

Farming and folklore in the contested countryside: the ‘Year of the Village’ (1978) and the transformation of the Farmers’ Union in Flanders*

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Abstract

In the twentieth century, the countryside of densely populated Flanders was increasingly contested by the competing interests of agriculture, recreation, rural housing and industrial development. However, Flanders’ largest agricultural organization – the *Boerenbond* – managed to retain its hegemonic position in this multi-purpose countryside by dividing into dual networks of highly specialized Farmers’ Guilds and non-professional ‘Rural Guilds’. This paper mainly deals with the Flemish ‘Year of the Village’ (1978) and the pivotal role it played in the achievement of this transformation. Seemingly a governmental campaign to promote rural awareness, we will show that the ‘Year of the Village’ was actually conceived and planned by the *Boerenbond*’s public relations service and subsequently monopolized by the newly-founded Rural Guilds.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, modernization processes have substantially and increasingly altered rural societies in north-western Europe. This ‘Agrarian Transition’, as it is known, signifies the transformation of a predominantly agrarian countryside towards a post-productivist and multi-purpose rural realm, both on the economic and the cultural front. On the one hand, a process of ‘de-agrarianization’ followed the decline of the agrarian sector. On the other hand, ‘de-ruralization’ entailed the cultural transformations and the decline of traditional political power structures in the countryside due to changing patterns of production, living and settlement.¹ After the Second World War, these processes accelerated and intensified in pace, scale and intensity. The 1960s may be regarded as a turning point. At a time when the European level became a major player in agricultural policy, mainly because of the Common Agricultural Policy, the societal importance of European agriculture dwindled. The continuing modernization, specialization and mechanization of agriculture pushed the

* We are grateful to our colleagues at the Leuven Ruralia Group for their expert advice and comments on the early drafts of this paper and to the editor and anonymous referees for their valuable and constructive comments.

¹ Gunther Mai, ‘Die Agrarische Transition. Agrarische Gesellschaften in Europa und die Herausforderungen der industriellen Moderne im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert’, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 33 (2007), p. 471.

rural youth and women out of the farming sector towards the booming industrial and service sectors. The active farming population decreased and aged rapidly.² As a result, professional agricultural organizations in several European countries lost significant numbers of members. For example, between 1960 and 1990, the Danish farmers' unions (for smaller and bigger farmers) shrank by 60 per cent³ and the national Catholic, liberal and Protestant farmers' unions in the Netherlands saw their membership decline by 25 to 30 per cent.⁴ In Britain, the National Farmers Union lost over half of its members between 1953 and 1990.⁵

Simultaneously, the countryside gained new roles and new inhabitants. Improvements in transport opened up rural areas to non-agricultural functions, such as housing, industrial activities and recreation. The rapid transformation of the countryside in Western Europe – the Agrarian Transition, cultural and economic urbanization, migration and globalization – prompted many actors to reflect on the true meaning of 'the countryside'. The less pronounced the difference between the urban and the rural, the greater the need to reflect on the definition of rurality and its specific characteristics.⁶ As a result, 'the rural' acquired a multiplicity of meanings, subject to a hegemonic struggle through which several societal actors (political parties, farmers' organizations, environmental groups, etc.) contested the countryside. This heightened the importance of discourses of the 'rural', as actors attempted to secure institutional support for their views on rurality.⁷ Mormont rightfully claims that social actors' representations of rurality are significant because they determine specific options for the actual development of the countryside.⁸ Gradually, the rural is reduced to a 'category' imbued with different meanings and employed in different ways by actors wishing to institutionalize their particular definition.⁹

Across Europe, a new representation of 'rural consciousness' emerged as 'village action' gained popularity. Around the second half of the 1970s, grassroots rural village action groups or movements were founded in many countries in response to the rapidly changing countryside.

² Ibid., pp. 508–11; Bertrand Hervieu, 'Ruptures identitaires et fondamentalisme agraire', in Marcel Jolivet and Nicole Eizner (eds), *L'Europe et ses campagnes* (1996), p. 133.

³ Flemming Just, 'Danemark. La gestion d'une agriculture intensive', in Bertrand Hervieu and Rose-Marie Lagrave (eds), *Les syndicats agricoles en Europe* (1992), p. 66.

⁴ Rolf Van der Woude, *Op goede gronden: geschiedenis van de Nederlandse Christelijke boeren- en tuindersbond (1918–1995)* [*On good grounds: the history of the Dutch Protestant Farmers' and Gardeners' Association (1918–1995)*], (2001), p. 510; Marinus Smits, *Boeren met beleid: honderd jaar Katholieke Nederlandse boeren- en tuindersbond 1896–1996* [*Farmers with policy: one hundred years of the Catholic Dutch Farmers' and Gardeners' Association, 1896–1996*], (1996), pp. 310–12.

⁵ Mark Cleary, Andrew Flynn and Philip Lowe, 'Royaume-Uni. Les fragilités d'un monopole en Angleterre et au Pays de Galles', in Hervieu and Lagrave

(eds), *Les syndicats agricoles*, pp. 234–35; Mark Cleary, 'Royaume-Uni: Sous la houlette de la NFU', in CEVIPOF (ed.), *Les organisations syndicales et professionnelles agricoles en Europe* (1989), p. 115; Rolf G. Heinze and Helmut Voelzkow, 'Organizational problems for the German Farmers' Association and alternative policy options', *Sociologia Ruralis* 33 (1993), pp. 26–27.

⁶ Paul Cloke, Marcus Doel, David Matless *et al.*, *Writing the rural. Five cultural geographies* (1994), p. 5; Paul Cloke and Mark Goodwin, 'Rural change: structured coherence or unstructured incoherence?', *Terra* 105 (1993), pp. 166–74.

⁷ Andy Pratt, 'Discourses of rurality: Loose talk or social struggle?', *J. Rural Studies* 12 (1996), pp. 69–70.

⁸ Marc Mormont, 'Rural nature and urban natures', *Sociologia Ruralis* 27 (1987), p. 3; Marc Mormont, 'Vers une redéfinition du rural', *Recherches Sociologiques* 20 (1989), p. 332.

⁹ Mormont, 'Redéfinition', p. 349.

In 1975, the Dutch Association of Small Towns and Villages was founded in the Netherlands to protect village interests and promote rural quality of life. In 1976, the first Village Action Groups were created in Scandinavia. In the southern, French-speaking Belgian region of Wallonia, a predecessor of the *Fondation Rurale de Wallonie* was founded in the mid-seventies. And in 1980, the Rural Voice appeared in England. These local grassroots action groups were established to address issues of rural decline, agricultural change, migration, centralization and those posed by the EU accession.¹⁰ They were similar in that they had non-agricultural origins and were conceived in a bottom-up fashion.

However, in Flanders – the northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, home to about 60 per cent of the country's ten million inhabitants – the situation was quite different. Flanders had developed a very ambiguous relationship with its rural dimension over the course of the twentieth century, especially following the Second World War. With its early industrialization and relatively weak agricultural sector, it is an interesting case study for rural change in Europe. Ever since medieval times, the region has had an exceptionally dense population, with a multitude of towns and chains of rural settlements, connected by a well-established transport network. Even in the 1930s, the farming population in the villages was outnumbered by blue- and white-collar workers, who lived in the countryside but commuted to their jobs in nearby cities and industrial centres using an efficient public transport system. Decentralizing housing and industry had always been an objective of government policy. Flemish rurality is therefore quite paradoxical, both because of the lack of large agglomerations and the strong urbanization of the countryside, often prompting planners to label the region one large 'nebular city'.¹¹

How did the agricultural sector cope with these changes? As in the rest of Europe, the Flemish farming sector modernized and professionalized rapidly. However, unlike Wallonia or countries like the Netherlands and Denmark, the Flemish agricultural sector was characterized by relatively small but very intensive farms integrated into a dynamic agro-alimentary industry. The number of farmers in Flanders plunged from 415,183 in 1950 to just 198,319 in 1970 and 142,843 in 1990, a decline of over 50 per cent in just 20 years and a decrease of over 75 per cent in 40 years.¹² Even though the post-war membership figures of the *Boerenbond* (Flanders' largest farmers' union) decreased slightly along with the shrinking agricultural population, it captured an ever-growing share of the remaining Flemish farmers, up to roughly 51 per cent in 1964.¹³ The two smaller, non-Catholic farmers' unions – the *Boerenfront* (Farmers' Front, 1937) and the *Algemeen Boeren Syndicaat* (General Farmers' Syndicate, 1962) – were of marginal or

¹⁰ Vanessa Halhead, 'Rural movements in Europe: Scandinavia and the Accession States', *Social Policy and Administration* 40 (2006), pp. 596–611.

