

The Emergence of Automobility in Belgium before the Second World War

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Introduction

The introduction written by Gijs Mom to the present workshop is an impressive and highly inspirational text that covers a wide array of issues concerning mobility policy and mobility culture in general. Somewhat too wide perhaps, at least for a historian who is confronted with the big black hole that Belgian mobility history has been until today. An uncomfortable position, regrettable even more considering the fact that the Netherlands and Belgium are two neighbouring small countries with heavily intertwined histories and a high level of comparability. Differences between these two 'national' cases of the international process that motorisation is are often small yet interesting at the same time. Such a level of comparison however requires much more research than is presently available. In what follows I will try to open a window to this problem by simply presenting a general overview of the main facts of the history of motorisation in Belgium before the Second World War, hoping to break ground for a consecutive phase of comparison and discussion.¹

Belle Époque (1895-1914)

Economic aspects

Early on in 1896, commenting on the news that in Paris 426 automobiles had been registered, the Belgian cycling journal *Le Véloce* stated that at that time in Brussels *hardly six* automobiles were in use. Three years later the *Annuaire générale de l'automobilisme* (General Yearbook of Automobility) listed the names of almost 500 Belgian automobile owners.² Between 1900 and 1914 the figures on automobile and motorcycle ownership rose from 1000 to over 16.000. Annual growth percentages were very high in 1900-1905, between 50 and 100 percent, then fell back to an average of

1 Except where noted differently, all data in this paper are taken from Donald Weber, *Automobilisering en de overheid in België voor 1940* [Automobilisation and the public authorities in Belgium before 1940], Ghent, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, 2008. A published version is scheduled for 2009.

2 *Le Véloce*, 19 December 1896, p. 2. *Annuaire générale de l'automobilisme*, Paris, 1900, p. 847-65.

15 to 20 percent before the First World War, with the notable exception of 1907 that witnessed a zero growth.

With roughly one motorised vehicle per 1000 inhabitants in 1907, James Laux placed Belgium on a third place in the world ranking of motorisation, a place shared with France, at some distance of the USA and Great Britain, but many lengths ahead of the rest of the world.³ Belgium, a small but densely populated and highly industrialised country, was an early adopter of motorisation.

Table 1— Early ownership of motorised vehicles in Belgium, 1899-1913

	Automobiles	Motorcycles	Total	Growth (%)	Bicycles
1899			499		
1900	715	340	1055	111,42	145.000
1901	1332	714	2046	93,93	
1902	1991	1427	3418	67,06	
1903	2618	2671	5289	54,74	
1904	3657	4343	8000	51,26	
1905 ⁴	2148	3652	5800	NA	207.246
1906	2951	4295	7246	24,93	
1907	3262	4002	7264	0,25	
1908					
1909					
1910	5928	3983	9911		420.567
1911	7234	4107	11.341	14,43	471.574
1912	9048	4410	13.458	18,67	522.827
1913	10.168	6090	16.258	20,81	

Sources: *Annuaire général de l'automobile*, 1900, p. 847-65 ; *Bulletin officiel du Touring Club de Belgique*, January 1901, p. 9, February 1905, p. 61, 30/10/1908, p. 477 and 15/4/1914, p. 214 ; *Handel - toerisme. Verkeer en vervoer*, Brussels, 1962, p. 50.

The dominance of Brussels was very outspoken, one automobilist out of three lived here in 1900. Automobile ownership was an urban phenomenon in this early period, the four main Belgian cities held 60 to 80 percent of car ownership in their respective provinces. Apart from this, economical wealth was decisive as to own an automobile or not: rich, highly industrialised regions had a higher level of motorisation than poor, rural ones. The rural areas were slow to pick up on motorisation, in 1900 the five poorest provinces (out of nine) together held not more than a mere 10 percent of global car ownership, by 1907 this had risen to approximately a quarter.⁵ Heavy, expensive automobiles were dominant in these years, not the more modest *voiturettes*, and except for a short period before 1910, automobiles always outnumbered motorcycles.

3 James Laux in Jean-Pierre Bardou (e.a.), *La révolution automobile*, Parijs, 1977, p. 38.

4 Before 1905 figures were taken from the national register of number plates. These figures were overrated, because old number plates often were not returned and because number plates were included distributed to local offices but not yet in use. This overrating grew worse year after year. From 1905 on these figures were no longer used, instead the automobile and motorcycle tax returns of the nine provinces of Belgium were added. Because of fiscal fraud (estimated as more than 10 percent) these figures were underrated, hence the difference in numbers between 1904 and 1905. This difference should be considered as purely statistical, further historical research shows not a single sign of lowering car ownership, quite the contrary. On top of this, the figure of 1905 does not include the province of East-Flanders, holding 7 percent of Belgian car ownership in 1906.

