The Domestic Uses of Belgian-American ‘Mutual Understanding’: the Commission for Relief in Belgium Educational Foundation, 1920-1940

‘If Belgian-American relations remained stable in a world of instability, if Belgium constantly supported the objectives of the foreign policy of the United States, if critical problems concerning strategic matters could eventually end up in a climate of friendship, we can attribute these results, at least in part, to the knowledge that Belgian leaders have and to the confidence they share in the United States, after spending their education in our universities.’

The author of the quote, Philip D. Sprouse, cultural attaché at the U.S. Embassy in Brussels, had some reasons to wonder at the performance of Belgian-American educational exchanges in 1956. The Fulbright program, established less than ten years earlier, was in full swing in Western Europe. It was rightly perceived as an instrumental part of the strategy aimed at recasting the United States’ international cultural relations around the concept of ‘mutual understanding’ after the Second World War. But the Belgian case was particular in this regard: the Fulbright program relied there on a previous experience of bi-national educational exchange. Since 1920, the Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB) Educational Foundation had enabled hundreds of American and Belgian students and researchers to pursue their study across the Atlantic. Just like the Fulbright program later on, the CRB Educational Foundation had been launched in order to ‘strengthen mutual understanding’ between Belgium and the United States after the chaos of the First World War. Although the organization of the CRB Educational Foundation contributed to influence the making of the Fulbright project, one could claim that the postwar success of the latter overshadowed the legacy of the former.

Yet, there were many differences between both foundations. First, the idea that ultimately gave way to the first Belgian-American exchange project resulted from a large-scale humanitarian drive – the Commission for Relief in Belgium – that took place during the First World War under the leadership of Herbert Hoover. The exchange program Hoover envisioned was but one of several ventures that ultimately aimed at revitalizing the Belgian academic environment in close connection with the United States. Second, far from being an intergovernmental initiative, the CRB Educational Foundation was built against the backdrop of blurred boundaries between public and private spheres. The Foundation’s organizational imprint was entrenched in the ‘associative’ mix of private action and public interests that characterized much of Hoover’s economic policy after the war, especially during his years as Secretary of Commerce (1921-1928). A third distinctive feature of the CRB Educational Foundation was its firm focus on the Belgian elite. Though the exchange program was originally designed to be a genuine two-way instrument, Belgian Fellows studying at American universities outnumbered their American counterparts from the very beginning. Quantity, however, was never a matter of concern as the Foundation’s core business progressively shifted from bi-national ‘mutual understanding’ to the improvement of Belgium’s lagging higher education system. With these
differences in mind, one could say that the CRB Educational Foundation is one the missing links which connect the nineteenth-century experience of (mostly non-governmental) intercultural transfers with the logics of ‘cultural diplomacy’ as a tool for foreign policy after Second World War.6

In this essay, my intention is twofold. First I will sketch the early history of the CRB Educational Foundation in order to give the immediate aftermath of the First World War and the interwar years a greater emphasis inasmuch as they concerned the ‘first wave’ of Americanization in Europe after the pioneering phases of the late nineteenth century.7 By showing that the practice of cultural diplomacy pre dates the Second World War, I thus rally behind Jessica Gienow-Hecht’s call to ‘make a serious effort to soft pedal our ongoing fascination with the Cold War’.8 The second purpose of this article comes down to questioning the underlying structure of the bilateral – or binational – exchange program beyond the rhetoric of ‘mutual understanding’. I argue that the CRB Educational Foundation was originally built on two different conceptions, which overlapped, rather than converged, with each other. This gave way to an exchange program that was fundamentally unbalanced and whose success ultimately resulted from a fruitful misunderstanding, rather than from a common aspiration for ‘mutual understanding’.

1. From wartime relief to postwar reconstruction

Shortly after German troops invaded neutral Belgium on August 4, 1914, the shortage of food supply for civilians was looming. Industrialists Ernest Solvay and Dannie Heineman reacted to the desperate call of the mayor of Brussels, Adolphe Max, by setting up an organization designed to coordinate food surpluses for local populations. The initiative, later called the Comité National de Secours et d’Alimentation (National Committee for Relief and Food, hereinafter Comité National) proved a useful stop-gap operation. It was headed by Emile Francqui, a wealthy, powerful and controversial figure, acting as director of Belgium’s most influential banking group, the Société Générale de Belgique. As the perspective of a lasting military occupation of the Belgian territory became reality, it appeared that negotiations with major Allied and neutral powers were a necessary precondition in order to prevent mass starvation. Francqui managed to reach the Belgian Legation in London on October 18, 1914, where he met several British diplomats, as well as the American mining engineer Herbert Hoover. Since the outbreak of the war, Hoover had developed a London-based humanitarian organization that assisted some 150,000 American travelers who were stranded on the European continent. His organizational capacities were praised. Alerted by his compatriot Millard K. Shaler about the dreadful situation in occupied Belgium, Hoover had already extended his efforts to securing the principle of the importation of food to Belgium when Francqui arrived in London. Despite past antagonism – Francqui and Hoover had first met in China in 1901 where they were pursuing conflicting business interests –, Francqui did not much time to realize that Hoover was ‘the man for the job’.9

The Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB), led by Hoover, was officially launched on October 22, 1914. Its role, upstream to that of the Belgian Comité National, consisted in centralizing, purchasing, and shipping food to Belgium (and, later on, to Northern France). In view of their responsibilities under wartime circumstances, both committees rapidly grew as a ‘kind of government’ (in the words of the Belgian industrial tycoon, Ernest Solvay, who acted as the Comité National’s Honorary Chairman) or even as ‘piratical states organized for
The outcomes of their joint action were no less eloquent. Between 1914 and 1919, they distributed goods for a total worth of nearly $1 billion to some 9 million Belgian and French citizens in the German-occupied zone. The success of the relief organization prompted Hoover to carry on a far-reaching relief program in Poland and Russia after 1918. Interestingly, estimates from the CRB show that 78.4 percent of the wartime funds stemmed from Allied government loans to France and Belgium. This large-scale partnering of the government with private donations and philanthropic organizations perfectly fitted into Francqui’s organizational scheme, but it was first and foremost the hallmark of Hoover’s associative framework of public-private partnerships, which would be increasingly experimented in the United States during the 1920s. The financial history of the wartime relief activities would deserve a thorough analysis. From the narrow perspective of this article, suffice it to say that, from February 1915 until the end of the war, the bulk of the expenses came from the American, British, and French Treasuries. In other words, early philanthropic private initiatives had rapidly given way to an unprecedented state-funded humanitarian enterprise.

Hoover and Francqui had been instrumental in securing governmental subsidies, obtaining diplomatic guarantees, and organizing the safe transportation and distribution of foodstuffs behind enemy lines. In an official history of the CRB, Tracy B. Kittredge, himself a former volunteer of the CRB, sketched a fascinating, albeit not unpartisan, mirror-image portray of the American and Belgian leaders:

‘Both were keen executives; both were accustomed to handling men and affairs. In temperament and personality they were utterly different. Hoover, with his odd persuasiveness, drew men to him, and won their love and friendship and confidence. Nothing was more characteristic of the Commission for Relief in Belgium than the loyalty of the volunteer members to their chief. (...) Hoover, with his characteristic modesty, always deprecated the tendency to attribute the marvelous success of the Commission’s work to his own efforts. (...)’

Francqui was of quite a different type. A man of strong will, of dominant personality, he impressed men by his ability, led them or drove them to follow him, because they realized that in the crisis through which Belgium was passing, he was the best man to be at the helm. In a very great many respects he was the dictator of the affairs of the Comité National. It was he who largely determined its policy and directed its course even in matters of detail’.13

Despite moments of extreme tensions, which culminated in January and February 1916 after leakages of food imports had been reported by the British government, Hoover and Francqui managed to overcome their mutual rivalries and find a modus vivendi throughout the
conflict. The uniqueness of their joint humanitarian work also rested on their firm commitment to maintain the monopoly on relief. For the sake of clarity and efficiency, Hoover in particular asserted that all donations should channel through the CRB. Humanitarian and charitable competitors, including the Rockefeller Foundation and the American Red Cross, ultimately complied with this scheme. After all, Hoover and Francqui had been organizational prime-movers; they occupied the relief stage through a dense network of volunteers. At this stage already, university students, like the Oxford Rhodes Scholars, played a pivotal role in administering foodstuffs and other basic needs. Their early involvement in the humanitarian drive set the pattern of the private voluntary enterprise for future initiatives.

As it happened, initiatives for a better future were in the air in the midst of wartime emergency work. An important catalyst of Hoover and Francqui’s collective effort was the prospect of postwar reconstruction, where both men intended to exert a leading role. They had the feeling they had reached a peak businesswise and wanted to reorient their action toward public interests. The CRB and the Comité National turned out to be pivotal in serving these goals. While both of them agreed on the principle to transfer a portion of the remaining funds of both relief committees to a permanent institution that would commemorate the wartime relief operation, the objectives of such an institution remained rather unclear. Although they were not explicitly uttered, two visions grew stronger. Raised as an orphan and deprived of any formal training, Francqui insisted to promote a wider access to Belgian higher education. Hoover was most impressed by the role played by dozens of Oxford Rhodes Scholars he had picked as volunteers in November 1914. Accordingly, he cherished the idea of establishing a scholarship exchange program between Belgian and American university students.

Although initial discussions concerning the extension of the ‘democratization’ of Belgian higher education started as soon as 1915, the first round of negotiations involving Belgian university authorities took place between March and July 1916. The secret meetings of this sub-committee, led by the banker Félicien Cattier, Francqui’s close adviser, focused on the establishment of a rather mysterious ‘Fifty-Million Foundation’, as the rector of the University of Louvain, Paulin Ladeuze, called it. But when it came to the origins of funds, university administrators, who had closed down their respective institutions since the start of the war, were kept in the dark.