¹¹ Marc Mormont, 'Belgique. A la recherche des spécificités rurales', in Marcel Jollivet (ed.), *Vers un rural postindustriel* (1997), pp. 21–4.

¹² Mormont, 'Belgique', p. 23; Leen Van Molle, *Chacun pour tous. Le Boerenbond belge* (1990), p. 365; Annual Belgian agricultural census, 1950–70. These numbers represent farmers (male and female)

and farm workers in the *Boerenbond's* entire field of action, meaning Flanders, Brussels and the province of Walloon Brabant.

¹³ Calculations by the authors. Annual reports of the *Boerenbond*, 1945–90; Information Centre of the Farmers' Union (*Boerenbond*) and Rural Guilds (*Landelijke Gilden*) [hereafter BB INFODOC], Annual Belgian agricultural census, 1950–90. These figures represent Flanders plus Brussels and the province of Walloon Brabant.

local importance and certainly offered a less developed system of economic and social support for their members.¹⁴

However, these changes within the rural population were not reflected by the emergence of village action. Even before the Second World War, many villages had societies for local history, branches of the national conservation organizations and of the national pillarized¹⁵ organizations for workers or the self-employed, but these types of groups did not champion a 'rural identity'. The same holds true for the rag-tag collection of local or regional organizations that concerned themselves with nature protection, beautification, open space planning and ecology under the umbrella of the national *Bond Beter Leefmilieu* (League for a Better Environment, 1971). These groups sometimes teamed up with farmers in protests against locally unwelcome developments, but were for the most part glorified NIMBY-committees that did not act out of a distinct feeling for the rural.¹⁶ The only initiative similar to village action covering all of Flanders was the 'Year of the Village' (in Dutch *Jaar van het Dorp*), a 1978 governmental campaign aimed at motivating individuals, organizations and village authorities to assume an active stance in the process of rural restructuring.

In this paper we will examine the peculiarities of the situation in Flanders, and the pivotal part played by the *Boerenbond* and the 'Year of the Village'. Firstly, we will present a brief outline of the history of the *Boerenbond*, Flanders' largest agricultural organization. We will especially concern ourselves with the ambiguous stance of the *Boerenbond* towards the 'Agrarian Transition'. We will argue that, by transforming itself into parallel networks of highly specialized and professional farmers' guilds and a broader 'Rural Movement', the *Boerenbond* managed to keep its power hold on the Flemish countryside. Specifically, we will demonstrate that the 'Year of the Village', although officially a governmental initiative, was conceived and almost entirely planned by key figures within the *Boerenbond*, tailored to the network of the recently founded 'Rural Guilds' and seized upon as an opportunity to institutionalize a specific rural ideology. In short, 1978 represents a pivotal moment for assessing the broader hegemonic struggle within the Flemish countryside as well as for the transformation of its largest agricultural organization.

I

The *Boerenbond* was founded in 1890 by Catholic politicians in support of the predominantly Catholic peasantry suffering from the agrarian crisis. The founders of the *Boerenbond* were

¹⁴ Chantal Bisschop and Leen Van Molle, 'De landbouwersorganisaties', in Patricia Van den Eeckhout and Guy Vanthemsche (eds), *Bronnen voor de studie van het hedendaagse België, 19e-21e eeuw* [Sources for the study of contemporary Belgium, 19th-21st century] (2009), pp. 903-14; Bart Coppein, 'De hand aan de ploeg. Vlaamse landbouwersorganisaties en Vlaams-nationalistische partijen in de twintigste eeuw', *Wetenschappelijke tijdingen* (2009), pp. 67-87.

¹⁵ Pillarization refers to the political and social segregation of Belgian society along ideological lines, most

prominent from the 1880s until the 1960s. The Catholic, liberal and socialist political parties integrated unions, media and leisure organizations in three subcultural networks or 'pillars'. Staf Hellemans, *Strijd om de moderniteit: sociale bewegingen en verzuijing in Europa sinds 1800* [Struggle for modernity: social movements and pillarization in Europe since 1800] (1990), pp. 266-71.

¹⁶ Rien Emmery, 'Looking past the rural idyll. "De Kat", or televising the post-productivist countryside', *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire*, 87 (2009), pp. 793-809.

inspired by German corporatism and modelled their farmers' guilds on the medieval guilds and the *Rheinische Bauernverein*. Additionally, with the introduction of universal suffrage in mind, they wanted to 'protect' farmers against socialist influences. The *Boerenbond* was set up as an umbrella structure over a network of parochial farmers' guilds, tightly affiliated to the Catholic church and the Catholic party. It was conceived as a 'total' organization, aiming 'to protect not only the professional but also the social, moral, religious and political interests of its members and their families to form a powerful Christian farming class'.¹⁷

Consequently, from the late nineteenth century onwards, the *Boerenbond* developed an extensive range of services for farmers and their families including an insurance company, a financial institution and a cooperative for buying and selling cattle feed, fertilizers etc. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the *Boerenbond* also founded branches for farmers' women and youth.¹⁸ Membership quickly increased¹⁹; virtually every parish in Flanders had its own farmers' guild, in which the local priest served as the chaplain. These guilds nestled themselves in the small village communities that were for the most part already structured around the church and local gentry. The *Boerenbond* was also deeply involved in the political system through its representation in the Catholic party. Its interests were guarded by the prominence of sympathetic experts in the agricultural administration, including some Ministers of Agriculture. In short, its well-developed centralized structure, strong economic branches and religious and political affiliation enabled the *Boerenbond* to become a virtually hegemonic farmers' organization in Flanders and to play an influential part in the development of the political, economic, social and cultural life in the countryside.²⁰

Over the course of the twentieth century, the *Boerenbond* continually tried to adapt and respond to social change. The 'Agrarian Transition' played a large part in prompting the restructuring of the *Boerenbond* in 1971. Following the Second World War, the remaining farmers tended to specialize. These modern farmers no longer felt at home in the 'old-fashioned' parochial farmers' guilds, which were still centred around the older mixed family farms. The social position of the *Boerenbond* was further threatened by the rapidly decreasing farming population. Fewer farmers meant fewer members, less revenue and diminished political influence.²¹ Similar agricultural organizations throughout Europe such as the *Deutsche Bauernverein* encountered the same organizational challenges.²²

Aware of this fast-changing farming landscape, the *Boerenbond* began to reflect about its future. In the early 1960s, the recruitment of sociologically trained employees – instead of

¹⁷ The *Boerenbond's* charter, 1890. Marc Mormont and Bogdan Van Doninck, 'Belgique. L'Hégémonie du *Boerenbond*', in Hervieu and Lagrave (eds), *Les syndicats agricoles*, pp. 27–8.

¹⁸ *Boerinnenbond* for women (1911); *Boerenjeugdbond* for boys (1929) and for girls (1931).

¹⁹ From approximately 20,000 members in 1900 to 98,620 in 1945. In 1945, the *Boerinnenbond* or women's branch counted 87,731 members and the youth branch roughly 30,000. Van Molle, *Chacun pour tous*, pp. 365–7.