5 *Bulletin officiel du Touring Club de Belgique*, January 1901, p. 9 and 30 October 1908, p. 477.

The effect of car ownership on public space was rather limited before the First World War, a traffic census showed that out of a hundred vehicles passing by on a highway on any given day in 1908 there would be 48 carriages, 48 bicycles, 3 automobiles and 1 motorcycle.⁶

An automobile industry came into being in Belgium at an early stage, the first factory dating from 1894, followed by several others from 1898 on. By 1905 more than twenty companies were into production, controlling half of the home market and successfully exporting their luxurious makes.⁷ The new industry's capital had a fourfold origin: former bicycle makers who expanded their business (e.g. Minerva, FN), engineers who started a business of their own (e.g. Vivinus), railway companies trying to break out of a saturated market (e.g. Germain), and newly formed financial holdings (e.g. Imperia).

The most successful Belgian car of this period was Germain, also known as *the Belgian Panhard & Levassor*. In 1901 one out of three automobiles in Belgium was a Germain. It was the leading Belgian make until the First World War, when the German army destroyed the factory.

Social and cultural aspects

Why did people start to use automobiles? Four motives become apparent when analysing early automobilism: (1) power, control over machines, technology and space, the engineer's power-through-knowledge, and the hybrid man-car creature or cyborg, (2) speed, the emotional reward of a whirl of excitement brought about by moving fast, (3) freedom, to boldly go to wide horizons and explore new worlds, and (4) status, automobilism as social capital and networking opportunity. The early automobilist organisations firmly believed in the future of the new machine, that was to change the face of society, and saw themselves on a mission to support this evolution.

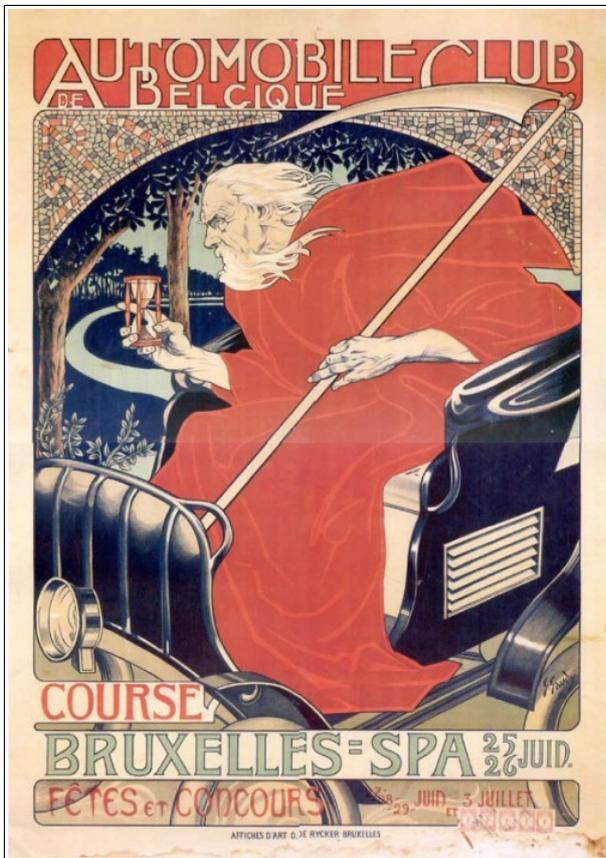
Belgian automobilism was firmly embedded in the upper class life of the Belle Époque, led by high aristocrats (counts, dukes, several princes) and wealthy businessmen, and strongly tied to the royal family. Every year a feast of the automobile was held in the city of Spa, where an international jet set gathered in order to admire the automobiles as they engaged in demonstrations and races, and to indulge in banquets, picnics, *punch d'honneurs* and lantern parades. In the winter season the highlight was the *Salon de l'automobile* of Brussels, attracting thousands of visitors. Crown prince Albert, a passionate *automobiliste* ever since his first encounter with automobilism in 1896, never missed such an occasion. The summer season was packed with races, the most famous being the *Circuit des Ardennes*, held from 1902 to 1907, and considered to have been the first automobile race on a circuit of its own and not on public roads.⁸ The French seaside resort Nice was the favour-

6 *Annuaire statistique de la Belgique et du Congo belge, 1920-1921*, p. 262.

7 *Annuaire générale de l'automobile, 1902*, p. 73-127; *Bulletin officiel du Touring Club de Belgique*, 15 April 1908, p. 150; Jacques Kupélian (e.a.), *Histoire de l'automobile belge*, Brussels, 1979.

