince Leopold (including Leopold's birth and family, first years of life, military and diplomatic actions, marriage to the English crown princess and refusal of the Greek throne), 2. Aspects of sustainability in King Leopold's foreign policy (summarizing the 'Ten-days' Campaign', *Treaty of the XXIV Articles*, Leopold's second marriage and family, Revolution of 1848, foreign policy and Leopold's attempts of colonization), and 3. Aspects of sustainability in King Leopold's domestic policy (cluster of the assumption of the Belgian throne, Leopold's inauguration, internal politics, Leopold and the social issue, death of the queen, 25th jubilee and death of Leopold I).

In doing so, starting from the presentation of the question, the following aspects were subsumed more specifically under these three main categories.

2.2.1 Aspects of sustainability in the life of Prince Leopold

Under this rubric, all information from the textbooks and historiography that in a direct or indirect way offered interesting insights into "political sustainability" in the sense of the construction of a prosperous politically stable, independent and well-organized Belgian state, but then related to the figure of Leopold I before his accession to the throne of Belgium, is brought together. Starting from the information in the sources themselves, we zoom in on Leopold's extensive military experience, his great diplomatic skills, his extensive international network and his ties with the most powerful royal houses of the

time, all of which apparently contributed to the much-needed stability and independence of the fledgling kingdom.

2.2.2 Aspects of sustainability in King Leopold's foreign policy

This chapter brings together all the information from the textbooks and historiography that in a direct or indirect way offers interesting insights into "political sustainability" in the sense of building a prosperous politically stable, independent and well-organized Belgian state, but then involved in the foreign policy of Leopold I as King of the Belgians. Based on the sources examined, this mainly involves the following aspects: Leopold's international mediation to obtain for Belgium territorially and economically the most favorable conditions for independence, the defense of the country's borders and the construction of a sufficiently strong army, the tightening of ties with the great powers, among other things through his marriage to a French princess, and the expansion of international trade relations, among other things through a targeted colonization policy.

2.2.3 Aspects of sustainability in King Leopold's domestic policy

This main category embraces all information from the textbooks and historiography that in a direct or indirect way offers interesting insights into "political sustainability" in the sense of the construction of a prosperous politically stable, independent and well-organized Belgian state in the domestic politics of Leopold I as King of the Belgians. Starting from the information that can be found about this in textbooks and historiography itself, this is mainly centered around the following political aspects: having a liberal constitution, a well-functioning democracy and a national administrative organization. These aspects of political endurance are tight together with sustainability on the social level (pursued by the development of solid educational institutions for all, a high work rate, government protection of the socially disadvantaged, having sufficient and healthy food, the right to protective trade unions for workers, state corrective action to forestall inflation) and on the economic level (the building up of a sound economic infrastructure in the light of an emerging industrial society).

For reasons of space, only the most important aspects that in one way or another refer to political sustainability in this research are presented here below.

3 Analysis

If one compares the treatment of Belgian history since 1830 in the Belgian National History textbooks from this period with those in the surrounding Belgian historiography at that time (see, e.g., Bronne, 1947; De Lichtervelde, 1929; Pirenne, 1932), several observations can be made. These apply to all textbooks, both those used in state education (Baekens et al., 1950; Dorchy et al., 1953; Gysels & Van Den Eynde, 1955; Vander Linden, 1922) and those intended for Catholic free education (Dierickx, 1955; Kurth, 1924, 1934; Leclère, 1931, 1937; Mercelis, 1922; Poukens, 1942). In the first place, a certain selectivity can be observed, since all textbooks within this period mainly retain those data from the known scientific Belgian historiography that, from their nationalist point of view, legitimize the construction of an independent and sustainable Belgium, and, secondly, the major role assigned to King Leopold I in this regard. This not only goes for the older textbooks up to World War II, which, like the then predominant biographical historiography in

History education, almost completely conflate Belgian history since independence with a biography of King Leopold I applied to Belgian history, with an emphasis on political and military history. But even in the younger textbooks, which no longer start from an apparently outdated biographical-narrative, but rather from a broader institutional and structuralist history of civilization, which now pays more attention to the economic and social dimensions in addition to the political factors (see, e.g., De Schrijver, 1990; Dorsman, 1991; Tollebeek, 1998), the undeniable contribution of the first king of the Belgians is referred to briefly but still systematically.