²⁰ Mormont and Van Doninck, 'L'hégémonie du

Boerenbond', pp. 27–31; Van Molle, *Chacun pour tous*, pp. 34–7.

²¹ Documentation and Research Centre for Religion, Culture and Society, Leuven [hereafter KADOC], *Boerenbond* [hereafter BB], Centrale Bestuurs- en Adviesorganen [hereafter CAB], 2.3.3., Boon to Hinnekens, 26 Sept. 1966; note Eggers with handwritten excerpts by Tijskens and De Bisschop, 20 Feb. 1967; note De Bisschop, 20 Feb. 1967; note Tijskens, 21 Feb. 1967.

²² Heinze and Voelzkow, 'Organizational problems', pp. 26–7.

merely agricultural engineers and lawyers – demonstrated that new ideas were gaining ground. The recruitment of highly educated staff members was a determined and common strategy in every branch of the *Boerenbond*. This tendency cannot be separated from the general democratization of the higher education and the development of social sciences at that time.²³ Moreover, from the 1960s onwards, new chairmen felt the need to rethink and restructure the organization and took the lead in the reshaping of the *Boerenbond*.²⁴ The management of the *Boerenbond* regarded farmers as traditionalist and somewhat closed-minded, unable to deal with the rapid changes in their profession, neighbourhood or village. The *Boerenbond* considered itself the ideal agent to promote the ‘mobilization of the farmer in contemporary modern society’. An additional, non-professional, socio-cultural education for the male rural population was therefore proposed, similar to existing practices within the youth division and the women’s division of the *Boerenbond*. These branches had also long opened their doors to non-agricultural members. The women’s branch in particular served as a key inspiration for the *Boerenbond*’s administrators. Farming women were deemed to be more sensitive to the cultural and social aspects of life, whereas men seemed merely preoccupied with farming. Moreover, to reflect the new configuration, the youth organization changed its name from ‘Young Farmers Union’ (*Boerenjeugdbond*) to ‘Catholic Rural Youth’ (*Katholieke Landelijke Jeugd* or KLJ) in 1965. The women’s movement (*Boerinnenbond*) followed in 1969, first informally renamed ‘Catholic Rural Women’ and later officially adopting the name *Katholiek Vormingswerk voor Landelijke Vrouwen* (KVLV or ‘Catholic Socio-Economic Education for Rural Women’) in 1971.²⁵

Discussions and consultations between 1966 and 1968 led to the vague idea of a broad ‘Rural Movement’. While maintaining its basic inspiration – ‘Putting the farmer’s fate in the farmer’s own hands’ – the *Boerenbond* acknowledged that profound social changes now made the realization of this goal dependent on new means.²⁶ In 1970 both the board of directors and the *Bondsraad* or ‘parliament’ of the *Boerenbond* approved a renewed charter. From that moment, the *Boerenbond* was split up into a highly specialized professional branch consisting of male farm guilds and agricultural circles for farming women (Agra-Circles) and farming youth (Green Circles); and a parallel, broader Rural Movement consisting of Rural Guilds, the

²³ Based on several interviews with *Boerenbond* employees, made as part of the ongoing doctoral research of Chantal Bisschop. However, the link between *Boerenbond* and the academic discipline of sociology at the University of Leuven existed long before the 1960s. For example, in 1936 Professor Van Dievoet – a jurist, politician and prominent figure in the *Boerenbond* – initiated the foundation of the new Institute for Political Science and Sociology. Emmanuel Gerard and Kaat Wils, ‘Catholics and sociology in Leuven from Désiré Mercier to Jacques Leclercq: a process of appropriation’, in Liliane Voyé and Jaak Billiet (eds), *Sociology and religion: an ambiguous relationship* (1999), pp. 49–50.

²⁴ The consecutive chairmen of the *Boerenbond*

were Alfons Conix (1940–45); Gilbert Mullie (1936–40; 1945–61); Maurice Van Hemelrijck (1961–64); Constant Boon (1964–77); Andries Dequae (1977–81) and Jan Hinnekens (1981–92). Hinnekens had been First secretary of the *Boerenbond* from 1960 to 1977. KADOC, BB CAB, 2.3.3., Boon to Hinnekens, 26 Sept. 1966, note Hinnekens, 21 Nov. 1966; BB CAB, 6.3.4, ‘Dagelijks Bestuur’, 7 Nov. 1966, 21 Nov. 1966 and 19 Dec. 1966.

²⁵ KADOC, BB CAB, 6.3.4, ‘Dagelijks Bestuur’, 21 Apr. 1969; BB CAB, 2.3.3, notes and reports on phase C, Apr. 1967 – Nov. 1967; BB Kultuurdienst [hereafter KD], 1, note Nackaerts, 24 Sept. 1964.

²⁶ KADOC, BB CAB, 2.3.3, note Hinnekens, 7 Aug. 1969.

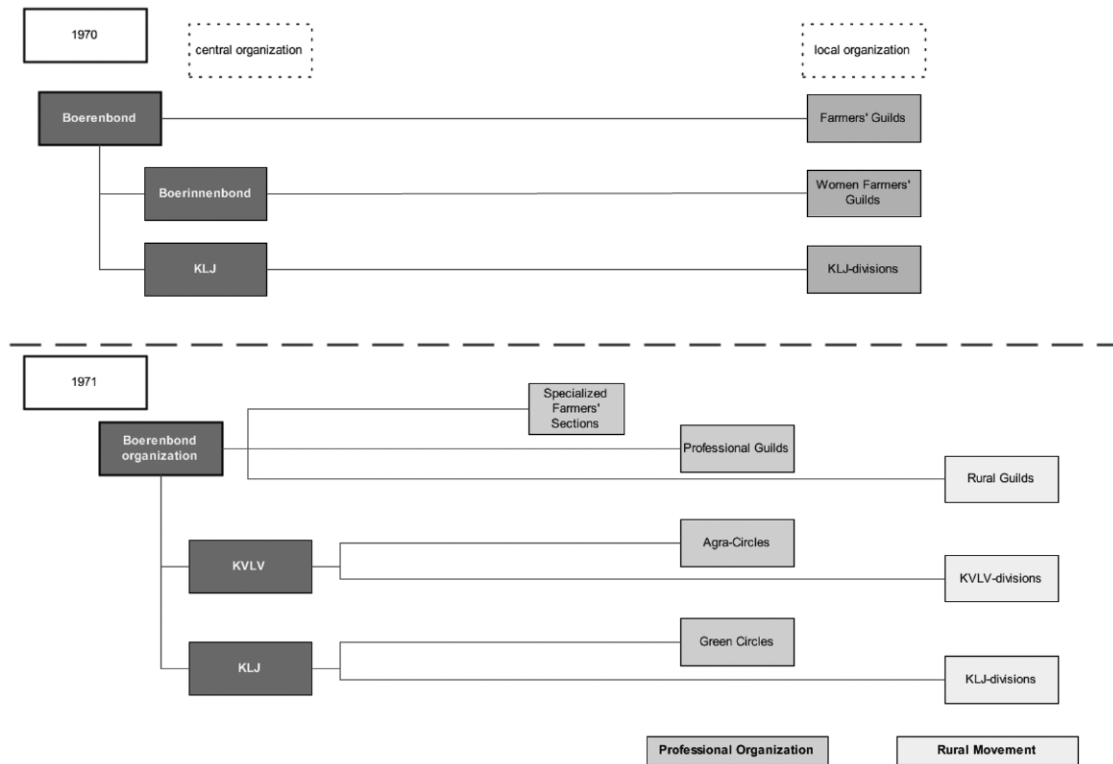


FIGURE 1. Structure of the *Boerenbond*, before and after 1971 (chart by Chantal Bisschop)

KVLV and the KLJ (Figure 1).²⁷ Notwithstanding an increasing focus on the socio-cultural education of farmers, it must not be forgotten that the *Boerenbond* remained first and foremost an advocate for the economic interests of its members. The debate about the 'Rural Movement' was mainly aimed at modernizing and strengthening the *Boerenbond* as a *professional* organization. The first notion of broader 'Rural Guilds' open to non-agricultural members even came from within the economic and financial divisions of the *Boerenbond*, on the lookout for new revenues from an extended client base.²⁸

Although this reorganization largely determined its future, the *Boerenbond* presented its new corporate structure as a practical adjustment, not as a spectacular change of course. They emphasized the gradualness of the reorganization, likening it to existing trends within the KLJ and KVLV.²⁹ Nevertheless, the new structure required a shift in corporate attitudes on different levels, which was not always easy to obtain.