8 Although in reality a number of public roads deep inside the Belgian Ardennes were being temporarily closed, the scarce inhabitants being ordered to stay indoors during the race. What was really new was that a number of 'rounds' had to be covered on a closed circuit, without railway crossings so that no stops were necessary. Guy Pierrard, *Le circuit des Ardennes*, Neufchâteau, 2002; Jean-Paul Dessaux, *100 ans de sport automobile belge*, Jauchelette, 1996, chapter '1908'.

ite summer tourism destination of rich Belgian automobile owners. Partly to counter this the first road for automobiles was built in 1904 along the Belgian coast, on the instigation of king Leopold II, starting in Ostend, the favourite royal seaside resort.



Poster of the second Automobile Feast of the Automobile Club de Belgique in Spa, July 1898.

However, from the onset it was clear that the new means of transportation had a potential far beyond that of a rich man's toy. The times were to be a-changing, and a vast array of social practices were on the edge of global transformation. This was well illustrated by the nostalgic thoughts of a doctor in 1900, musing over the changes in his profession that were expected to come. In his slow carriage, visiting his patients on the country would take a doctor all day, people passing by would stop him and ask for (free) medical advice, in many cases doctors weren't even called for, by the time they would arrive it would be too late. With a car a doctor could do all of his visits in an hour or two and would still have time left in the evening for studying.⁹

Automobilism as a social movement grew directly out of cyclism, and inherited several of its values and practices. Two cyclists were to trigger the automobilist movement in Belgium. Charles Craninckx took part in the magic summer of automobilism, Paris 1895, where count de Dion decided to create the world's first *automobile club*. Craninckx, after returning to Belgium, contacted a

⁹ *L'Automobile belge*, 27 October 1900, p. 1.

fellow cyclist, count Fernand de Villegas de Saint Pierre Jette, and the two of them created a Belgian automobile club.¹⁰ The Automobile Club de France (November 1895), David Salomon's Self Propelled Traffic Association (December 1895) and the Automobile Club de Belgique (January 1896) were the world's first three automobile clubs. Together they formed an informal but close international network.

The new club, with a highly aristocratic profile, closed ranks with the *Touring Club de Belgique*, created a year earlier, in February 1895. The latter had a more modest middle class profile, and would gain over 80.000 members by 1914, making it the country's largest organisation based on individual membership. Starting of as a cyclist organisation, from 1897 on the tourist club would slowly turn towards automobilism.¹¹ From 1898 on the Automobile Club supported the creation of a network of local automobile clubs in the main cities of Belgium, and in 1899 took active part in unifying the Belgian automobile industry in the *Chambre Syndical de l'Automobile*. In 1900 a third national automobilist organisation was created, the *Moto Club de Belgique* (modelled after its French counterpart), trying to take up a position in between the Automobile Club and the Touring Club, an impossible stand that nevertheless would last until the outbreak of the First World War.

The automobilist movement saw political lobbying activities as part of its core business. Each of the automobilist organisations had over a dozen members in parliament, and offered honorary positions to a select number of political decision makers, including the king, the prime minister, and the mayor of Brussels. They had direct access to the minister's cabinet, and addressed themselves directly to the members of parliament or any other public council. By 1910 three quarters of the Belgian Senate consisted of automobile owners.

Political aspects

There was no true motorisation policy before the First World War. The coming of motorised traffic on the public roads was something that happened outside the realm of public policy. Automobile politics was always merely a response to a wider context of the gradual automobilisation of society.

Long before the arrival of automobile traffic, since 1891, the cyclist organisations had been asking for national traffic regulations and improvement of the road networks to make them suited for the new means of transport, and immediately after its creation in 1896 the Automobile Club joined their ranks. In 1896 a new Road Fund was voted by parliament, the first since the 1830s, albeit of modest means. Simultaneously, a first bill was laid down for a national Traffic Law and traffic regulations. This draft was inspired by the Paris regulations on automobile traffic of 1893, and was more extensive than the British Act on light locomotives of 1896 or the French decree on auto-

¹⁰ *Le Véloce*, 8 December 1895, p. 1, 19 December 1895, p. 1 and 8 Januari 1896, p. 2 ; Mathieu Flonneau, *L'automobile à la conquête de Paris. Chroniques illustrées*, Paris, 2003, p. 35-6 ; Piers Brendon, *The Motoring Century: the Story of the Royal Automobile Club*, London, 1997, Theo Barker, 'A German Centenary in 1986, a French in 1995 or the Real Beginning About 1905?', in Theo Barker (ed.), *The Economic and Social Effects of the Spread of Motor Vehicles*, Basingstoke, 1987, p. 30-1.