By July 1916, it came to the attention of the Belgian government in exile that the ‘Freemasons’ Francqui and Cattier were plotting to prepare important postwar reconstruction reforms. These rumors prompted Hoover to inform the (Catholic) Belgian Minister of Finance, Aloys van de Vijvere, who had already clashed with him about the need to return to the Belgian government unspent public funds. Against this backdrop, Hoover wished to keep the government-in-exile informed of the foundation he and Francqui had in mind:

'It is the desire of your countrymen in Belgium to establish some kind of an institution to commemorate the Relief ... It is not proposed so far as I know to establish any teaching institution in competition with those existing, but simply to establish a foundation, the income from which would be injected into the present educational system for the stimulation of scientific and industrial research and the extension of needed departments ... Such foundations have been
the greatest factor in the remarkable advancement of American higher education and research, in the last thirty years.\textsuperscript{18}

Hoover’s assertion was essentially preemptive; it aimed at reconnecting the planned initiative with the endowments and community chests that were mushrooming in the United States before the war. Quite surprisingly, however, there was no mention of transatlantic educational exchange anymore. Franqui fleshed out the proposal a couple of weeks later. The Fondation universitaire to be organized, he told Van de Vijvere, would grant university loans to students from low-income families, give subventions to recognized scientists, and provide ‘recent PhDs intending to start a scientific career the necessary means allowing them to pursue their studies in Belgium or abroad.’ There was no mention of educational exchange. With audacity, Francqui went on by saying that a proposition of law was already available and awaited the return of the government-in-exile to Belgium.\textsuperscript{19} Obviously, the prolongation – and intensification – of the war stalled further discussions.

A complimentary interpretation underlines the impact of internal politics. Francqui and Hoover became increasingly aware of the unexpected political obstacles laying in their way. The conflict had covered the Belgian society with a veil of solidarity across the strong political, religious, and linguistic walls that traditionally divided the country. But this ideological convergence was provisional; cultural divisions would naturally resurface once the war was over. In order to fulfill their ‘commemoration’ scheme, Francqui and Hoover not only had to forestall the eventual reluctance from the Belgian government, they also had to win over the hearts and minds of academic ‘competitors’.

2. A ‘systematic exchange of intellectual ideas’

The CRB carried on its action after the entry of the United States into the war in April 1917. Deprived of their neutral status, however, American delegates were progressively replaced by Dutch and Spanish representatives. Hoover himself was recruited by Woodrow Wilson to head the US Food Administration in Washington, from where he continued to supervise the relief operations in Belgium. The important geopolitical reshuffling of 1917 had limited impact on the coordination of labor between the CRB and the Comité National until the signing of the Armistice in November 1918. By early 1919, priority was given to the international agenda framed by Woodrow Wilson. While Hoover took the lead of the American Relief Administration, which extended relief activities to Central Eastern Europe (Poland, in particular) and post-revolutionary Russia, Francqui was advising the Belgian government in assessing the wartime reparations claims Belgium intended to make towards Germany at the Versailles Conference. Less regular than before, their mutual correspondence still focused on Belgian affairs with a special eye on the liquidation of both relief committees. Due to the various sources of income and the volume of transactions, the settling of accounts turned out to be a Herculean task. Francqui and Hoover’s fruitful cooperation was unsurpassed at this stage. Unafraid of working with complex figures, they built a creative system of accounting techniques, which eventually brought a positive balance of no less than $30 million into the Benevolent Department of the CRB, primarily concerned with charity purposes. After careful coordination with Francqui, Hoover was pleased to inform the Belgian Prime Minister Léon Delacroix that ‘no
more democratic service can be rendered to the Belgian people than that these funds should be applied to the extension of higher education in Belgium.' Hoover and Francqui agreed that this was the most convincing, and still rather vague, way to express their objectives. Shrewd as they were, they went on by describing as ‘unexpended gifts and profits of the Commission for Relief in Belgium’ what, in reality, were significant portions of profits secured and accumulated throughout the war by the Comité National. The Belgian government never smelled a rat – or fainted credulity.

For both relief leaders, implementing their ‘commemorative’ scheme had required as much diplomacy as boldness. From the balance mentioned, which grew to $42 million in 1920, Belgian universities (Brussels, Ghent, Liège, and Louvain) and two other institutions received directly some $20 million. The residue was invested to create two separate foundations: the New York-based CRB Educational Foundation, and the Brussels-based Fondation universitaire. The dual structure was somehow contrary to the plan presented to the Belgian government. Hoover plainly justified the discrepancies as a ‘return to the original idea’. Evidently, the CRB chairman, who had observed Francqui’s recklessness all through the war, feared that the executive head of the Comité National could use the foundation project for his own goals; he had no wish in seeing the commemoration of the Belgian relief transformed into a bone of contention. Organizing a foundation of his own, run by a handful of trusted CRB delegates (Edgar Rickard, W. Hallam Tuck, Millard K. Shaler, and Perrin C. Galpin), enabled Hoover to keep full control of the relief legacy and let him have free reins in directing programs along the lines he deemed necessary. The same was true for Francqui. Once reassured that the ‘American Foundation’ was not established at the Fondation universitaire’s expense Francqui gave Hoover his complete blessing. ‘It is a monument that we are erecting to the solidarity of the two people’, noted the Belgian emphatically.