The first few years were mainly dedicated to a continuation of activities within the professional

²⁷ Official announcement of the reorganization, General Assembly 23 June 1970; Approval of the renewed Charter by the *Bondsraad* on 25 Oct. and 22 Nov. 1970; Approval of the derivative Charters on 31 Jan. 1971.

²⁸ KADOC, BB CAB, 2.3.3, notes and reports on

consultation phases, Jan. 1966 – Apr. 1967; note Hinnkens, 7 Aug. 1969; BB CAB, 6.3.4, 'Dagelijks Bestuur', 3 Apr. 1964; BB CAB, 2.3.3, notes and reports of phase B, Apr. 1967 – Nov. 1967.

²⁹ KADOC, BB CAB, 2.3.3, Proposal for the reorganization by the *Hoofdbestuur*, Mar. 1970.

(male) organization. For practical reasons, professional farmers' guilds were established across parochial boundaries, next to specific sections arranged according to specialization. The 'old' parochial guilds were merely renamed 'Rural Guilds', without any deep reflection on their role. For example, a dairy farmer would become a member of the professional guild of his municipality (not his parish) and of the dairy section of his region. Automatically, he also remained a member of his old parochial guild, now called 'Rural Guild'. By slowly and silently intensifying their rurally oriented activities, these guilds would then gradually evolve to become part of a broader rural movement.

The first edition of *Levend Land*, the journal of the Rural Guilds, was issued in January 1972. From the summer of 1972 onwards, a few employees of the *Boerenbond* were charged with the organization of the Rural Guilds. For each province, a single officer within the professional organization was appointed to oversee the Rural Guilds.³⁰ A long-term strategy was put into motion to energize the committees of the local guilds, specifically looking for new, younger and not exclusively agricultural representatives. The *Boerenbond* also launched 'Objective 5000', a special campaign for membership recruitment. The goal was to halt the annual member loss of about 3 per cent and attract 5000 new members, ideally half of them professional farmers.³¹ Competition between guilds was stimulated through contests and prizes for the most successful membership drives.

At first, these efforts generated a positive effect.³² By 1974, over a thousand new members – three quarters of whom were non-farmers – had joined the Rural Guilds. But in 1975 and 1976, the new guilds *lost* over 5000 members, mostly professional farmers, whose numbers continued to dwindle.³³ This reduced membership level also illustrated a general feeling of malaise within the newly established Rural Movement. From the outset, reactions recorded by the field staff of the *Boerenbond* had not been universally positive. Even Maurice Beddegenoots, director of the *Organisatiediensten* (OD or 'Organizational Services'), admits that he initially had his doubts about the future of the Rural Guilds.³⁴ Moreover, despite the extensive consultation undertaken in the years of reorganization, many farmers decried the lack of shared decision-making and the top-down approach of the restructuring. Beddegenoots had to rebut these allegations in a special memorandum, reminding members that the Rural Movement was not the invention of the Organizational Services Department but merely a dynamic and loyal execution of earlier decisions.³⁵

It is striking that, in the mid-seventies, many people in the *Boerenbond* shared the view that the Rural Movement had started off on the wrong foot. Farmers' guilds had been abruptly renamed Rural Guilds without sufficient explanation. Throughout the planning of the reorganization, there had been scarcely any reflection on their purpose. The Rural Movement was, from the outset, essentially an empty box. It is significant that Beddegenoots encouraged officials to

³⁰ KADOC, BB KD, 1, First meeting of the provincial representatives of the Rural Movement [hereafter MPR], 7 June 1972.

³¹ KADOC, BB Organisatiediensten [hereafter OD], D.192, note Beddegenoots, July 1973.

³² KADOC, BB OD 95–128, MPR, 5 Dec. 1973.

³³ Membership dropped from 84,395 in 1974 to 79,433

in 1976. Annual Reports of the *Boerenbond* and Rural Guilds, 1974–77.

³⁴ Interview with Maurice Beddegenoots, 12 Mar. 2010.

³⁵ KADOC, BB KD, 3, note Beddegenoots, 8 Sept. 1972.

get to know the local needs of the rural population, to ensure a dynamic Rural Guild.³⁶ The guilds themselves were often reluctant or even defiant about the shift, with reports of explicit opposition to the inclusion of non-farmers in committees or even the guild as such. Especially in the most agricultural areas of Flanders, many still called themselves ‘farming guilds’.³⁷

This vicious circle was broken by both a change in approach and an ideological deepening of the Rural Movement. Firstly, more attention was paid to the ongoing training and supervision of the existing committees of the Rural Guilds and to the recruitment of new committee members. This required a major shift in attitudes for the still heavily agrarian and technically skilled corps of consultants. Secondly, the adoption of the decree for the ‘socio-cultural education for adults in a group context’ on 4 July 1975 marked an important step in the right direction. The resulting governmental subsidies provided for a fully funded staff and, from that moment on, several *Boerenbond* consultants were exclusively responsible for socio-cultural activities.³⁸ Thirdly, at around the same time, a consensus was reached about an intensified political engagement of the Rural Movement.³⁹ The Rural Guilds adopted the practice of ‘theme years’ highlighting one aspect of village life, for instance ‘A school for each village’ in 1974-75.⁴⁰

The Rural Movement embraced a functional definition of the countryside, as a separate spatial category with some typical characteristics and functions (agriculture but also green belt areas, recreation, tourism and rural dwellings). Considering the growing influence of sociologically-trained employees within the *Boerenbond*, it is not surprising that this definition subscribed entirely to the sociological thinking of that time.⁴¹ However, although the leaders of the Rural Movement were convinced of this clear functional definition, some doubt remained about the specificity and the future of the countryside: ‘The Flemish countryside is urbanizing continuously. In some areas this process has reached the point where the rural specificity is hardly recognizable’.⁴²

The Rural Movement’s contemplation of the ‘inherent character’ of the countryside went hand in hand with musings on the position of the *Boerenbond* itself within that changing countryside. From the mid-seventies onwards, more attention was paid to identity formation as a tool for institutional survival. The most important expression of this new identity consciousness was the *Grondvisie* of the Rural Movement, a new set of maxims published in 1975. It consisted of an analysis of the rural *status quaestionis*, followed by a clear formulation of purposes and strategies. The aim of this declaration of intent was to justify the existence of the movement by defining a distinct rural identity. ‘Without a clearly formulated image in

³⁶ KADOC, BB OD, 95–128, MPR, 5 Nov. 1975; BB KD, 3, note Beddegenoots, 8 Sept. 1972.

³⁷ KADOC, BB OD, 95–128, MPR, 5 Nov. 1975; Interview with Edgard Debergh and Julia Baert, 30 June 2008.

³⁸ The *Boerenbond* lobbied intensely for the passing of this decree. Annual Report of the Rural Guilds, 1977–78; KADOC, BB OD, 95–128, MPR, 4 Dec. 1974.

