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A Technocratic Moment in 1930s Belgium: Governmental Planning Between Democracy and Fascism

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Historiographical accounts generally explain Belgian technocracy as a short-lived phenomenon of the 1930s, when the politicians Hendrik de Man and Paul van Zeeland unsuccessfully tried to reinforce state power by strengthening the role of experts (at the expense of the parliament). This article focuses on the overlooked ideas and activities of the political scientist Louis Camu, who, also during the 1930s, pushed for technocratic governance – with more success than van Zeeland and de Man. As ‘Royal Commissioner’ for civil service reform, Camu sought to transform Belgian politics and even the morality of the population at large. Yet despite his public prominence, Camu was far from a transparent political operator. While defending a Montesquieuan democracy in public, he covertly became involved in extreme-right politics during the latter years of the 1930s, culminating in his 1940 membership of a war-time reform committee that sought to abolish the liberal democracy.

Introduction: Technocracy in a Non-technocratic Country?

Even though the term ‘technocracy’ has rightfully been characterised as anachronistic with regard to pre-1945 Europe,¹ the ideal represented by the principle has intellectual roots that go back to the second half of the nineteenth century, when engineers arose as ‘heroes of the bourgeois society’.² The engineering mindset came with a certain ‘distrust ... towards everything that appeared to be unquantifiable, apparently irrational, and open to multiple interpretations’.³ As such, the promise of objective and rational ‘planning’ – a key element of technocratic thinking – became a ‘myth of modernity’, which experienced its global heyday between roughly 1918 and the 1970s.⁴ As a ‘background ideology’, technocracy could itself combine various political beliefs.⁵ Despite their often ‘[stark and confrontational] rejection of ... the normal machinery of politics’, advocates of technocracy usually showed a ‘high degree of ideological flexibility’, allowing them to ‘compromise with different ideologies and their organized representatives’.⁶ What united all technocrats was the conviction that

¹ Stefan Couperus, *De machinerie van de stad: Stadsbestuur als idee en praktijk, Nederland en Amsterdam, 1900–1940* (Amsterdam: Aksant, 2009), 64.

² Rolf Peter Sieferle, *Fortschrittsfeinde? Opposition gegen Technik und Industrie von der Romantik bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1984), 146. See also Dirk van Laak, *Weisse Elefanten: Anspruch und Scheitern technischer Großprojekte im 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1999), 38.

³ Dirk van Laak, ‘Technokratie im Europa des 20. Jahrhunderts: eine einflussreiche “Hintergrundideologie”’, in Raphael Lutz, ed., *Theorien und Experimente der Moderne: Europas Gesellschaften im 20. Jahrhundert* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2012), 116. For a similar thesis, see Thibault Le Texier, *Le maniement des hommes: Essai sur la rationalité managériale* (Paris: La Découverte, 2016), 59–60.

⁴ Dirk van Laak, ‘Geschichte und Gegenwart des Vorgriffs auf die Zukunft’, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 34, no. 3 (2008): 322.

⁵ Van Laak, ‘Technokratie’.

⁶ Anders Esmark, *The New Technocracy* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2020), 8. See also Jens Steffek, *International Organization as Technocratic Utopia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 4; Dirk van Laak, ‘Infrastrukturen und

‘technological competence ... [and] rational administration [preceded] the hazards of public debate’.⁷ However, rejecting established forms of policy-making did not necessarily imply a rejection of democratic principles. Some technocrats believed that political conflict was simply not ‘a healthy component of democracy, but a consequence of ignorance’. In this view, ‘rational analysis and knowledge [were to] produce efficient solutions that should be accepted by all people of good will’.⁸ Others saw technocracy more as a means of replacing mass democracy altogether with an elitist bureaucratic regime that could turn ‘all problems of politics into problems of administration’.⁹