¹¹ *Mémorial du Royal Touring Club de Belgique, 1895-1955*, Brussels, 1955.

mobile traffic of 1899.¹² Still it took another three years to get the bill through parliament, until in August 1899 the first Belgian Traffic Law was finally proclaimed.

The new rules included obligatory brakes, lights and horns, a central register of number plates, and speed limits. But the most important aspect of the new legislation was the delegation of the power to prescribe traffic rules to the central government, thus depriving both parliament and local councils of the power of decision making in matters concerning roads and public places in general. This was the beginning of a long lasting alliance between the automobilist movement, resisting local restrictions to automobile driving, and the central government, greatly enhancing its power over public space. As a consequence of the new law, the presence of motorised traffic on the Belgian public roads was for once and for all legitimated, and an essentially urban way of living was violently forced upon the inhabitants of the countryside. After which a social conflict broke out on the public roads between adherents of the new means of transport and the rest of the road users. Automobilitation policy thus can be seen as a social process of decision making, involving several actors, aimed at creating a public system of social control — the modern traffic system — while balancing between the conflicting interests of the parties involved.

In 1899 the Belgian Camille Jenatzy broke through the symbolic limit of 100 kilometers per hour in a vehicle called *La Jamais Contente* (The Never Pleased), causing sensation in the press. The next year Les Ateliers Snoeck of Liege introduced their *Bolide*, a car make of extreme size and weight, capable of a stultifying top speed of 85 kilometres per hour.¹³ All of this illustrated how speed was at the heart of the conflict, reversing the traditional order of life on public roads and replacing it with something that we since call *traffic*. In reaction to this, several anti-automobilist strategies were developed in the following years:¹⁴ (1) road users taking to direct action, throwing stones, whipping, refusing to let cars pass by, with as most extreme act of violence the cable over the road in Rhisnes in May 1913, involving three automobiles in a bloody accident, only two months after a similar act near to Berlin ; (2) local authorities trying to protect their people with speed-trapping constables, restrictive local police regulations, lower speed limits, road obstacles around the village centre, etc. ; (3) undignified citizens engaging in anti-automobile associations, such as the oddly named *Ligue pour la sécurité des routes et la défense des piétons contre l'envahissement des automobiles* (League for Road Security and the Defence of Pedestrians Against the Automobile Invasion) of 1904, or the *Ligue des Piétons* (Pedestrians' League) of 1906 ; (4)

12 Mathieu Flonneau, *Paris et l'automobile*, Paris, 2005, p. 54-5 ; Christoph Maria Merki, *Der holprige Siegeszug des Automobils, 1895-1930*, Vienna, 2002, p. 325 ; James Laux, *The European Automobile Industry*, New York, 1992, p. 23-5 ; Clive Emsley, "'Mother, what did policemen do when there weren't any motors?'" The law, the police and the regulation of motor traffic in England, 1900-1939', *Historical Journal* 36 (1993) 2, p. 363-7 ; William Plowden, *The Motor Car and Politics, 1896-1970*, London, Head, 1971, p. 28-46 ; Sean O'Connell, *The Car in British Society*, Manchester, 1998, p. 112-31.

13 Robert Fonteyne, 'Camille Jenatzy. Le premier Diable Rouge', *Historicar* (2000) 7-8, p. 1-33.

14 For a similar analysis of the German case, see the pioneering work of Uwe Fraunholz, *Motorphobia: Anti-automobiler Protest in Kaiserreich und Weimarer Republik*, Göttingen, 2000. Whereas Fraunholz develops a typology based on the acts involved, I use a typology based on the actors.

press campaigns, numerous aggressive, accusative and instigative articles against the *chauffards* (road hogs), describing automobile accidents in all of their bloody details and demanding severe penalties and restrictions to automobile traffic — especially *Le Soir*, the leading Brussels journal, was renowned for its anti-automobile attitude ; (5) the world of justice, police chiefs and judges in court, not insensitive to the complaints of traditional road users, bringing automobile drivers to court — even aristocrats, for whom it was often their first encounter with the apparatus of justice.

Automobile associations developed a number of counter-strategies, mainly electoral actions (automobile drivers were entitled to vote), political actions (lobbying), associating (creating and financing organisations working in defence of automobilism), debating (press articles, distribution of leaflets and brochures with comments on legislation), and by installing the first traffic signs and signposts along Belgian roads, thereby trespassing the authority of the public authorities to regulate public space.



Warning sign by the Automobile Club de Belgique, used on public roads in 1924.