³⁹ KADOC, BB OD, 95–128, MPR, 4 Jan. 1974; BB OD, 95–128, Official approval on the National Advisory

Board of the Rural Movement, 9 Feb. 1974.

⁴⁰ KADOC, Boerenjeugdbond/Katholieke Landelijke Jeugd [hereafter: BJB/KLJ], 4.7.2.13, 23 Mar. 1979; BJB/KLJ, 4.7.2.8, Jan. 1976.

⁴¹ Paul Cloke, ‘Conceptualizing rurality’, in Paul Cloke (ed.), *Handbook of rural studies* (2006), p. 20.

⁴² KADOC, BB KLJ 4.7.2.13, *Grondvisie* of the Rural Movement, 14 Apr. 1975; BB CAB, 2.3.3., note De Bisschop, 7 Oct. 1969.

respect of the members, employees and the outside world, the movement cannot achieve the dynamism and depth that it needs to reach its objectives.⁴³

The 'Year of the Village' in 1978 is, without a doubt, the best case study for an analysis of this process of identity formation. The remainder of this paper will outline how the *Boerenbond* presented itself with an excellent opportunity for both the crafting and the institutionalization of a particular rural identity.

II

(a) Planning

Outwardly, all official statements presented the 'Year of the Village' as an initiative of several ministries within the government of Christian-Democrat Prime Minister Leo Tindemans. The Departments of Dutch Culture and Flemish Affairs, Agriculture and Public Transport were the principal promoters of the campaign.⁴⁴ The 'official' explanation about the origins of the campaign is rather dubious. Supposedly, the Minister of Dutch Culture and Flemish Affairs, Rika De Backer, was persuaded of the necessity of a 'countryside campaign' after attending a joint seminar organized by two rural organizations from the villages of Balegem and Zandhoven in 1976. De Backer's *chef de cabinet* Johan Fleerackers was present at the seminar the next year, where his speech explicitly credited the people of Balegem and Zandhoven with the bottom-up conception of the 'village action' represented by the 'Year of the Village'.⁴⁵

In reality, the campaign was almost entirely conceived by the *Boerenbond*. In the spring of 1975, around the time when the *Grondvisie* of the Rural Movement was approved, the concept first emerged when the *Boerenbond*'s public relations officer and political liaison Paul Marck met with Fleerackers to discuss the *status quaestionis* of the Flemish countryside. Fleerackers pitched the idea of a special campaign, similar to that of the ongoing European Monument Year (1975), to protect and preserve village culture. Marck urged the *Boerenbond* administrators to embrace this suggestion. He drafted the first proposal for a 'Year of the Village', which was officially approved by the executive committee of the *Boerenbond* in May 1976. A month later, the *Boerenbond* sent De Backer a very detailed proposal for the 'Year of the Village', including a description of the different steps to be taken in preparation. The *Boerenbond* pledged the 'dynamic cooperation' of its Rural Movement, consisting of the Rural Guilds, the KVLV and the KLJ, but 'preferred' the creation of a national committee to deal with the day-to-day organization of the campaign. Unsurprisingly, De Backer welcomed the idea and immediately invited a *Boerenbond* delegation for preparatory talks with her advisors.⁴⁶

⁴³ KADOC, BB OD, D19–I, note Snaet, 3 May 1974; BB OD, 95–128, MPR, 14 May 1974; KLJ, 4.7.2.13, 14 Apr. 1975 and Annual Report of the Rural Guilds, 1975–76.

⁴⁴ These three ministries were supported by other (quasi-)governmental agencies, such as the Association of Belgian Cities and Municipalities (*Vereniging van Belgische Steden en Gemeenten* or VBSG), the General Commissariat for Tourism (*Commissariaat-*

generaal voor Toerisme), the Department of Planning (*Landinrichting*) and the State Service for the Preservation of Monuments and Landscapes (*Rijksdienst voor Monumenten en Landschapszorg*).

⁴⁵ *Dorpskrant*, Sept. 1977, p. 13.

⁴⁶ KADOC, Katholiek Vormingswerk van Landelijke Vrouwen [hereafter KVLV], 78, Marck to Hinnekens, Beddegenoots en Lievens, 30 Apr. 1975, KVLV, 78,

Paul Marck then drafted a working paper on the practical organization of the 'Year of the Village', which – due to the 'consensus atmosphere' surrounding the idea at that time – he urged should be held no later than 1978. Undoubtedly, his recommendation was also inspired by the municipal mergers that were, at the same time, being heavily contested by local authorities because they would rob many small villages of their longstanding self-government. These mergers, more ambitious than the previous rounds in 1964 and 1970 that had already reduced the original number of 2663 municipalities by approximately 300, would soon reconstitute them as a mere 589 local authorities.⁴⁷ A campaign like the 'Year of the Village' was exactly the kind of gesture required to highlight the prized individuality of every village.

Marck envisioned a steering committee consisting of all branches of the *Boerenbond*, the ministries concerned (Culture, Public Transport, Agriculture) and several (semi-)governmental institutions. He also eyed other organizations in the fields of social tourism, the environment and local history, but these never joined the steering committee. Marck singled out the Rural Movement to undertake the important task of 'animation' in the villages.⁴⁸

It is no coincidence that all the ministers involved hailed from the *Christelijke Volkspartij* (CVP or 'Christian People's Party'), which was founded shortly after the Second World War as the successor of the Catholic Party. In the late 1970s, the Christian Democratic CVP, which had been part of coalition governments for the previous 20 years, was at a new height in its political power. Especially in Flanders, the 'catch-all' party appealed to a large swathe of the electorate (workers, retailers, farmers), especially in rural areas. As with the Catholic Party, the CVP became the *Boerenbond's* preferred political partner. In 1950, all *Boerenbond* representatives holding an electoral office for the CVP joined forces in the *Centraal Comité voor Land- en Tuinbouwbelangen* (CCLT, Central Committee on Agricultural and Horticultural Interests), which met several times a year.⁴⁹

Although continually represented as a grassroots campaign catering to an existing need in the countryside, the Year of the Village's organization was unquestionably structured in a top-down fashion. On a day-to-day basis, the campaign was run by a central secretariat, the 'National Service', managed by an agricultural engineer who had been an occasional member of the *Boerenbond's* educational staff.⁵⁰ The National Service consisted mainly of staff members seconded from the co-operating ministries and participating institutions, including many high-profile *Boerenbond* employees. This was due to the fact that there was no official campaign budget for the 'Year of the Village': all costs had to be covered by the budgets of the ministries involved. Nevertheless, the actual basic unit of the campaign was delegated to the municipal level. Villages were to establish their own 'task force' during an 'open meeting' with the population. In the end, the campaign sought to co-ordinate all existing

Note 46 *continued*

'Dagelijks Bestuur', 3 May 1976; KVLV, 78, Boon to De Backer, 4 June 1976; KVLV, 78, De Backer to Boon, 22 June 1976.

⁴⁷ Theo Luyckx, *Politieke geschiedenis van België, deel 2 van 1944 tot 1985* [Political History of Belgium, part 2, from 1944 to 1985] (1985), pp. 674–75; Rudolf Maes, 'De samenvoeging van de gemeenten en de gemeentelijke

bestuurskracht', *Res Publica* 18 (1976), pp. 275–313.

⁴⁸ KADOC, KVLV, 78, note Marck, 29 Sept. 1976.

⁴⁹ Jozef Smits, 'De standenvertegenwoordiging in de Christelijke Volkspartij en de Parti Social Chrétien', *Res Publica* 24 (1982), pp. 84–5.