From an international perspective, Belgium has never been considered as a country where politics was strongly marked by technocratic principles.¹⁰ A bastion of laissez-faire capitalism in the nineteenth century, Belgium continued to give private initiative an important role in the twentieth century, particularly in the banking sector. Moreover, the founding fathers of the Belgian state (1830–1) had created a highly liberal constitution that granted a considerable amount of power to local entities (cities and municipalities), as well as to non-governmental – but ideologically ‘pillarised’ – institutional actors (mainly the political parties and the church; later also subnational movements and trade unions). This way, the legislators of the young state wanted to prevent the reoccurrence of despotism. As has been argued by Marnix Beyen, the ‘anti-etatist’ constitution inevitably resulted in a rather weak central government, whose powers were continuously met with strong counter-powers emanating from the civil society.¹¹ None of these elements was conducive to the emergence of a technocratic movement. While neighbouring countries such as the Netherlands and France have a historiographically well-documented tradition of expert influence on governance, technocracy in Belgium is associated almost exclusively with a strong involvement in supranational European integration after the Second World War, as well as with a short-lived political experiment at the national level around 1935–7.¹²

The latter experiment, whose exceptional nature and unsuccessful outcome seem to prove the rule that Belgium is a relatively non-technocratic country, was instigated by the Catholic strongman Paul

Macht’, in François Duceppe-Lamarre and Jens Ivo Engels, eds., *Umwelt und Herrschaft in der Geschichte* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 2008), 112–13; Van Laak, ‘Geschichte’.

⁷ Antoine Picon, ‘French Engineers and Social Thought, Eighteen–Twentieth Centuries: An Archeology of Technocratic Ideals’, *History and Technology* 23, no. 3 (2007): 197.

⁸ Claudio M. Radaelli, *Technocracy in the European Union* (London: Routledge, 1999), 25.

⁹ Cited by Steffek, *International Organization*, 15.

¹⁰ No historical overview on technocracy or anti-technocratic criticism exists for Belgium. Some observations on the weak position of technocratic ideas have been formulated with regard to the first post-war decades: Guy Coppieters and Michaël Amara, *Inventaris van het archief van de Studiecommissie voor naoorlogse problemen* (Brussels: Algemeen Rijksarchief, 2021), 14; Géry Leloutre, ‘La transformation moderne de Bruxelles: Processus d’agencement de l’espace urbain bruxellois entre 1949 et 1979’ (PhD thesis, Université Libre de Bruxelles and Università IUAV, 2020), 221; Gerd-Rainer Horn, ‘From “Radical” to “Realistic”: Hendrik de Man and the International Plan Conferences at Pontigny and Geneva, 1934–1937’, *Contemporary European History* 10, no. 2 (2001): 264; L. Penninckx, ‘Vijftien jaar economische programmering en planning in België’, *Streven* 29, no. 8 (1976): 686. A more general evaluation of this weak position is presented in a recent essay by a former diplomat and journalist: Dirk Achten, *Ligt het aan ons? Waarom Nederlanders en Belgen hun land anders organiseren* (Antwerp: Manteau, 2023), 66, 74, 147–48.

¹¹ On this anti-etatist constitution, see Marnix Beyen, ‘Tragically Modern: Centrifugal Sub-Nationalisms in Belgium, 1830–2009’, in Michel Huyseune, ed., *Handelingen van het Contactforum ‘Contemporary Centrifugal Regionalism: Comparing Flanders and Northern Italy’, 19–20 juni 2009* (Brussels: Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie van België voor Wetenschappen en Kunsten, 2011), 20–27.

¹² On technocracy in the Netherlands, see among others Peter Rodenburg, ‘Ingenieurs van de samenleving: De opkomst van technocratisch denken in de Verenigde Staten en Nederland’, *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 127, no. 2 (2014): 271–91; David Baneke, ‘Synthetic Technocracy: Dutch Scientific Intellectuals in Science, Society and Culture, 1880–1950’, *British Journal for the History of Science* 44, no. 1 (2011): 89–113. On France, see among others Theodore M. Porter, *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 114–47; Herrick Chapman, *France’s Long Reconstruction: In Search of the Modern Republic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018); Philip Nord, *France’s New Deal: From the Thirties to the Postwar Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Picon, ‘French Engineers’, 202. On the technocratic nature of supranational European integration, see among others Kathleen R. McNamara, *The Politics of Everyday Europe: Constructing Authority in the European Union* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 73–78; Radaelli, *Technocracy*.