Then again, the two-foundation construction was as much the result of a process of mutual neutralization. The idea of transatlantic academic exchange reemerged in this context, as the direct expression of Hoover’s desire. Inspired by the example of the Rhodes scholarship program and the Rockefeller Foundation, Hoover proposed in October 1919 to select Belgian and American candidates ready to study at American and Belgian universities, respectively. Provisional ‘Fellowship Committees’ were created in New York and Brussels as a means to oversee the process. In order to enhance the transatlantic cooperation, a few of Hoover’s men served as representatives in Brussels, where they also had their business. An early initiator of the relief effort, the engineer Millard K. Shaler was appointed vice-president of the Fondation universitaire; William Hallam Tuck, who had been recruited by the chemical company Solvay, sat at the board of directors of the same Fondation. Despite the presence of American representatives, differences in the organization of the selection procedure and in the use of selection criteria were hard to smooth down. For instance, the ‘rectors’ of Belgian universities – the equivalent of university presidents – took direct and decisive part in the Fondation universitaire’s fellowship committee. They based part of their judgment on the assumption that Belgian candidates intended to pursue an academic or scientific career. Nothing of that sort applied to the American applicants. Composed exclusively of American engineers and businessmen, the CRB Educational Foundation’s fellowship committee merely collected applications that had been preselected by American universities.

To a large extent, these differences sprang from the reactivation of wartime committees for the purpose of educational programs. While Hoover’s structure rested on his close network of engineers and friends, all of whom were former CRB members, Francqui (and Cattier) had
favored an organization that involved university administrators and professors, most of whom had taken part in the secret meetings that took place in the midst of the war. By and large organizational mishaps between Brussels and New York did not prevent the American foundation from taking the upper hand in framing the exchange program. A brochure depicting the objectives of the CRB Educational Foundation in October 1920 noted that its first purpose was ‘the establishment of 48 exchange graduate fellowships between Belgian and American universities, each year 24 Americans are chosen to study in Belgium and 24 Belgian Fellows are chosen to study in America’. Other means included the exchange of professorships and the awarding of ‘grants for special investigation leading to the advancement of economic education, scientific and social ideas’, all of which were intended to serve the ‘systematic exchange of intellectual ideas between Belgium and the United States.’

Interestingly, while the emphasis of the initial drafts of the commemoration project had been laid on the ‘promotion of goodwill between the two nations’, the two-foundation structure and the early discussions surrounding the permanent establishment of both institutions paid the organization of exchange fellowships among universities in both countries closer attention. From an ancillary status, student exchanges had suddenly become the cornerstone of Hoover and Francqui’s project. The reason was obvious: while differing on the end game of closer relations between Belgium and the United States, they both agreed that transnational educational exchange could serve their respective objectives. Hoover was obsessed with the idea that ‘mutual understanding’ between both countries would be best reached through a two-way university-based exchange program. Francqui, on the other hand, was persuaded that Belgium’s lagging position after the war could be partly overcome through the development of scientific research. For Hoover in particular, considerations of world politics may also have played a role. The promotion of ‘mutual understanding’ in this respect was Herbert Hoover’s alternative view to Woodrow Wilson’s conception of internationalism. While they shared the same assumptions for an open international diplomacy, the concrete premises of Hoover’s understanding of ‘mutual understanding’ were rooted in his associative philosophy. As Olivier Zunz put it, Hoover ‘was able to turn institutions of civil society, from philanthropic foundations to community organizations, into instruments of the executive branch while calling on them for voluntary actions’.

This matter-of-fact approach sharply contrasted with the Wilsonian imperative set down in the Fourteen Points.

Emile Francqui, likewise, was not capable of grand theoretical designs. His awareness of international relations was subordinated to his staunch patriotism. He came back from the Paris Peace Conference with the anxiety that Belgium’s decay was inexorable – and that the state could not respond to it. He knew too well that the Belgian government had just turned down the idea to set up a state-funded National Research Council modeled after the National Research Council in the United States and inspired by the network of research institutions created by the Kaiser-Wilhelm Gesellschaft in Germany. He firmly believed that non-governmental informal instruments were better adapted to induce the advancement of scientific knowledge, which was required to lead the ‘competition among nations’ that Belgium faced after the war.

For the Belgian rectors alike, the feelings of their country’s scientific decline ran high. Paul Héger, rector of the University of Brussels and mastermind of its postwar modernization, urged his colleagues to use the channels of the American educational exchange program in order to reach the level of its neighboring countries. In other words, according to Francqui and his university allies, the making of scientific excellence had to take into account primarily the needs of the country’s reconstruction. Promoting Hoover’s politically-imbued ‘mutual understanding’ did not
rank high in their priority list. To a large extent, therefore, the organization of student exchanges was interpreted as a compromise for different expectations. These conflicting views were about to appear at the center stage.