⁵⁰ KADOC, KVLV, 78, Marck to Boon *et al.*, 11 Feb. 1977.

neighbourhood councils, local action committees, socio-cultural, recreational and environmental organizations behind a 'singular community project' based upon 'unanimous concern' for the countryside's future.⁵¹ At the end of 1978, the final report would itemize 2075 separate activities throughout all participating Flemish villages, of which 70 per cent were initiated by 'local organizations' (mostly the Rural Guilds, KVLV and KLJ), 16,5 per cent by the 'grassroots' municipal task forces (in which *Boerenbond* organizations generally took part), and 13,5 per cent by the municipal authorities.⁵²

During and leading up to the 'Year of the Village', the National Service organized several colloquia and seminars for Flemish and foreign experts to discuss rural issues. The campaign itself was announced several months in advance. Prime Minister Leo Tindemans (CVP) – a former minister of Agriculture and also a member of the CCLT – officially proclaimed the 'Year of the Village' at a forum gathering all Flemish mayors on 22 March 1977. In the ensuing months, the sponsoring ministries held several press conferences to inform the general public of the aspirations and ambitions of the campaign.⁵³

To fuel discussion at the local level, the National Service had prepared a slide show and tape recording highlighting the rural issues that would be tackled. They even encouraged local committees to assemble their own slide shows. Top of the bill was a short film about the 'Year of the Village' offering specific suggestions to improve the village environment. Municipal task forces were asked to conduct a survey among the rural population, chronicling their complaints and expectations concerning housing, employment, education, well-being, services and traffic in the countryside. These 'inventory files' were subsequently processed by the University of Antwerp and presented as a blueprint for a renewed rural policy at a colloquium in December 1978. The official aim of the campaign was to have a lasting influence on rural society, especially at the municipal level, regarded as 'closest to the population'. Apart from several local and regional initiatives devoting attention and funds to the quality of rural life, the Belgian government decided to support 'socially responsible projects on village and countryside renewal' with 300 million Belgian francs in subsidies, allocated by Royal Decree on 30 March 1978.⁵⁴

The National Service provided all participating village committees with thousands of promotional items including posters, stickers, flags and T-shirts. It also published several brochures on the issues of social alienation, country planning and rural well-being.⁵⁵ Combined with a booklet providing practical instructions, these thematic brochures were to serve as guidelines for the initial discussion panels among the rural population.⁵⁶ The National Service even hired out an educational staff of 140 lecturers to boost local activities. Most of the information and guidelines were (at least partially) announced or reprinted in an *ad hoc* quarterly magazine called *Dorpskrant* ('Village Paper'). Contact with the general public was established at 'Action and Idea Fairs' held in each of the five Flemish provinces. These

⁵¹ *Dorpskrant*, July 1977, pp. 20 and 24.

⁵² *De Boer*, 15 Dec. 1978.

⁵³ *Dorpskrant*, May 1978, p. 9; *Levend Land*, Sept. 1977, p. 5; *Dorpskrant*, Sept. 1977, pp. 8–10.

⁵⁴ *Dorpskrant*, Sept. 1977, pp. 11–12; July 1978, pp. 20–2; Oct. 1978, pp. 2–4 and 8; Dec. 1978, p. 17.

⁵⁵ *Samen leven: over de vervreemding van de plaatselijke bevolking* (1978); *Ruimtelijke ordening: over de ordening van de plattelandsruimte* (1978); *Wel-zijn*, (1978).

⁵⁶ Rika De Backer-Van Ocken, *Het jaar van het dorp: hoe werken aan de basis* (1978).



FIGURE 2. Official logo of the
‘Year of the Village’
(KADOC, collection *Boerenbond*)

fairs were meant to be a source of inspiration for local administrators and an opportunity to exchange ideas on campaign projects. Screenings of the slide show and film were arranged and ample quantities of the brochures and promotional items were distributed among interested parties. Every participating national, regional or local institution was assigned an information stand. The fairs lasted for several days, with no entrance fee to encourage the largest possible attendance. Livened up by village-themed events such as orchestras, folk dances, puppet theatre, crafts demonstrations and even a circus, the explicit goal was to lure in young families and ‘introduce children to rural issues’. Entire Flemish schools visited the exhibitions, during which the National Service presented their teachers with teaching materials. Pupils were invited to participate in provincial drawing and essay contests on the subject of the countryside. The *Dorpskrant* even featured an article enumerating several possible ‘Year of the Village’ projects for elementary schools.⁵⁷

At the local level, the Rural Guilds effectively took over the organization of activities. As early as May 1977, the campaign and its logo were featured in *Levend Land*, the monthly journal of the Rural Guilds (Figure 2).⁵⁸ In fact, the organizational structure of the ‘Year of the Village’ seemed tailored to jump-start and boost the recently founded but struggling Rural Guilds. For instance, the campaign headquarters warned ‘paternalistic’ municipal authorities not to ‘monopolize’ the campaign and leave its implementation to the rural population, through its existing local, socio-cultural organizations and neighbourhood committees.⁵⁹ Some articles in *Levend Land* even expressed frustration at municipal councils empanelling campaign committees without *Boerenbond* representatives, paradoxically accusing those local authorities of abusing the ‘Year of the Village’ concept and ignoring the ‘grassroots’ movement. The Rural Guilds explicitly recommended themselves and the other *Boerenbond* branches as the actors best fit for assuming these responsibilities.⁶⁰ In recent interviews, Maurice Beddegnoots readily admitted the ‘Year of the Village’ gave momentum to the sluggish Rural Guilds and provided them with an opportunity to gain ground within the local communities.⁶¹

⁵⁷ *Dorpskrant*, July 1977, pp. 22–3; Mar. 1978, pp. 23–32; May 1978, p. 22; Sept. 1978, p. 5; Oct. 1978, p. 13; Dec. 1978, pp. 15–16.

⁵⁸ *Levend Land*, May 1977, pp. 4–5.

⁵⁹ *Dorpskrant*, Mar. 1978, pp. 15–16.

⁶⁰ *Levend Land*, Nov. 1977, p. 22.

⁶¹ Interviews with Beddegnoots, 16 Aug. 2008 and 12 Mar. 2010.

This promotion of the Rural Guilds caused friction with the KVLV and KLJ, the other pillars of the *Boerenbond's* Rural Movement. For one thing, their representatives never attended the meetings with government officials, although they had been invited and were sent progress reports.⁶² Marck kept reminding all *Boerenbond* branches that the 'Year of the Village' was a 'unique opportunity' for the Rural Guilds to introduce themselves to the general population and strengthen the Rural Movement, in close cooperation with the KVLV and KLJ.⁶³ However, internal documents often contained instructions to ensure that activities concerning the 'Year of the Village' were credited to the Rural Guilds. Tensions arose and both the KVLV and KLJ repeatedly complained to Beddegenoots that neither their names nor logos featured in press releases and campaign brochures. They clearly feared that the Rural Guilds would be the sole benefactors of the publicity stemming from the 'Year of the Village'.⁶⁴

(b) *Message*

In the opening article of the first issue of the *Dorpskrant*, the 'Year of the Village' was said to have been inspired by an existing and growing interest among the general public for 'nature, agriculture, the countryside and the village'. The magazine perceived a shift in the late 1970s towards the peace, quiet, clean air and 'simplicity' of the countryside, in contrast to the appeal of urban economic, social and cultural services before the Second World War. Urbanites explored the countryside as tourists, sometimes moved on to building a weekend cottage and even moved to rural areas permanently in considerable numbers. The National Service for the 'Year of the Village' interpreted this phenomenon from a social perspective: 'Society rediscovers values and lifestyles that had almost been forgotten. From within his fully automatic, mostly impersonal social order, the city-dweller in particular is on the lookout for nature, for the village, for "uncommon commonness"'.⁶⁵ However, among other damaging consequences, this entailed the 'chaotic' expansion of villages through ribbon development. The attachment of urban-rural migrants to their urban lifestyle was deemed equally harmful. Villages and their inhabitants resented being treated by tourists as 'museum pieces that are worth a visit'.⁶⁶ In short, the authenticity of the countryside was regarded as increasingly threatened by urban influences – be it cultural, social or architectural.