What counts here for my presentation of the question is that both older and younger textbooks invariably talk in the case of Belgium about achieving political autonomy, a stable and well-organized government and civil service, a well-functioning economy, sufficient social welfare, domestic and foreign peace associated with good political and economic foreign relations, etc. – all things, then, that are considered essential features of a sustainable nation to this day. In what follows, using some of the many examples from the textbooks examined, I will illustrate what is meant here. In order to bring some unity to the diverse material, and taking into account the central role of Leopold I in it, the various relevant themes are categorized under the following threefold division: Prince Leopold as a predictor of sustainability, Belgian foreign sustainability and Belgian domestic sustainability.

3.1 Aspects of sustainability in the life of Prince Leopold

What is striking is that textbook authors generally pay relatively little attention to Prince Leopold's first phase of life (born in 1790). If they do, they cite from the available surrounding historiography (see, e.g., Bronne, 1947, pp. 15–52; De Lichtervelde, 1929, pp. 15–17; Pirenne, 1932, pp. 48–48) only those data that they believe contributed positively to the construction of a lasting kingdom of Belgium at a later stage. For example, Mercelis cites the following in relation to Leopold's early years and earliest youth: "From his youth onwards, the future king of the Belgians distinguished himself by his serious character and his diligent enthusiasm for his study" (1922, p. 259). Several authors also emphasize the military qualities and experience that the young Leopold had acquired early on and that he would put at the disposal of safeguarding the independence of the fledgling Belgian kingdom in the fight against foreign aggressors, mainly the Dutch King William I. Kurth, for instance, states in both editions of the textbook retained here, with respect to the mentioning of Leopold's selection by the National Congress on June 4th 1831 as king of the Belgians, that Leopold had fought bravely in the ranks of the allied forces against Napoleon in 1813 and 1814 (1924, p. 208; 1934, p. 194). The fact that Kurth is intent on emphasizing Leopold's military qualities, is also revealed in the added portrait of Leopold I, where he is depicted in his military uniform, covered with decorations (1924, p. 209; 1934, p. 195). Leclère also covers this aspect of the first history of Leopold I in the same vein. In both editions of his work *Geschiedenis van België* [History of Belgium] he reminds us in small print that Leopold had participated in the last European wars against Napoleon I (1931, p. 171; 1937, p. 194). The same remarks are valid for the book by Baekens et al., when they write about Leopold I in a similar context that he used to serve in the Russian army (1950, p. 132).

In addition, the textbook authors also like to point to the great international influence that Leopold had acquired through his marriage in 1816 to the English Crown Princess

Charlotte Augusta, the only daughter of the later King George IV of the United Kingdom, but who had died grievously a year later after giving birth to a stillborn son. Some authors, such as Vander Linden, only briefly mention Leopold's first marriage (1922, p. 245), while many others add additional comments to further highlight Leopold's great foreign influence, as, for example, Poukens, who argues, after the mention of Leopold's widowerhood, that the latter preferred to stay in England and acquired great influence at the court (1942, p. 243). The same can be said about both Dierickx and Gysels & Van Den Eynde, when they add the following to the decease of Leopold I's first wife respectively:

"Ever since, the prince resided in England and was most appreciated there. The Brits were greatly flattered by the fact that our National Congress selected him to be king of the Belgians" (Dierickx, 1955, p. 189).

"The prince stayed in England, the political regime of which he admired and where family ties kept him: he was an uncle of queen Victoria by marriage, who often sought his advice" (Geysels & Van Den Eynde, 1955, p. 697).

Also, the addition that in 1830 Leopold had refused the Greek crown which several textbook authors in this context bring forward, can be interpreted from a similar line, namely to make proverbially the internationally recognized value of Leopold. The textbook by Baekens et al. even makes an explicit reference to this by the laudatory statement that Leopold drew the attention as pretender to the Belgian throne because, due to his political relations and family ties, he was likely to please most powers (1950, p. 134).