The major event in the conflict over the public roads eventually took place in parliament with the struggle over the *Loi de l'automobilisme* (Automobilism Law) in 1909. A bill was laid down in the Belgian Senate in 1905 modelled on the German, Swiss and Austrian bills of 1904 that had attempted to introduce a new regime on the liability of drivers involved in accidents.¹⁵ This bill and other proposals presented to the Senate in 1906 and 1908 not only dealt with liability, but also tried to introduce new measures such as in-built automated speed restricts, deprivation of the right to drive as a legal penalty, penalties for fleeing a car accident site, compulsory vehicle assurances etc. The automobilist organisations tried to bargain by offering to accept a driver's license as an alternative, but eventually it was the government that stopped the *Loi de l'automobilisme*. After the Senate had voted the bill, it was passed to the lower chamber where it was buried in a committee, never to come out again (*encommissionnée*, a common procedure in Belgian politics).

¹⁵ See also Angela Zatsch, *Staatsmacht und Motorisierung*, Konstanz, 1993, p. 266-74 and 297-8 ; Gerard Horras, *Die Entwicklung des deutschen Automobilmarktes bis 1914*, München, 1982 ; Fraunholz, *Motorphobia*, p. 221 ; Merki, *Siegeszug*, p. 354-60.

Interbellum (1918-1940)*Economic aspects*

Tabel 2 — Ownership of motorised vehicles in Belgium, 1921-1950

	Automobiles	Motorcycles	Vans	Trucks, buses	Total	% growth	Bicycles
1921	14.999	12.995	2.257	3.390	33.641		
1922	21.839	17.470	4.735	5.133	49.177	46,18	
1923	28.366	21.823	12.972	5.939	69.100	40,51	
1924	44.361	24.964	16.609	6.843	92.777	34,26	
1925	55.604	29.025	23.830	7.311	115.770	24,78	1.458.741
1926	59.108	29.454	25.901	7.183	121.646	5,08	1.509.599
1927	63.425	32.686	26.541	6.544	129.196	6,21	1.615.855
1928	80.902	39.287	33.059	7.385	160.633	24,33	1.713.935
1929	93.371	45.814	40.250	9.611	189.046	17,69	1.815.782
1930	100.917	52.856	46.204	10.987	210.964	11,59	1.909.757
1931	112.693	57.532	51.310	11.968	233.503	10,68	1.954.249
1932	119.128	62.032	52.902	13.458	247.520	6,00	1.954.555
1933	127.245	63.990	52.121	15.118	258.474	4,43	2.062.361
1934	124.985	64.821	55.246	16.182	261.234	1,07	2.130.965
1935	129.752	63.270	60.612	11.667	265.301	1,56	2.277.606
1936	138.482	64.929	61.524	12.185	277.120	4,45	2.454.052
1937	150.192	67.235	63.756	13.572	294.755	6,36	2.625.087
1938	160.115	67.016	62.069	15.531	304.731	3,38	2.821.874
1939	161.394	64.561	60.524	17.328	303.807	-0,30	2.842.355
1940	114.991	32.529	45.693	12.363	205.576	-32,33	2.587.795
1941	17.205	8.235	21.651	8.853	55.944	-72,79	2.610.090
1942	12.441	5.934	16.776	11.023	46.174	-17,46	2.370.048
1943	10.883	6.684	13.411	11.949	42.927	-7,03	2.125.789
1944	14.950	10.466	15.557	12.850	53.823	25,38	2.045.493
1945	49.236	41.451	42.863	17.632	151.182	180,89	1.941.780
1946	86.001	72.320	65.257	26.572	250.150	65,46	2.212.663
1947	129.329	91.973	78.492	33.679	333.473	33,31	2.618.929
1948	177.288	108.641	86.496	41.185	413.610	24,03	2.781.460
1949	226.961	122.472	88.178	44.809	482.420	16,64	2.863.868
1950	273.599	139.932	93.142	51.424	558.097	15,69	2.980.201

Sources: *Annuaire statistique de la Belgique et du Congo belge*, 1922-1951 ; *Handel - toerisme. Verkeer en vervoer*, p. 51 ; *Royal Auto*, 1 August 1929, p. 2.