The National Service pleaded, above all, for a deeper *understanding* and *appreciation* of the countryside. The 'Year of the Village' was in essence a conservationist effort, to protect the 'harmony between people and environment, between greenery and a peaceful lifestyle' from the threat of urbanization. The countryside ought to remain a 'social environment organized according to human standards'.⁶⁷ It is not difficult to link these objectives with documents such as the *Grondvisie* of the Rural Movement and the earlier shift within the *Boerenbond* towards socio-cultural education.⁶⁸

⁶² KADOC, KVLV, 78, Marck to Boon *et al.*, 4 Nov. 1976; KVLV, 78, Marck to Boon *et al.*, 11 Feb. 1977; Marck to Lievens *et al.*, 13 Sept. 1977.

⁶³ KADOC, KVLV, 78, Marck to Boon *et al.*, 11 Feb. 1977

⁶⁴ KADOC, KVLV, 78, correspondence between OD,

KVLV and KLJ, Sept.–Dec. 1977.

⁶⁵ *Dorpskrant*, July 1977, p. 1.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 1–5.

⁶⁷ *Dorpskrant*, Dec. 1978, p. 17.

⁶⁸ KADOC, BJB/KLJ, 4.7.2.13, *Grondvisie* of the Rural Movement, 14 Apr. 1975.

The most important buzzword was the call for the integrity of the countryside's 'inherent character'. The 'Year of the Village' emanated a particularly social view of rurality, hailing its humanity, simplicity and sense of community, which were credited to the 'spontaneous interlocking of nature and culture'. Unequivocally, there was a call for the conservation of this rural heritage, to preserve it from the threats of industrialization and urbanization:

The village and the countryside cannot let themselves be helplessly squeezed to death by proliferating industry, by hungry traffic and by colonizing strangers from cities that had become uninhabitable. We cannot be reconciled with a concept that reduces the countryside to the lost space between two cities. On the contrary, the countryside fulfils a purpose that is of essential advantage to the entire society and that has to be preserved.⁶⁹

According to the *Dorpskrant*, the key to this equilibrium was mutual respect between the city and the country and among the different rural actors themselves.

The 'Year of the Village' strived to find a balance between several competing rural functions: food production by a dynamic agricultural and horticultural sector, natural recreation and housing. The Ministry of Agriculture, for example, focused primarily on the importance of farming for the rural society, stating several times that a countryside was 'unimaginable' without agriculture: 'Thriving agricultural companies shape the core of the countryside, of which the farmer and his business are an integrated and irreplaceable part'.⁷⁰ According to the Ministry, the countryside had been affected – and agricultural activities disturbed – by road construction, industrial sites and the proliferation of second homes and weekend cottages. It was primarily concerned with the sustainability of Flemish farms. This required not only the preservation of 'fine agricultural land' but also the unrestricted use of machinery, tractors, fertilizers and even pesticides. It was remarkable that the Ministry argued that agricultural and environmental interests actually coincided. For instance, farmers were credited with the creation and maintenance of the existing rural landscape and represented and hailed as 'guardians of nature' or 'environmental sentinels'.⁷¹

The other ministries and governmental agencies involved with the 'Year of the Village' highlighted other aspects of rural life, but always with respect for the countryside's 'inherent character' – and this always meant agriculture. The General Commissariat for Tourism, for instance, regarded tourism as a possible means of 'rural public relations' for the regularly shunned agricultural sector. They encouraged petting farms (where children could get close to and touch the animals) and farm tourism, combined with traditional folkloristic recreation, rural festivals and 'simple local food and drink'. This 'intertwining with agriculture' was deemed crucial to rural tourism if it was to avoid disrupting existing farming activities.⁷²

Without a doubt, a prominent agricultural bias permeated the 'Year of the Village' and its activities, as a result of the *Boerenbond*'s quasi-monopoly in the day-to-day organization of the campaign. All other functions of the countryside were deemed secondary to the unhindered functioning of Flemish agriculture. Even the initial proposal for the 'Year of the Village' put special emphasis on campaign initiatives that would familiarize people with modern

⁶⁹ *Dorpskrant*, July 1977, pp. 1–5.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 17.



FIGURE 3. Flailing demonstration in Westrozebeke, July 1978 (KADOC, collection *Boerenbond*)

agriculture.⁷³ We must remember that, in order to be successful in their attempt at redefining 'the rural', social actors ultimately strive to impose their definition upon others. That is the main reason why the 'Year of the Village' and its pro-agricultural message were steeped in the established imagery of the rural idyll, instantly recognizable to the entire population, irrespective of political, social or economic boundaries. These idyllic images were not meant as a nostalgic history lesson, but rather as a model of 'neo-rurality', defined by Mormont as 'a way of life, or a model of an alternative society inspiring a social project that challenges contemporary social and economic ills'. Within this view, [p]easant autarky, village community and ancient techniques are no longer relics, but images which legitimize this social project of a society which would be ruralized, so to speak, or in which rurality would be revalued.⁷⁴ The dominant depiction of the countryside throughout the campaign was as a possible refuge for modern society, relying heavily on the imagery of 'a traditional rural world based on a symbiosis with nature, autonomous forms of production, frugality and a harmonious social life within small-scale communities'.⁷⁵ Typical, in this vein, was the praise for craftsmanship, folklore, 'simple' rural cuisine and local history opposed to the 'banal' media and consumer culture.⁷⁶ The final report claimed that 77.5 per cent of activities were of a folkloristic nature

⁷³ KADOC, KVLV, 78, Boon to De Backer, 4 June 1976.

⁷⁴ Mormont, 'Rural nature', p. 18. '[T]he traditional rural world and the peasant way of life are quite clear references for their projects, for their aspiration, for

their desire to be autonomous and for their dissent from the urban environment and the dominant economic universe'. Ibid., p. 11.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 14.

⁷⁶ Mormont, 'Redéfinition', p. 342.

(parades, plays, banquets, demonstrations of traditional farming techniques and so on) and a mere 22.5 per cent concerned informational or educational activities on contemporary problems facing the countryside (Figure 3).⁷⁷ The adoption of the idea of the rural idyll within a discursive strategy explains the strong folkloristic bias of the ‘Year of the Village’.

III

It is not far-fetched to regard the ‘Year of the Village’ as an extension of the Rural Movement’s practice of organizing its socio-cultural education into theme years. On the one hand, the *Boerenbond* employed the campaign to voice and institutionalize its opinions about post-war, rural land-use planning which had been frustrating them for decades. The farming community increasingly felt boxed in by new industrial and residential neighbourhoods, newly constructed roads and nature reserves that hindered their conventional agricultural practices.⁷⁸ On the other hand, the *Boerenbond* grasped the ‘Year of the Village’ as a public relations tool for the agricultural sector and the countryside’s agricultural past. This led to a focus on folklore, farm beautification and rural arts and crafts.⁷⁹

Because of this bias, the campaign encountered harsh criticism. In particular the Belgian Socialist Party (BSP) and its pillarized organizations denounced the ‘Year of the Village’ as an expensive government campaign promoting Christian Democratic values and providing the regional (mostly rural) CVP strongholds with an opportunity for self-affirmation.⁸⁰ The budding Flemish environmental movement pointed primarily to the negative impact of modern agriculture on landscape and environment, also mocking the nostalgia, folklore, parades and farm beautification.⁸¹ Even within the CVP itself, Christian Democratic workers’ organizations decried the overly romantic nature of the activities, the timing immediately after the controversial municipal mergers and complained about the lack of attention devoted to cultural and recreational infrastructure for rural labourers.⁸² Many critics of the ‘Year of the Village’ nevertheless attempted to insert their own talking points into the campaign: issuing manifestos and press releases, parodying the logo, making alternative slide shows on rural issues etc. Instead of eclipsing the different policy options for the development of the countryside and uniting all rural organizations and individuals as it set out to do, the ‘Year of the Village’ proved itself to be nothing more than another arena in which the Flemish countryside could be contested.