3.2 Aspects of sustainability in King Leopold's foreign policy

It should come as no surprise that when dealing with the first decades of the history of independent Belgium, the textbooks under consideration pay a lot of attention to Belgian foreign relations as a determinant in the realization of political sustainability. Indeed, even official Belgian historiography states without equivocation that not all of the so-called Great Powers were equally happy with Belgian independence at the time, and Russia and Prussia, for the sake of restoring the European balance of power, preferred to restore the United Kingdom of the Netherlands as a buffer state against France (see, e.g., Bronne, 1947, pp. 67ff.; De Lichtervelde, 1929, pp. 34–44, 64; Luyckx & Platel, 1985, pp. 59–60, 71–74; Pirenne, 1932; Van Wiele, 2018; Witte, 1983, pp. 318–327). For more than a decade, this cast a dark shadow over the development of the young Belgian state, and older textbooks from this period in particular report extensively on this. Thereby, sometimes implicitly but usually very openly, they praise the crucial role that Leopold played in this. In line with the preceding description of his personal and diplomatic qualities, the first King of the Belgians is hailed as the man who, through his quiet determination, incisiveness, military prowess and his European influence, not only strengthened the position of the young state but, above all, secured it permanently. Again, we cite only a few of numerous examples.

For instance, several authors first of all extolled the wise action of Prince Leopold, who did not want to accept the Belgian throne if the provisional Belgian regime had not approved the so-called *Treaty of the XVIII Articles*. They correctly bring in mind, in one way or another, that this treaty contained the peace terms that the Great Powers France, Great Britain, Russia and Prussia wanted to impose on Belgium in exchange for their guarantee of independence, something that meant a considerable loss of territory for Belgium. The

underlying idea is that Leopold, however, through his extensive international network, understood better than anyone else that without the Provisional Government's approval of these terms, the young Belgian state had no chance of survival and that he therefore used, behind the scenes, all his political influence to make the Great Powers' peace terms for a secession of the Netherlands as favourable as possible for Belgium, something which, through his efforts, even led to some changes to the original treaty in Belgium's favour. A typical example is the passage in Poukens:

"In order to obtain more advantageous principles of the separation, the Congress counted on the influence of Prince Leopold [...] who actually obtained a concession from England, which was included into the *Temporary Treaty of the XVIII articles*: Belgium did have to yield *Zeeland Flanders*, but it could still hope for the acquirement of *Maastricht* and *Luxemburg*. It was declared *independent*; the powers guaranteed its *neutrality*; it obtained *free navigation* on the Scheldt and the Terneuzen canal, but Antwerp was not to become a military harbour (June 26th)" (1942, p. 237; accentuation in the original).

Many authors see a second important contribution to Belgium's stability and sustainability in Leopold's military action as soon as he had assumed the kingship. It is recounted how, as newly appointed head of the army, he hastily organized the defense of the country against the incursions of the Dutch army under the Dutch King William I, who was also unwilling to accept the *Treaty of the XVIII Articles* and had declared war on Belgium. Some of them bring to mind Leopold's calling for the assistance of the French, after which the latter sent their army, under the command of field-marshal Gérard, to our country and forced the Dutch into a truce (Baekens et al., 1950, p. 134; Gysels & Van Den Eynde, 1955, p. 705; Kurth, 1924, p. 209; 1934, p. 195; Vander Linden, 1922, p. 245). Mercelis openly suggests the role of Leopold I in a laudatory way, when he argues that "fortunately, Leopold managed to obstruct the road to the capital" (1922, pp. 26–27). What matters here is that, according to the authors, Leopold I, through his appropriate and skillful military action, played a key role in establishing Belgian independence not only diplomatically but also with arms, by defending the country's borders and being able to keep the territory largely intact, which was immediately, as we will see below, a first and necessary condition for any further so-needed sustainable development at the domestic level.

A third non-negligible determinant in the establishment of a stable Belgium in the European political landscape was also, according to several authors, Leopold's marriage in 1932 to the young French Princess Louise-Marie of Orléans, daughter of the French King Louis-Philippe I, because through this marriage he tightened the bonds between France and Belgium. In the two editions of Kurth's textbook for instance, this opinion comes to the surface immediately upon the following description:

"The severing of our country did not prevent the young kingdom from growing stronger and blossoming. As early as 1832, the marriage of Leopold I with Ludovica-Marie, daughter of Louis-Philip, King of France, had increased the value of our king's throne" (1924, p. 210; 1934, p. 196).