3. The unbalanced exchange: statistics and beyond

The two-way avenue that Hoover had striven for; ‘his’ exchange fellowships project quickly turned into a failure. Whereas 34 Belgian students went to the United States in the program’s second year (1922/23), only 11 Americans stayed in Belgium. The lack of interest for American graduates to study at Belgian universities, rather than any organizational malfunction, was the source of an ever-growing disproportion over the years (see Tables 1 and 2 below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University of Brussels</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University of Ghent</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Liège</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Louvain</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other institution</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>595</td>
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</table>

This prompted the New York-based office of the CRB Educational Foundation to resort to several mechanisms of adjustment over the years. First, new types of fellowships were introduced in 1924 – the so-called ‘advanced fellowships’ – which targeted professors and researchers from both sides. The number of ‘advanced Fellows’, which fluctuated between four
and eight annually, reduced automatically the average number of ‘graduate fellowships’. Second, rather than finding the proper ways to encourage American applications, it was decided to drastically limit the number of Belgian applicants. This was the unforeseen consequence of an agreement reached between Hoover and Francqui whereby each foundation would cover expenses incurred in local currency, irrespective of the Fellows’ citizenship. As a result, CRB Secretary Perrin Galpin argued that the combination of various elements – the growing number of Belgian Fellows, the inflation of American universities tuition fees that were covered by the Foundation, the rising living standards, etc. – forced the CRB to cut the number of appointments for Belgian candidates from 24 to 18 as of 1929. The third organizational adjustment mechanism was perhaps the boldest one as it stepped directly into the Belgian foundation’s prerogatives. With much diplomacy, comments were made from New York about the mixed results given by Brussels’ selection procedure. While Galpin invoked the lack of fluency in the command of the English language by some successful Belgian applicants, the CRB Educational Foundation aimed at recasting some essential characteristics of Francqui’s methodology, which consisted in favoring ‘useful science’, i.e. knowledge that could be tapped for Belgium’s social and economic development. CRB officials did not oppose these ultimate goals, which were echoed in Belgian Fellows’ subjects of study and research (see Table 3). But they contested the organizational basis upon which these goals rested. It took five years of hard-fought negotiations to settle a modus operandi. A separate ‘Advisory Committee on Fellowships for the United States’ composed of university professors was created. Its main task was to submit a preliminary ranking of applicants to the Fondation universitaire’s executive committee. The reform was implemented from 1930 but it encountered an array of amendments throughout the 1930s, which considerably undermined its innovation. Then again, the American thrust for objective methodology did not come out of the blue. It was grounded in the sentiment that the joint enterprise was not equally appreciated on the Belgian side. Still in 1934, the ‘old CRB people’ suspected that Francqui directed ‘efforts to control the selection of our Fellows in Belgium’ as part of a ‘definite plan to dominate our affairs.’ Hoover and Francqui nevertheless remained on very good terms during Hoover’s presidency (1929-1933) and up to Francqui’s death on 16 November 1935.

4. A tale of two cultures

The decisive breakthrough aiming at attenuating the disproportion between Belgian and American Fellows came with the introduction of university summer courses in art in 1936/37. The program, which focused on the history of Flemish art and modern Belgian art, was composed of lectures at different universities and guided tours in Belgium’s finest museums. These summer courses met a great demand among Americans until the outbreak of the Second World War. The initiative also reflected a more general trend: in sharp contrast with their Belgian counterparts, American Fellows favored topics from the arts and humanities, both subjects of study for which Belgium was considered appealing (Tables 3 and 4). Even fellows who had travelled to Belgium for the purpose of completing their education in the natural and medical sciences emphasized the impact of the artistic and cultural heritage. A student in organic chemistry from Wesleyan University staying at Ghent pointed to the ‘invaluable’ experience he gathered from visiting monuments and museums from the region, rather than by attending practical training in laboratories. An American student consulting the collections of the
botanical garden in Brussels suggested that complementary lectures on art be organized by the CRB for ‘those of us who do not fully appreciate the things we see.’

Among Belgian fellows, on the other hand, engineers seem to have been the most enthusiastic about their educational exchange experience. ‘When we come to actual engineering work’, summarized a fellow enrolled in Harvard’s Master program for civil engineering, ‘there is no doubt that no country can compete with the United States at present’. On the West Coast, another young Belgian engineer gave a fair assessment of the training he received at Liege University but felt somehow that ‘American methods’ of engineering, focusing as they were on first-hand practice and process application, should be applied to Belgian universities ‘at least in the last years’. His compatriot Jules Roman, a graduate from the Solvay Business School at the University of Brussels, went a step further in this call for technology transfer. A few years after his stay at Harvard’s Graduate School of Business Administration, he wrote a book entitled *The American Industrial Organization Applied to European Firms*. The author’s infatuation with business efficiency methods and in-house standardization techniques resulted in a blending of Taylorism and Fordism, both of which were en vogue in Europe during the 1920s. As Gaston Dept, a Belgian historian studying at Harvard, put it, ‘it seems that engineers and physicians have more to learn in the United States than philosophers, historians, or lawyers; but this can only be said from a material point of view.’ Undoubtedly, Belgian and American students could not deny the existence of a ‘technological gap’ dividing their respective countries. Yet, this prompted a Belgian fellow working in the field of experimental medicine at the well-endowed Rockefeller Institute in New York to lay stress on a ‘peculiar Belgian spirit’, which consisted in ‘doing some good piece of work with very poor financial resources’.