Paradoxically, the agricultural sector was never universally enthusiastic about the ‘Year of the Village’. In the last issue of the *Dorpskrant*, Minister of Agriculture Humblet evaluated the impact of the campaign on Flemish agriculture. Although he did not dispute the success of certain initiatives such as ‘farm open days’ and admitted to a greater interest in agriculture among the general public, he doubted that there would be a better understanding or appreciation of, or attitude towards, modern agriculture. On the contrary: according to the minister, the

⁷⁷ *De Boer*, 15 Dec. 1978.

⁷⁸ *De Boer*, 27 Jan. 1978, p. 15.

⁷⁹ *De Boer*, 14 July 1978, p. 19.

⁸⁰ *Dorpskrant*, Oct. 1978, p. 25; *Stem der Vrouw*,

Mar.–Apr. 1978, p. 23; *Stem der Vrouw*, May–June 1978, p. 5.

⁸¹ *Dorpskrant*, Sept. 1977, p. 14.

⁸² *Dorpskrant*, Oct. 1978, p. 25.

largely folkloristic take on the campaign in many villages was having an adverse effect: '[M]any non-farmers are left with a romantic image of the farmer. This entails a kind of jealousy, rather than a realistic picture of agriculture and its complications'. The five Flemish 'Provincial Chambers of Agriculture' had each held a discussion on this issue and proclaimed themselves very wary of the newfound interest in 'their turf'. According to Humblet, Flemish farmers were not opposed to the countryside opening up and were reconciled to the fact that 'purely agrarian districts' were economically unsustainable. But they expected the respect and esteem of rural newcomers for their farming activities. The Flemish farmer 'abhorred' a future role as the mere attendant of a park-like countryside and dreaded the 'strangulation or paralysis of his enterprise in between residential areas, industrial nuclei, classified landscapes, etc'.⁸³ This brings to mind the claim by Mormont that farmers have always regarded the transformation of agricultural areas into recreational areas as 'a subtle means of disposing of the rural community ... which will complete the process of dispossessing the remaining peasantry of their territory and their culture wherever agriculture is not considered economically viable'.⁸⁴

Indeed, there were comments of a cynical tone in the weekly paper of the professional farmers' guilds. These critiques frequently reminded the reader of the municipal mergers shortly beforehand, likening the campaign to a 'funeral ceremony'.⁸⁵ At the end of 1978, in response to these sarcastic comments, the *Boerenbond* devoted its monthly TV programme to an evaluation of the 'Year of the Village'. The episode consisted of a show with music and poetry, but also a 'serious' panel discussion about the campaign. The panel was made up of 'representative' farmers and horticulturalists and was meant as a forum for their thoughts on the campaign and the rapidly changing rural environment and community.⁸⁶ This forum allowed the disgruntled professional branches of the *Boerenbond* a final opportunity to highlight the dominance of agricultural food production over tourism and other rural functions.

The new Rural Guilds were generally satisfied with the outcome of the 'Year of the Village' and hoped for its lasting influence. At the local level, the inclusive nature of the activities, stimulated by the campaign, successfully linked the agricultural base with other rural inhabitants, which clarified the future direction and workability of the Rural Movement to the previously hesitant local committees. At the central level, rural issues such as rural development, environmental planning and the reassessment of rural space became increasingly important themes for the Rural Movement. The most obvious example is the creation of the non-profit 'Foundation for Rural Policy' (*Stichting Plattelandsbeleid*) in 1981. It was based on an informal working group that had already been established in the first years of the 1970s and consisted of both Rural Movement delegates and other interested community workers. Like the 'Year of the Village', the Foundation for Rural Policy promoted a positive approach towards rural issues by both government and the population.⁸⁷

⁸³ *Dorpskrant*, Dec. 1978, pp. 2-3.

⁸⁴ Mormont, 'Rural nature', p. 4.

⁸⁵ De Boer, 18 May 1979; *Levend Land*, Feb. 1979, p. 14.

⁸⁶ KADOC, BB KD, 1, documents on TV programme,

Aug.-Sept. 1978.

⁸⁷ KADOC, BJB/KLJ, 4.7.2.13, meeting of the Working Group for Rural Policy, 23 Mar. 1972; BJB/KLJ, 8.3.5, meetings of the committee of the Rural Movement, July-Dec. 1980.

IV

Over the course of the twentieth century, recreation, housing and industry have challenged the position of agriculture in the Flemish countryside. Nevertheless, the long-established *Boerenbond* managed to retain its hegemonic position in this multi-purpose countryside by effectively transforming itself into a highly professional agricultural organization and a broader Rural Movement. Inviting all rural inhabitants to join non-professional ‘Rural Guilds’, the *Boerenbond* extended its client base and effectively pre-empted the founding of village action committees more critical of modern agriculture. Initially confronted with opposition from its agricultural base and disappointing membership figures, the *Boerenbond* decided to devote more attention to identity formation during the 1970s, culminating in its successful attempt to organize a ‘Year of the Village’ in 1978.

Was the ‘Year of the Village’ a turning point for the Flemish countryside? Not in terms of policy: it was a strictly single-year campaign, on a shoestring budget, that did not generate any structural changes, which frustrated many of the people who were involved in its day-to-day organization.⁸⁸ Urban sprawl and industrial settlement on agricultural land happily continued in the 1980s. Was it a turning point for the *Boerenbond*? Not in terms of public perceptions of agriculture. Although the campaign boosted the Rural Movement and effectively pre-empted the emergence of non-agricultural village action groups as in other European countries, the polluting nature of intensive, industrialized agriculture was nevertheless increasingly contested during the 1980s and 1990s. As far as the expectations of the *Boerenbond* went, the ‘Year of the Village’ did not entirely fulfil their aspirations. The campaign even caused additional tensions between different branches of the *Boerenbond* itself. Basically a joint venture between the farmers’ union and the Christian Democratic party, its obvious agricultural bias spurred critiques directed at the organizational level, especially within environmentalist and socialist circles. From the outset, this thwarted the attempt at rallying all rural inhabitants and the various competing organizations behind the same flag. In addition, the campaign’s largely folkloristic approach, tuning into the idea of the rural idyll upheld by the general public, had the adverse effect that it did not result in a better understanding or greater respect for modern agriculture. Finally, many common farmers felt that the entire campaign about ‘their’ village rather passed them by.

Then again, it is a valid point that the ‘Year of the Village’ served as the real take-off point for the *Boerenbond*’s Rural Movement. When the Rural Movement was created, it was little more than an empty box. Not only did several central leaders and local chairmen explicitly reference the ‘Year of the Village’ as the catalyst for the sluggish Rural Guilds, the campaign may also be regarded as the extrapolation of their ongoing process of identity formation, institutionalized as a government initiative.⁸⁹ Or, as one of the regional *Boerenbond* supervisors strikingly put it: ‘It was tailor-made for us but I have to admit that *we* were the tailors’.⁹⁰

By embedding themselves in the local organization of the campaign, the Rural Guilds made

⁸⁸ Interviews with André Smout and Jef Geldof.

⁸⁹ This is based on the ongoing doctoral research by Chantal Bisschop through interviews with major

Boerenbond leaders and local (committee) members of several Rural Guilds.

⁹⁰ Interview with Dries Delrue, 8 Mar. 2011.

their mark in the Flemish villages, thereby attracting a growing number of non-farming members in the following years. If, by 1990, the *Boerenbond* had more or less the same number of members as in 1976, this was mainly due to non-farmers joining their ranks. If anything, the 'Year of the Village' and its inclusive message contributed to the institutional survival of the *Boerenbond* as the most important rural organization in the Flemish countryside.