A final element worth mentioning linked to the pursuit of greater sustainability for Belgium in foreign affairs is the admittedly brief account in textbooks of the attempts at colonization during the reign of Leopold I with a view to finding foreign markets for Belgium's growing industry. In contrast to the extensive account one can find of the colonization of Congo under Leopold II in textbooks, only a few textbooks pay attention to this initiative under the guidance of Leopold I and even then in a most concise way. The reason for this

may lie in the fact that all these well-intentioned colonization attempts ultimately failed due to a lack of interest on the part of the Belgian government and various unforeseen circumstances, such as illness among the colonizers or financial malfeasance (see, e.g., Veraghtert, 1981, pp. 352–353). Poukens, among others, comments in very vague terms that “when young Belgium was not yet mature to start up colonial enterprises, Leopold I had already sought markets in Central America, Oceania and Western Africa, but those attempts were a matter of indifference to the country” (1942, p. 285). Dierickx is a little more specific. By means of preface to the colonization of Congo, this author only writes that “Leopold I had already sought markets in Guatemala (1841), Brazil (1844) and the west coast of Africa (1848) for the expanding Belgian industry, but all these attempts had failed” (1955, pp. 209–210). In Gysels & Van Den Eynde, one finds, also by means of an introduction to the colonization of Congo, a map with among other things the attempt of colonization by Leopold I. In the accompanying texts we can read that in the middle of the 19th century, many Belgians tried to settle in these overseas regions, amongst others in North America, in Guatemala, in Brazil and in Guinea, but that these attempts failed (1955, pp. 799–800).

3.3 Aspects of sustainability in King Leopold’s domestic policy

In all the textbooks examined, it is striking that the authors recall that Belgium’s sustainability and prosperity did not depend solely on foreign relations. On the contrary, once Belgium’s foreign borders were consolidated, according to the authors, it now came down to ensuring and increasing the new state’s prosperity domestically, and in all areas. In examining some typical nationalist tendencies (see, e.g., Anderson, 1996; Balibar, 1996; Gellner, 1984; Hastings, 1997; Hobsbawm, 1993; Schultze, 1996; Smith, 1998) in the textbooks, I have already shown that an important determinant here was the introduction of a parliamentary democracy, based on a liberal constitution and a good relationship between the king, who appoints and dismisses his ministers, and the people’s parliament. In the opinion of the textbook authors, this went particularly well in the case of Belgium, so that, out of patriotic pride, they not infrequently put forward the Belgian state model as an example to other nations (see Van Wiele, 2022, p. 103). Yet in addition, several other as yet unmentioned determinants of sustainability stand out in the textbooks that should certainly be highlighted here.

If one compares the textbooks with the surrounding scientific Belgian historiography on this subject (see, e.g., Craeybeckx et al., 1997; De Lichtervelde, 1929, pp. 71ff.; Pirenne, 1932, pp. 50ff.; Simon, 1953, pp. 17–54; Stengers, 1992, pp. 43–132; Wils, 1977a, 1977b; Witte, 1983), it is striking that the latter following the example of the former pay ample attention to the role of the first king of the Belgians in this, albeit in a less critical manner and in a somewhat different way. The older textbooks in particular go even further than the official historiography and almost unanimously attribute the pursuit and achievement of domestic sustainability to King Leopold I. For instance, Kurth does not resist to praise him on this occasion: “Our country which, in the first place, had been helped by his experience [...] also owed its development to him” (1924, p. 211; 1934, p. 197). In textbooks of later date, Leopold I is given a less prominent role and the achievement of political stability, so important for establishing national prosperity, is attributed at least equally to other key political actors besides the king. Leclère, among others, no longer states that Belgium owed all of its prosperity to Leopold I, but that the country’s welfare was the

result of the good understanding between the parliament, the responsible ministers and the king himself (1931, p. 173; 1937, p. 196). Nevertheless, both authors then unanimously bring forward in a most generalizing and more enumerating style the principal facts and measures of the first Belgian government and its king, as an illustration of the argument. This clearly shows that, in addition to a good form of government, the development of national administrative organization, the availability of good educational institutions for all sections of the population, fully in line with the pedagogisation movement of the time (see, e.g., Depaepe, 2002), and a sound economic infrastructure, such as an extensive water and road network, are also necessary preconditions for a sustainable and prosperous emerging industrial society. Leclère is typical again:

"The different governing services were arranged; the provinces and municipalities enjoyed a widely conceived autonomy, watched by the provincial and the municipal councils; beside the free education with the Universities in Brussels and Louvain (1834) and along with numerous colleges and primary schools, the State founded the colleges of higher education in Ghent and Liège (1836); it introduced municipal primary education (1842) and founded normal schools and secondary educational institutes (1850). Also, by the construction of roads, navigable waterways and railways – our first railway from Brussels to Malines was declared open in 1835 – the economic development of the country was boosted considerably" (1931, p. 173; 1937, pp. 197–198).