Table 3: CRB Belgian Fellows to the USA, 1920-1943: General Subjects of Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medical Sciences</th>
<th>188</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Natural Sciences</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applied Sciences</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law &amp; Social Sciences</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>595</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: CRB American Fellows to Belgium, 1920-1940: General Subjects of Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>History</th>
<th>34</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>French Language and Literature</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interuniversity Summer Art Courses</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Sciences</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical Sciences</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (&lt; 10)</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Figures of subjects of study can hardly provide a convincing picture of the impact of the exchange fellowships program. But this reservation also applies for more subjective or personal documentation. In this respect, the preliminary and final reports, which the CRB Educational Foundation asked each of its Fellows to draft, are far from being first-hand testimonies. The
hyperbole tone of these accounts (‘wonderful opportunity’, ‘outstanding experience’, etc.) and the inherent bias they contained make them irrelevant sources if taken at face value. With this caveat in mind, however, these reports have still much to offer. They show that the reactions of fellows largely corresponded to the general patterns associated with travel writings in general, which conveyed a set of national stereotypes and imagined identities by means of cross-cultural comparisons.43 As a Belgian Fellow studying automotive engineering at MIT put it, ‘there are many preconceived ideas in Europe about America, American individualism, money-making, college life, sports, and so on.’ But, as he filled in his preliminary report, he was himself eager to reproduce many of these clichés – the strong feeling of Americans for justice, equity, human rights, and the their role in the development of ‘modern civilization’.46 Reports gave way to a form of imaginative leap where the ‘numerous differences existing between the two continents’ strikingly outweighed analogue observations and convergent experiences. While Belgian students in medical, natural and applied sciences praised the high standards of laboratory equipment and overall research facilities, their colleagues in the humanities and social sciences celebrated the extended opening hours of university libraries as well as their endless stacks. Conversely, American students travelling to Belgium were appalled by the insufficient collections available in Belgian academic libraries, disappointed by the absence of course catalogs enabling them to select their program, and surprised by the unorganized and undisciplined student life within Belgian campuses. They insisted, however, that the lack of facilities was partly offset by the welcoming atmosphere and the conditions of work provided during their stay.

For both groups of students, the two foundations played a crucial role of information and general guidance. Whatever their final destination, Belgian students had to pass by the CRB New York office once they had completed their cruise in first-class cabins aboard the Red Star Line, the main transatlantic passenger line running between Antwerp and New York. After three days spent in New York, fellows were expected to pursue their travel to the university they had selected. Travel and initial accommodation expenses were covered by the foundations on a flat-rate basis. The same was true for the general amount of stipends, which were granted regardless of the type of housing and the region chosen. As it happened, CRB officials deemed it part of the learning process that exchange students had to deal with these constraints. The variation of living costs across the United States, however, rapidly became an ongoing source of soft criticism in reports, especially from those staying on the East Coast. They complained that ‘fellows who [had] chosen to study in a Western university can easily visit the country by the mere fact that their trip to and from their residence is paid by the Foundation and can be routed through the interesting places they want to see’.47

Interestingly, CRB Fellows sought to underline the importance of the non-scientific aspect of the exchange program. They indicated that they learned as much about the other culture and people as about their particular area of study. ‘As far as I am concerned’, wrote René Breckpot, a young Belgian chemist and future professor at the University of Louvain, ‘I can state that my year in the United States has been as interesting from the general point of view as from the purely scientific one. Such a stay means, I feel, quite an education.’48 Their American counterparts seemed especially pleased with their experience in an ‘old country’. Of course, obstacles in meeting local people and expanding one’s social network were numerous. It entailed some efforts to grasp the cultural idiosyncrasies and social dynamics of both countries. Belgian students felt it was an utmost necessity to ‘appertain to a well-known active club’ in order to mingle with Americans. Then again, a Belgian student in engineering urged his fellow
compatriots to ‘go outside the world of fraternities and dormitories’. The different interpretations concerning the privileged institutional setting for social intercourse were instructive. In 1927, the Flemish writer Jan-Albert Goris published a book entitled Meet America (under his pen name Marnix Gijsen) based on his stay as a CRB graduate fellow at the University of Washington the previous year. A fervent catholic, he paid much attention to the declining faith among the younger generation of Americans but noted that other social communities (fraternities, sororities, sport clubs, etc.) were mobilized as a means to tie cultural binds. American students were quite disappointed with the lack of university life on Belgian campuses and felt forced to rely on their ‘foster’ families or on any kind of informal network. ‘I have been offered a sufficient opportunity to meet the better class of Belgians socially’, told a student in International Law, ‘but through individuals rather than through any organized effort.’ The barrier of language affected fellows’ ability in social intercourse. This proved troublesome not in the sense of incommunicability but rather inasmuch as many of their Belgian acquaintances, especially in Brussels, were eager to switch to English. American students in Belgium did not seem to pay much attention to the linguistic quarrels opposing French and Flemish communities; they saw the country as predominantly French-speaking. Even in the Flemish city of Ghent, where the university supplied lectures in Dutch, American fellows deemed it useful and sufficient to exercise their French for social purposes. In Flemish cities like Antwerp and Ghent, French-speaking groups notoriously belonged to the higher social strata. ‘The American who wishes to become familiar with Belgian life and character (…),’ wrote Carl Stephenson, an assistant professor in History from Wisconsin, ‘does well to come to a place like Ghent. Here he is forced to associate with Belgians and to speak French instead of going with his own little crowd and always talking his own vocabulary.’ Such accounts tell us much about the fellows’ social background and their inclination to remain in the vicinity of the hushed and elitist atmosphere of the Fondation Universitaire and other sedate academic clubs. The ‘molding of character’ was an essential objective of both components of the CRB educational exchange program.