During the interwar period the motorised vehicle broke through and became established as the norm for transport and mobility. The First World War brought the automobilisation process to a full stop for six years, but after that the growth of the automobile park was impressive, going from 34.000 in 1921 (already doubling the pre-war figure) to over 200.000 in 1930. The expansion was at its height in 1920-1925, then fiscal measures had a negative impact for a few years, even taking a number of trucks and buses out of business, but by the end of the 1920s there was a revival. In the next decade motorisation grew much slower, even came to a standstill. This was due to a combination of causes: economic crisis, saturation of the market, new fiscal measures, and from 1939 on the

prospect of war.¹⁶ Remarkable was the high market share of transport vehicles, good for a quarter of all vehicles, with vans as the most successful category of motorisation, a clear indication of the changing character of the automobile, evolving from being predominantly a toy into a mixture of toy and tool. The countryside still lagged behind in motorisation, the share of the five (out of nine) poorest provinces slowly rose from a quarter to a third. Belgium had to give in somewhat on its international position, still closely following the most advanced countries in the 1920s, but falling back to a position below the average of most of its European neighbours in the 1930s. Any comparison with the levels of motorisation of the USA and Canada, a generation ahead of the rest, was no longer relevant.



Help!! Prohibitive automobile taxes are hitting even the most humble, published in automobile journal Mon Auto, 1933.

Traffic censuses showed an enormous expansion of transport activity on the roads, quadrupling between 1908 and 1938, with motorised traffic becoming predominant. On any given day in 1938, out of a hundred vehicles passing by on a highway there would be 48 bicycles, 45 automobiles, 4 carriages and 3 motorcycles. Quite remarkable is that in absolute numbers the loads in tons transported by carriages did not diminish until the 1930s, only then substitution of horse transport by

¹⁶ However, this is as yet open to further investigation. Future research could take into account a number of social factors that may have influenced the evolution of the means of transport: density of the population (favouring pedestrian travel, the use of bicycles and public transport in general), the population pyramid (persons under age usually do not drive cars), income inequality (without discretionary income even the cheapest car can not be afforded) and family size (a side-car can take one or two children, but not three or more).

motorised transport began to take place. Even so remarkable is that on Sundays in 1938 three times more automobiles and five times more motorcycles could be seen driving on highways than on an average day in the week, again illustrating the continuity of hedonistic elements in the automobile culture.

Taxes on the possession and use of automobiles were soaring in the 1920s, including the introduction of a so-called luxury tax, an early VAT-predecessor, and leading to automobile protest demonstrations in January 1927 in Brussels and Antwerp. By 1934 no less than ten percent of the national state budget came from taxes on automobility, two thirds of which were gasoline taxes. Taxes were so high that they slowed down the expansion of the automobile park several times, as in 1926 and 1933. Drivers were not rewarded for their fiscal efforts though, their taxes were added to the general budget, and the government refused to directly link them to special purpose policies such as road building. A notable exception were the Road Funds of 1928 and 1933, however these enjoyed only a limited budget.

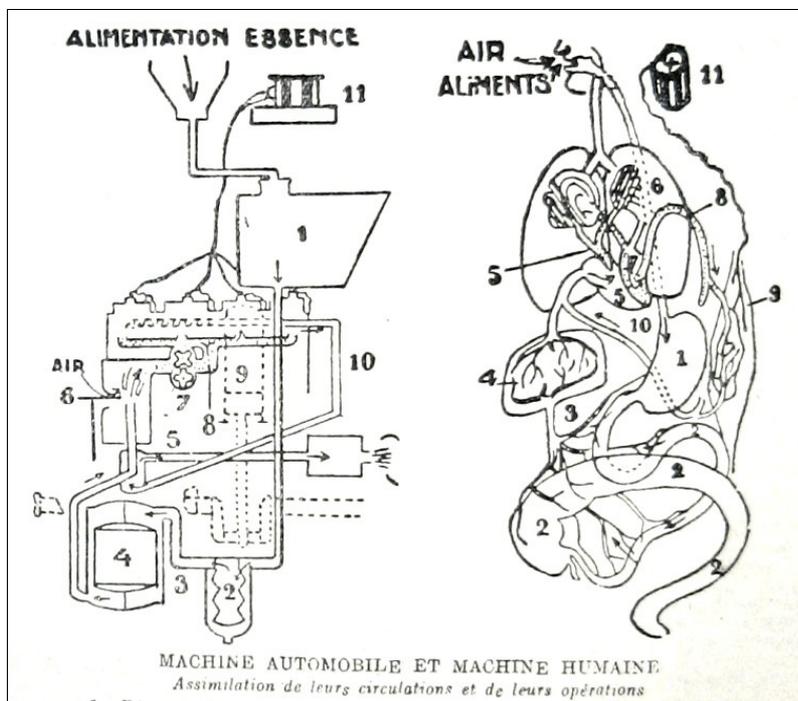
The most important economic development of the interwar automobile industry was the American invasion. Already on the outbreak of the First World War Ford's British plant had become the number one European automobile builder. The 1920s saw the coming of the so-called *assemblage industry*. Ford and General Motors adopted an industrial policy whereby automobiles were shipped overseas in parts rather than as whole vehicles, thus avoiding both higher transport costs and customs duties on import. Factories were then created at the overseas ports to assemble the parts into whole cars. The Antwerp port was chosen as the Ford bridgehead to conquer the continent in 1922, followed by GM in 1924 and Chrysler in 1926, while Citroën in 1924 and Renault in 1925 came to Brussels. This assemblage industry annually produced over 40.000 cars in the 1930s, of which a third or more was exported. The traditional Belgian automobile industry, headed by the legendary luxury brand Minerva, was no match for this and disappeared.