van Zeeland and his Socialist counterpart Hendrik de Man. In view of the lingering economic crisis, both tried to counter the classic liberal economic tradition of ‘non-planning’: instead of floating on waves of periodical recessions, van Zeeland and de Man sought to actively steer the socio-economic field – and by extension the political field – towards expert-driven predictability.¹³ However, the focus of the two politicians differed. Even though he was closely linked to the right wing of the Catholic party, van Zeeland presented himself as a nonpartisan financial expert who rose above party-political turmoil.¹⁴ Hailed as the instigator of ‘a New Deal for Belgium’,¹⁵ this former vice-governor of the National Bank of Belgium indeed possessed valuable technical knowledge, which proved to be instrumental at the start of his term as prime minister in March 1935. At that moment, van Zeeland received ‘special powers’ from parliament to implement a number of reforms via enabling legislation, the most significant being a 28 per cent devaluation of the national currency.¹⁶ Even though this devaluation had beneficial macro-economic effects, van Zeeland’s career as prime minister would come to a premature and inglorious end in October 1937, after he was accused of having received unjustified personal payments from the National Bank.¹⁷

An even more ambitious figure was de Man, whose views on socio-economic reform caused a Europe-wide furore following the publication of his 1933 Labour Plan (*Plan du Travail*).¹⁸ Tommaso Milani has recently noted that the appeal of the plan was the result of a rare combination of a technocratically inspired agenda with an attempt at forging democratic legitimation for that agenda. De Man’s plan was indeed conceived as ‘a rallying point for ordinary people [and] a multi-class political platform’.¹⁹ In practice, the Labour Plan proposed a powerful executive, with the involvement of five (unelected) expert ‘commissioners’, who were to implement top-down reforms over the course of a three-year term.²⁰ With its promise to tackle unemployment and bring the ‘parasitic’ banking world under government control, de Man’s so-called ‘planism’ was presented as an innovative instrument for counteracting the crisis. To highlight the non-partisan and trans-ideological dimension of his views, moreover, de Man deliberately involved non-Socialist experts during the drafting phase of his Labour Plan.²¹ Yet in the eyes of both contemporary observers and historians, the planist experiment has overwhelmingly been perceived as a fiasco, since de Man’s actions as a minister in three consecutive governments (1935–8, including two led by van Zeeland) did not result in the structural overhaul demanded by the Labour Plan. Even though de Man successfully pushed for the creation of a technocratic government institution devoted to ‘economic recovery’ (*Office de*

¹³ On the notion of ‘non-planning’ (*das Ungeplante*), see Van Laak, ‘Geschichte’, 309–10.

¹⁴ For an overview of van Zeeland’s policies, see Brigitte Henau, *Paul van Zeeland en het monetaire, sociaal-economische en Europese beleid van België, 1920–1960* (Brussels: Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van België, 1995). On the technocratic nature of his ideas, see Tommaso Milani, *Hendrik de Man and Social Democracy: The Idea of Planning in Western Europe, 1914–1940* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 147; Nico Wouters, ‘Social Reform in Times of Transition: Reflections on Martin Conway’s “The Sorrows of Belgium”’, *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 129, no. 4 (2014): 48; Mieke van Haegendoren, ‘De tijdsgeest van 1940 als verklaring voor de betrachtingen van Hendrik de Man’, *Bulletin van de Vereniging voor de studie van het werk van Hendrik de Man* 31 (2005): 77; Emmanuel Gerard, ‘Omstreden democratie’, in Ronny Gobyn and Winston Spriet, eds., *De jaren ’30 in België: De massa in verleiding* (Brussels: ASLK, 1994), 103.

¹⁵ This qualification was made by a Belgian economist in a US periodical: Charles Roger, ‘A “New Deal” for Belgium’, *Foreign Affairs* 13, no. 4 (1935): 627.

¹⁶ Jan Willem Stutje, *Hendrik de Man: Een man met een plan* (Kalmthout: Polis, 2018), 194; Emmanuel Gerard, ‘De democratie gedroomd, begrensd en ondermijnd: 1916–1939’, in *Nieuwe geschiedenis van België*, vol. 2, eds. Michel Dumoulin et al. (Tielt: Lannoo, 2006), 1070–74; Vincent Dujardin and Michel Dumoulin, *Paul van Zeeland, 1893–1973* (Brussels: Racine, 1997), 77–78; Henau, *Paul van Zeeland*, 132–33, 138–43, 164.