5. (Re)producing the elite?

On the Belgian side, successful applicants belonged to the upper ranks of the bourgeoisie. Bearing in mind the limited scope for democratization of Belgian universities during the interwar period, CRB fellow Jan-Albert Goris noted in his essay that university students only represented 1.4 percent of the Belgian population in 1923/24, whereas they accounted for 6 percent in the United States at the same time. The student population of the University of Louvain was of 3,412 in 1924 – a rather shy figure in comparison with the University of Columbia (37,000), University of California (12,000) and even the University of Washington in Seattle (6,500). Moreover, in spite of the Fondation universitaire’s early commitment to infuse democratization into the Belgian higher education system, the selection mechanisms of the exchange fellowships program contributed to reproduce, rather than to reform, the existing social structure. For instance, in stark contrast to Hoover’s appeal, reflected in his seminal letter of August 1919 addressed to the Belgian Prime Minister, in which he asked that young women be included in the educational program, women only represented 6.57 percent of the total group of Belgian Fellows between 1920 and 1940. This was a rather disappointing achievement considering the impressive increase of female students in Belgian universities during the interwar period: at the University of Brussels their proportion grew from 4.15 percent in 1919 to 20.35 percent in 1928 and even
23.01 percent at the eve of the Second World War. Early discussions within the Brussels-based fellowship committee had determined an ideal profile of candidates, which combined intellectual excellence with ‘gentlemen’s values’. In this sense, the ideal-type of the Fondation universitaire’s educational agenda was at the intersection of two cultural representations: the Anglo-American approach that favored the ‘molding of character’, on the one hand, and the continental European approach, which gave greater focus on academia-oriented training, on the other. Over time and due to the effect of path-dependency, this informal profiling had given way to an unofficial blueprint, which tended to associate the program with – academic and social – elitism.

In this regard, it is interesting to note that 68.4 percent of CRB Belgian Fellows between 1920 and 1928 were concentrated in seven American universities, with Harvard attracting 20 percent of the whole group (see Table 5). Undoubtedly, students intended to capitalize on the high degree of ‘academic prestige value’ produced by these renowned establishments, as Thorstein Veblen observed at the time. But the lack of information also played a role. A Graduate Fellow complained that candidates had to choose their university too early in the process. Would the Fondation universitaire call the old Fellows for rescue, ‘I am sure that much fewer Belgians would think themselves obliged to go to the biggest universities as Massachusetts Institute of Technology, since they would learn from their predecessors that some smaller universities are excellent for special fields.’

Table 5: CRB Belgian Fellows to the USA, 1920-1928: Choice of American Universities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Columbia University</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johns Hopkins University</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harvard University</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts Institute of Technology</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Princeton University</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanford University</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of California, Berkeley</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (&lt; 10)</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>250</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Conclusion

At the completion of a three-week stay in Belgium in January 1939 J.P. Den Hartog, assistant professor at Harvard, wrote down two ‘striking’ observations about his experience. First, he was impressed by the quality of the equipment of the engineering laboratories he visited, which he considered ‘more modern and up to date than most American university laboratories’. He was also amazed by the fact that many members of the teaching staff at Belgian universities were familiar with American cultural and scientific conditions. In this community, he noted, ‘the many CRB Belgian fellows, who have lived and studied in the United States, form a lively and surprisingly well-coordinated group that is having a profound influence on University life’. The real ‘impact’ or ‘influence’ of these cultural exchanges is of course far from easy to assess and statistics only provide limited guidance. Until 1940, the CRB Educational Foundation gave some 500 Belgians the opportunity to study in the United States and to encounter American culture. The figure would increase threefold during the second half of the twentieth century.
For any educational foundation, this quantitative achievement would appear as an undisputable success. But the most impressive realizations of the CRB Educational Foundation cannot be measured through statistics as they deal essentially with Belgium’s inside social dynamics. First, the Foundation was able to partly ‘deprovincialize’ Belgian universities by strengthening the international circulation of scientific elites and considerably reducing the inbreeding mechanisms of academic recruitments. Between a third and a quarter of CRB Fellows became academics, most of them at Belgian universities (see Graph 1).\(^1\) Second, and in some way in contradiction to the previous effect, the CRB exchange program became an unexpected pathway that allowed for the legitimization and reproduction of the Belgian elites through their inclusion in the academia. These changing sociological mechanisms were not planned. They do not reflect Hoover’s initial vision of a genuine transatlantic educational exchange or Francqui’s claim for the democratization of Belgian higher education. But their differing interpretations of ‘mutual understanding’ through educational exchanges profoundly transformed the intellectual underpinnings of the Belgian bourgeoisie inasmuch as it contributed to shift Belgium’s academic and scientific center of gravity from East to West, i.e. from a predominantly German scientific tradition before 1914 to a cultural reference model exerted by the United States after the First World War. Of course, this paradigmatic shift was progressive, hardly visible, and limited in scope. It first affected first and foremost the highest strata of the Belgian population. Nevertheless, its mechanism was already underway during the interwar, well before the outbreak of the cultural Cold War and the formalization of cultural diplomacy. This early version of top-down Americanization paved the way for a strong transatlantic consensus in the heart of Europe after the Second World War.\(^2\) Resting on the tenets of a Fordist economic policy, this consensus resulted in the form of geopolitical stability observed by the U.S. cultural attaché in the opening quote.