Social and cultural aspects

Due to the fast growing number of automobile users in the 1920s, the automobilist movement transformed into a mass movement, with the Touring Club de Belgique and the newly founded Vlaamse Toeristenbond (Flemish Tourist League) now counting hundred thousands of members and even the once so aristocratic Automobile Club de Belgique gaining ten thousands of members. Simultaneously, a process of institutionalisation took place, as public authorities more often invited the automobilist organisations to join in with advisory committees. However this double transformation put the organisations in a rather paradoxical position: their membership grew to a massive scale, but as they grew slower than the automobile market their market penetration was weakening ; and the arrival of ever more and ever more powerful lobbying organisations for the

case of automobilism seemed to lead to no other effect than more and higher taxes and more severe traffic rules.

Outside the realm of the automobilist movement motorisation entered daily life, and the first generation grew up that had not known a world without automobiles. A cyber motive inspired by automobility became part of the social discourse: the use of cars would make society faster and bigger, and motorised traffic would give public space a more rational appearance. Young people would 'grow into' automobility, were both human bodies and automobiles not a comparable kind of machinery after all?¹⁷ Belgian public authorities recognised this new reality at an early stage, with Minister of Public Works Edouard Anseele stating in 1920 that automobiles and motor ways were useful to the country's economy and that it was the government's duty to support them.¹⁸



Biology of the automobile, the car as a body and vice versa (engine=stomach, oil=blood, etc.), 1933.

Yet, although automobiles were entering normality during the interwar period, and the often bitter struggles between automobile users and pedestrians now had mostly vanished, the dark side of automobilism had not disappeared, quite the contrary. There was literally blood in the streets. In 1939 more than 900 people died in car accidents, five times more than in 1920. Motorised traffic by then had become the main cause of accidental deaths. Most accidents involved automobilists only, but the majority of those injured or killed were pedestrians. The two major causes of traffic accidents were pedestrians crossing the streets and cars driving too fast. Accidents were particularly

¹⁷ John Rae spoke of the lower classes buying cars as a *social revolution*, since the motor vehicle “offers individual, personal, flexible mobility, as nothing before it has ever done.” John Rae, *The Road and the Car in American Life*, Cambridge, 1971, p. 360-1.

¹⁸ *Annales parlementaires du Sénat belge*, 1/7/1920, p. 482.

lethal on the long stretches of country roads, where there were no speed limits.¹⁹ Instead of tackling the security problem on public roads, the Belgian government, following the French example of 1921, chose to abolish general speed limitations in 1925. That same year the number of car accident casualties went up with fifty percent.

Political aspects

“Society's problem was, and is, to decide how much death and injury the enormous powers conferred by motor vehicles are worth.”²⁰ In 1987 James Foreman-Peck came to the conclusion that in responding to the rising problem of car accidents British, American, French and German authorities took a comparable range of measures: introduction of driver licenses and driving tests, liability regulations and required vehicle insurance, speed limitations and road police, massive campaigns in traffic education and huge investments in road construction and traffic signs. The Belgian government revised the Traffic Law of 1899 in 1924, introducing a number of new restrictions on motorised traffic, such as the criminalizing of fleeing a scene of an accident. But the introduction of a driver license was rejected, and a compulsory medical exam was included but had to be withdrawn after loud protests by the Automobile Club. Instead, it was decided to abolish speed limitations, except for inhabited areas or special locations. Then, for the next ten years, with accident rates soaring, the consecutive national governments continued to hesitate in taking new measures, while numerous attempts by individual MP's to introduce new traffic legislation were declined. Considering the large economic benefits of automobile industry and motorised transport, none of the three main political families (christian-democrats, liberals, socialists) were willing to burden the new means of transport with restrictive security measures.