¹⁷ Stutje, *Hendrik de Man*, 229, 236–37; Gerard, ‘De democratie’, 1094–95.

¹⁸ For an analysis of de Man’s theories and their international reception, see Milani, *Hendrik de Man*. For a biographical approach, see Stutje, *Hendrik de Man*.

¹⁹ Milani, *Hendrik de Man*, 123.

²⁰ Hendrik de Man et al., *De uitvoering van het Plan van den Arbeid* (Antwerp: De Sikkel and Servire, 1935), 37–40.

²¹ Mieke Claeys-Van Haegendoren, ‘La pratique du Planisme en Belgique’, *Revue européenne des sciences sociales* 12, no. 31 (1974): 132.

redressement économique; OREC), this institution largely remained impotent because of opposition from the Liberal Party.²² It is generally believed that the negative experience of de Man's government participation contributed to his ideological radicalisation in the latter years of the 1930s, culminating in his infamous June 1940 manifesto, which applauded the German takeover of Europe.²³

This article argues that the technocratic experiments by de Man and van Zeeland were not isolated events, but rather formed part of a broader technocratic momentum that occurred in Belgium from the mid-1930s until the beginning of the Second World War. To this end, it provides an analysis of the activities and ideological views of the political scientist Louis Camu, who pushed for technocratic governance during the same period as van Zeeland and de Man. From 1936 to 1940, Camu acted as Royal Commissioner for Administrative Reform, a newly created function within the political-administrative system. While Camu's career as government reformer began under the aegis of Prime Minister van Zeeland, it soon transcended the specific context of the latter's cabinet: the Royal Commissariat continued to exist after van Zeeland's resignation, and Camu would continue to serve under three more prime ministers until the start of the war. In a period characterised by both intense political instability and a rapid succession of governments (two phenomena that could be observed in many democratic European countries during the 1930s),²⁴ Camu thus became the personification of a remarkable institutional continuity. Most importantly, the Royal Commissioner also managed to secure the implementation of various government reforms; many of his proposals would even endure long after the Second World War. These aspects of continuity indicate that Camu was a more successful technocrat than van Zeeland and de Man. In practice, the Royal Commissioner developed a technocratic blueprint for a radical reorganisation of the Belgian civil service, which was intended to have a societal impact similar in scale to the economic reforms in de Man's Labour Plan. Even though the object of Camu's and de Man's reform ambitions differed, both men shared an unmistakable political elitism, which they combined with a quest for public legitimacy (in Camu's case, this quest resulted in numerous public appearances aimed at promoting the technocratic cause).²⁵ Like de Man, moreover, Camu would come to fully embrace illiberal, authoritarian ideas by the time of the German invasion – a moment when both men also showed themselves eager to play a role in the New Order.

Despite his political and public prominence in the 1936–40 period, Louis Camu has remained virtually undiscussed in Belgian political historiography.²⁶ This article seeks to correct this absence, while

²² Established in 1935, the OREC's main accomplishment was to subsidise a series of municipal public works in the Borinage region. The institution was idle from May 1938 onward; in 1939, it was formally abolished. Its history has been narrated in detail in Guy Vanthemsche, 'De mislukking van een vernieuwde economische politiek in België vóór de Tweede Wereldoorlog: De OREC (Office de redressement économique) van 1935 tot 1938', *Belgisch tijdschrift voor nieuwste geschiedenis* 13, nos. 2–3 (1982): 339–89. See also Milani, *Hendrik de Man*, 216–18; Stutje, *Hendrik de Man*, 192–3, 198; Ginette Kurgan-Van Hentenryk, *Max-Léo Gérard: Un ingénieur dans la cité (1897–1955)* (Brussels: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2010), 162–9; Henau, *Paul van Zeeland*, 148–51.