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\(^1\) US National Archives at College Park, MD, Record Group 59 (General Record of the Department of State), Decimal Files 511.553/4-2356, ‘Semi-annual Report on the International Educational Exchange Program, July-December 1955’ by Philip D. Sprouse (Counselor of Embassy), 23 April 1956.


\(^3\) In 1938, the Commission for Relief in Belgium Educational Foundation became the Belgian American Educational Foundation. To avoid confusion the name CRB Educational Foundation will be used throughout this essay.


11 George I. Gay (with the coll. of H. H. Fisher), Public Relations of the Commission for Relief in Belgium (Stanford University Press, 1929): vol. II, Ch. XIII.
14 See Thomas Irish’s article in this issue.
15 Nash, Hoover, 205-6; Ranieri, Francqui, 293. Both draw upon the personal diary of US Ambassador to Belgium, Brand Whitlock.
17 Hoover to Van de Vijvere, 9 May 1916, Commission for Relief in Belgium Records, 1914-1930, Box 7, Folder 26, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford, CA (hereinafter HIA).
19 Francqui to Van de Vijvere, 2 August 1916, CRB Records, Box 13, Folder 24, HIA.
20 Hoover to Delacroix, 28 August 1919, CRB Records, Box 6, Folder 30, HIA.
21 Ranieri, Francqui, 301-03; Bertrams, Universités, 185-86.
23 Francqui to Hoover, 28 March 1920, CRB Records, Box 14, Folder 9, HIA.
26 Brochure CRB Educational Foundation, Inc., New York City, October 1920, CRB Educational Foundation Records, Box 1, Folder 2, HIA.
27 Zunz, Philanthropy, 104.
29 Francqui to university administrators, 8 September 1919, reproduced in La Fondation universitaire (Brussels, n.d.), File 1.451, Archives of the Fondation Universitaire, Brussels.
30 Paul Héger, ‘La Fondation universitaire’, Le Flambeau, 3 (November 1919): 7. Following a six-week tour of American universities taken by a commission of the University of Brussels in October 1922, the CRB Educational Foundation agreed to give 15 Million Belgian Francs for land and buildings ‘to meet present urgent necessities of the University’ of Brussels (see CRB Educational Foundation. Annual Report, 1921-1922, pp. 8-9, CRB Educational Foundation Records, Box 3, Folder 3, HIA).
31 Source for Tables 1 and 2 is Belgian American Educational Foundation, Inc., Report for the years 1941-1942-1943, pp. 72-75, CRB Educational Foundation Records, Box 4, Folder 2, HIA.
32 Galpin to Executive Committee Members of CRB Educational Foundation, 10 October 1927, Minutes of meetings, ‘Choice of Belgian Fellows, 1924-1936’, BAEF.
33 Shaller to Galpin, 14 June 1929, Minutes of meetings, ‘Choice of Belgian Fellows, 1924-1936’, BAEF.
34 Galpin to Hoover, 9 February 1934, CRB Educational Foundation Records, Box 1, Folder 14, HIA.
35 See Hoover-Francqui correspondence in Hoover Papers Subject Files, Box 315, HIA.
36 Ranieri, Francqui, 311.
38 Preliminary reports of American Fellows in Belgium, 1924-25, ‘A.W., Botany, University of Brussels’, CRB Educational Foundation Records, Box 4, Folder 11, HIA.
39 Preliminary reports of Belgian Fellows in America, 1926-27, ‘F.C., Civil Engineering – Harvard’, CRB Educational Foundation Records, Box 5, Folder 3, HIA.
Preliminary reports of Belgian Fellows in America, 1922-23, ‘F.P., Engineering – Stanford’, CRB Educational Foundation Records, Box 5, Folder 2, HIA.


Final reports of Belgian Fellows in America, 1924-25, CRB Educational Foundation Records, Box 4, Folder 5, HIA.

Preliminary reports of Belgian Fellows in America, 1922-23, ‘J.M., Medicine - Rockefeller Institute’, CRB Educational Foundation Records, Box 5, Folder 2, HIA.

Source for Tables 3 and 4 is Belgian American Educational Foundation, Inc., Report for the years 1941-1942-1943, pp. 73-75, CRB Educational Foundation Records, Box 4, Folder 2, HIA.


Preliminary reports of Belgian Fellows in America, 1927-28, ‘J.D., Neurology – Harvard’, CRB Educational Foundation Records, Box 5, Folder 4, HIA.

Final reports of Belgian Fellows in America, 1924-25, ‘R.B., Pure and Applied Chemistry – Chicago’, CRB Educational Foundation Records, Box 4, Folder 5, HIA.


Final reports of Belgian Fellows in America, 1924-25, CRB Educational Foundation Records, Box 4, Folder 5, HIA.

CRB Educational Foundation, Inc., Annual Report 1927, p. 33, CRB Educational Foundation Records, Box 3, Folder 6, HIA.