Instead the government put some effort in a different kind of strategy: traffic education. The automobile organisations were enthusiastically supporting this, arguing that the problem was not the expansion of motorised traffic, but the incapacity of pedestrians to deal with the new traffic. Thus in matters of mobility policy pedestrian education would have to be given the highest priority. Traffic weeks were being organised, hundred thousands of traffic folders were being distributed in schools, and with movies in the cinema, radio programmes, lectures, expositions and even an *Anti-lawaaaweek* (Against Noise Week), a *pedestrian code* was broadly being propagated with the population. This strategy was made official in 1932 with the creation of an *Office de la circulation routière* (Road Traffic Office) as part of the national administration. Yet, although the growth of traffic accidents and the numbers of victims was slightly slowing down in the 1930s, this line of policy could hardly be called efficient.

¹⁹ *Annuaire statistique de la Belgique et du Congo belge, 1919-1942.*

²⁰ James Foreman-Peck, 'Death on the Roads. Changing National Responses to Motor Accidents', in Theo Barker (ed.), *The Economic and Social Effects of the Spread of Motor Vehicles*, Basingstoke, 1987, p. 284.



What the child should learn first and foremost. In the family... At school..., 1925.

This was what could be labelled as the moral strategy. Moral measures apply to individuals, and try to steer their behaviour, mostly by threatening with punishment if wrong choices are being made. The opposite of this is the technical strategy, that tries to create a system that leaves the individual no other option but to follow, regardless of his or her personal preferences. Early in the 1930s a new technical strategy was being developed in Belgian mobility policy. The new mobility policy mirrored foucaultian disciplinary systems as applied before in factories, schools, hospitals etc. and involved extended sets of new definitions of roads, vehicles, road users and movements on the roads, and a battery of signs and signals that eventually transformed the whole of public space. The new mobility policy had strong technocratic characteristics, its aim was no longer security, but efficiency. It was prepared internationally in conventions such as Paris 1926, introducing new traffic rules, and Geneva 1931, introducing new traffic signs.

The Belgian version of this was characterised by three key marks. First of all there was a preliminary phase with Brussels in the 1920s acting as a laboratory for testing new traffic control tech-

niques such as street crossings, traffic police, traffic lights, public parking spaces, one way streets or *le système giratoire* (roundabouts). Second, around 1930 all four international structures that were preparing or contributing to conventions such as Paris 1926 or Geneva 1931 were being presided by Belgians, heavily influencing Belgian traffic legislation.²¹ The highly innovative Belgian traffic regulations of 1934 not only mirrored, but actually extended and elaborated the principles, rules and signs of the international conventions. Finally, a new generation of engineers came up in the national administration in the early 1930s, with a strong technocratic state of mind. Hardly hindered by an impotent parliament and indecisive governments these civil servants not only turned existing traffic legislation inside out in 1934, but also managed to have a budget for the construction of motor ways included in the state budget from 1935 on, although no other actor in the decision making process on road policy, including the minister, was sympathetic to this type of roads.

Conclusions

The automobile came to Belgium at an early stage from 1895 on. It first caused turbulence and social conflicts in public space, yet it was generally seen as a phenomenon with strong social and economic potential. In the 1920s motorisation broke through and began to realise its potential, both transforming public space and existing social practices, and creating important industrial and economic added value. The backside of this was a serious security issue on the public roads. Belgian public authorities, mainly concerned with economic prosperity, were conspicuously reluctant to intervene, until finally in the 1930s a new generation of technocratic civil servants took over mobility policy. “Engineers speak with their shovels,” no longer was security the issue, but efficiency. New traffic rules and signs pushed pedestrians and cyclists aside and cleared the way for speeding automobiles, new motor ways were constructed for their own sake, useless from the point of view of both traffic policy and traffic economy. “The road was its own justification: an artery, a vantage point, the technological transformation of nature to a sublime engineered landscape.”²²

21 The Convention of Geneva on the unification of road signalisation of 30 March 1931 was made by the *Comité Permanent de la Circulation Routière* (Permanent Committee of Road Traffic), a commission of the League of Nations under the presidency of the Belgian Armand Stiévenard. The three main international associations lobbying this committee were the traffic commission of the *Association Internationale Automobile* (the Automobile Clubs) led by the Belgian Jules Hansez, the *Association Internationale de Tourisme* (the Touring Clubs) under the presidency of the Belgian Paul Duchaine, and the *Union Internationale des Villes* (the city planners) led by the Belgian Émile Vinck. One should not confuse these international structures with PIARC that was dealing with *road* technology, not or only marginally with *traffic* regulations.

22 Matthew W. Roth, 'Mulholland Highway and the Engineering Culture of Los Angeles in the 1920s', *Technology and Culture*, xl, 1999, nr. 3, p. 549-550.