²³ On de Man's disillusion and radicalisation, see for instance Milani, *Hendrik de Man*, 226–7; Horn, 'From "Radical"', 87–90, 165–66; Gilles Vergnon, *Les gauches européennes après la victoire nazie: Entre planisme et unité d'action, 1933–1934* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997), 327–8; Dick Pels, 'The Dark Side of Socialism: Hendrik de Man and the Fascist Temptation', *History of the Human Sciences* 6, no. 2 (1993): 75–95; Dick Pels, 'Hendrik de Man and the Ideology of Planism', *International Review of Social History* 32, no. 3 (1987): 224–5.

²⁴ On these phenomena in a European context, see Chris van der Heijden, *Grijs verleden: Nederland en de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Amsterdam: Contact, 2001), 46.

²⁵ On de Man's quest for legitimacy and the resulting propagandist efforts, see for example Milani, *Hendrik de Man*, 134–5; Stutje, *Hendrik de Man*, 163–4; Pels, 'Hendrik de Man', 207.

²⁶ Some analyses of Camu's work as civil service reformer exist; yet these do not take his political significance into account. See among others Patrick Humblet, 'Collectieve arbeidsovereenkomsten in de publieke sector? Een tweeluik (Deel 1: Morceau de fantaisie)', *Tijdschrift voor sociaal recht* 53, nos. 1–2 (2015): 325–26; Nico Wouters, *De Führerstaat: Overheid en collaboratie in België, 1940–1944* (Tiel: Lannoo, 2006), 13–14; Bénédicte Rochet, 'L'impact de la seconde guerre mondiale sur les pratiques administratives', *Pyramides* 5, no. 2 (2005): 158–79; Nick Thijs and Steven Van de Walle, 'Administrative Reform Movements and Commissions in Belgium, 1848–2004', *Public Policy and Administration* 20, no. 4 (2005): 42–44; Herman Balthazar, 'De Rijksadministratie: Zorgenkinder door verwaarlozing',

also pointing to the relevance of the Camu case for our understanding of the transnational development of technocratic ideas during the 1930s. A syncretic thinker, Camu was involved in the so-called administrative sciences scene, which provided possibilities for exchange between (aspiring) reformers from various countries. As such, this article should equally be understood as a contribution to the transnational history of expertise. In a recent contribution, Martin Kohlrausch signalled that during the second half of the nineteenth century, experts first rose to prominence as a socio-professional group by '[exploiting] their authority to interpret state policy, national prestige, and health'. This position came with an elitist *habitus*: rather than thinking of themselves as specialists, they considered themselves tacitly as meta-experts or 'geniuses' – with the latter term 'partially [regaining] its original meaning as a guiding spirit which accompanied and guided the individual on his or her life's journey'.²⁷ In a seamless act of translation, many 'guiding spirits' thus believed they were to direct the nation-state as well.²⁸ An important subsequent development in expert discourses on government functioning was the advent of Taylorism (or scientific management) immediately before the First World War. During the interwar period, the Taylorist notion of 'efficiency' indeed became increasingly prominent, with experts trying to integrate new managerial principles of surveillance, speed, hierarchy and cost-savings into the sphere of government. Taylorism thus became – in the words of Nikolas Rose – a Foucauldian 'technology of government', characterised by 'an assemblage of forms of practical knowledge ... traversed and transected by aspirations to achieve certain outcomes in terms of the conduct of the governed'.²⁹ This 'technology' could indeed link itself easily with both the 'democratic' and 'authoritarian' variants of technocracy, as will be illustrated below.

An Expert Generalist

With their self-declared ethos of emotional detachment and rational calculation, technocrats rarely acknowledged that personal ambitions formed part of their aspiration to exert societal influence. Regarding de Man, Stanley Pierson has, for instance, observed that 'despite his attention to the non-rational forces in life [which he investigated in various theoretical works on social psychology, *author*], [he] was convinced that the passions, at least among the intellectuals, were subject to the control of conscience and reason'. So de Man's vision of the elite that was holding a position of leadership within a planist society meant completely ignoring the possibility that 'intellectuals might have special interests or a distinctive will to power'.³⁰ In a similar vein, recent research on the notion of the 'techno-celebrity' has called attention to the fact that some technocrats on the international scene, such as the modernist architects Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius, did not see any contradiction between their self-image as neutral scientists and their unremitting quest for honour and distinction on the public scene.³¹ It indeed bears repeating that technocratic thinking did not unfold solely as the result of a societal demand and/or an inherent scientific logic: it also stemmed from personal motives. As

in *De democratie heruitgevonden: Oud en nieuw in politiek België, 1944–1950*, eds. Luc Huyse and Kris Hoflack (Leuven: Van Halewyck, 1995), 123–24; Henau, *Paul van Zeeland*, 161.