With the gradual introduction of social and economic history in textbooks, one also sees more and more other factors emerging that help determine the degree of social sustainability, such as the right to work, government protection of the socially disadvantaged, having sufficient and healthy food, the right to protective trade unions for workers, government corrective action to prevent extreme inflation and price rises, etc. In the oldest textbooks, however, these themes are only rarely discussed but a first tendency in this direction is already becoming noticeable. The corresponding report by Kurth, for instance, is nevertheless very short. After his brief remark on the miserable situation in Flanders since the years 1845 to 1847 because of the terrible crisis in the flax industry, he points at the "replacement of manual work by machines" as a first cause of this social disaster (1924, p. 214; 1934, p. 197). And Mercelis writes on this topic: "Times were bad for the lower class in Belgium: the failure of the grain crop and the potato disease caused general food shortage", and on this occasion he refers to what he sees as the extraordinary charity of our first queen "who entered into the hut of the poor herself to wipe his tears with her own hand" (1922, p. 264). In contrast to Mercelis, Vander Linden makes a fascinating detour. Instead of the dynasty, he represents minister Charles Rogier, liberal politician and one of the founding fathers of the Belgian state, as the saviour of Flanders: "Minister Rogier saved Flanders: he provided for food and subsidies and managed to improve and to expand the flax industry" (1922, p. 252).

Other than the older textbooks, the textbooks after 1940 deal with the social issue during the government of Leopold I very extensively. Anyhow, the role of the dynasty is no longer mentioned. At first sight, when taking a closer look at the passages in question, the thoroughly substantiated information provides a pretty good representation of the problems of those days. Indeed, the miserable situation of the workers is now spread over several pages in detail, and many reasons are put forward as explanations (Dierickx, 1955, pp. 194–204; Gysels & Van den Eynde, 1955, pp. 784–790; Poukens, 1942, pp. 255–257; Baekens et al., 1950, pp. 145–151, 162–171). At a general level, these can be reduced to

five pillars, the last four of which overlap fluently: the crop failures in 1845 and 1847, overproduction, foreign competition, economic liberalism and the restrictive Belgian legislation in matters of the foundation of workers' co-operative societies. Several authors not only blame a number of general economic principles and even some parts of the state for the miserable fate of lower-class people but also openly criticize other sections of Belgian society. In his introduction, Poukens denounces the leading higher class, which lacked solidarity towards the suffering of the lower class, because they were too much occupied with the material interests of the young state (1942, p. 153). Also, Gysels and Van Den Eynde argue that the enfranchised citizens, who had the control of the government in their hands, did not pay any attention to the poverty of the workers (1955, p. 784). All these things, then, show that in the textbooks studied from the last century, people attached great importance to themes that today are spontaneously perceived as features of a sustainable society, such as social justice, equal rights and economic prosperity for all, much earlier than one might have thought.

4 Conclusion

Perhaps contrary to what one might expect, the theme of sustainability and sustainable development is already particularly prominent in Belgian National History textbooks between 1910 and 1960, both in Catholic and government-organized secondary education. In contrast to many contemporary views that relate the term sustainability mainly to environmental issues and ecology, sustainability here is adopted as a central and overarching theoretical concept, often with or sometimes without the use of explicit current terminology and fully in line with the predominant political and military institutional history of the time. The pursuit of sustainability is then broadly viewed here as the pursuit of a stable, independent, secure and peaceful state, where neutrality, having an adequate military defense, a functioning parliamentary democracy and monarchy, a well-organized state apparatus and administrative divisions, a constitution that guarantees the basic freedoms of citizens, good relations with other countries, an effective economic infrastructure and the unity will of the people help to realize it. Only when all these conditions are met, a modern and prosperous Belgian society can be realized.

Despite the great continuity, two evolutions stand out. First, the gradually decreasing attention to the role of the first Belgian king in this, without, however, forgetting to mention, even if much more briefly than before, his lasting merits in this field. Secondly, especially from the interwar period onwards, one sees increasing attention in textbooks to economic and social history alongside political developments. On the one hand, this is accompanied by a stronger emphasis on some determinants of social sustainability that were previously not or hardly addressed, such as the right to education for all or the fight against poverty. At the same time, one also sees more and more new themes emerging that most of us nowadays will also spontaneously link in one way or another to building a sustainable society, such as distribution of wealth, right to trade unions, economic equality and right to work.

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