²⁷ Martin Kohlrausch, 'The Social Promise of Scientific Progress: Technical Experts and the Quest for Authority', in Eva Giloi et al., eds., *Staging Authority: Presentation and Power in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2022), 94.

²⁸ Kohlrausch, 'The Social Promise', 104. On this process, see also Nimrod Amzalak, *Fascists and Honourable Men: Contingency and Choice in French Politics, 1918–45* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 32–4, 45. On expertise in general, see also, among others, Joris Vandendriessche, Evert Peeters and Kaat Wils, eds., *Scientists' Expertise as Performance: Between State and Society, 1860–1960* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2015).

²⁹ Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 52. On the influence of Taylorism-inspired thinking on government during the interwar period, see for example Renaud Payre, 'Une République mondiale de l'administration? Circulations internationales, sciences de gouvernement et réforme administrative (1910–1945)', *Revue internationale de politique comparée* 23, no. 1 (2016): 35–56.

³⁰ Stanley Pierson, *Leaving Marxism: Studies in the Dissolution of an Ideology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 45.

³¹ Kohlrausch, 'The Social Promise', 123.

such, it is essential to take the biographical dimension of technocrats duly into account. In the case of Louis Camu (1905–76), an analysis of this dimension reveals an eagerness to transcend geographical, ideological, disciplinary and professional boundaries, already from a young age.

Born to a French-speaking family of industrialists in the Flemish town of Aalst (or Alost in French), Camu was initially destined to become his father's successor as the owner of a malting plant. During his adolescence, he immersed himself in brewing techniques at the *Institut de fermentation* in Ghent, but it quickly became clear that his interests reached beyond the family trade. He went on to study political science at the State University of Ghent, while also taking courses at the Academy of International Law in The Hague. Aged just twenty-two, Camu was granted a teaching position in the field of political economics at his Belgian alma mater.³² During the second half of the 1920s, the young scholar worked hard to establish a network and a reputation. Personal successes followed as a matter of course, as demonstrated by a Flemish newspaper report of a 1929 speech given by Camu for the Danish-Belgian Association. In his capacity as secretary of his hometown's Chamber of Commerce, Camu had travelled to Copenhagen to address a group of dignitaries. The event was described as follows:

Among those present in the packed room were the French ambassador ... , the Belgian First Secretary ... , several consuls ... , [Danish] professors ... and literary men. The floor was then given to Louis Camu, a remarkably young scholar of the modern type, blessed with an iron will. His speech covered economic life in Belgium, the wartime destruction and the miraculous recovery since. To conclude, Camu stated: 'I apologise if you found my talk dry and boring, but a hard-working people has no time for laughter!' Following lengthy applause, [the rector of the University of Copenhagen] convinced Camu that his speech had been both perfect and important, and that the Belgian economic recovery should serve as an example to Denmark.³³

Around the same period, Camu entered government service. Probably through his family ties with the Liberal Party, he was appointed as cabinet adviser to Maurice Auguste Lippens, the Minister of Transport from 1927 to 1931. In a subsequent government (1932–4), when Lippens's portfolio changed to Public Education, Camu was promoted to the position of principal private secretary. Through these experiences, Camu gained an intimate knowledge of the Belgian political-administrative system.³⁴ His impressions, so it seems, were not overwhelmingly positive. When interviewed in 1937, Camu would recall that he had been astounded by the ingrained habit of nepotism that guided the recruitment of new ministerial employees: 'The correspondence containing political support for the respective candidates was weighed, and appointments were subsequently made "by the kilo"'. Too rarely, the interviewee continued, were job candidates chosen for their 'intelligence' or 'personality'.³⁵ His own position, Camu appeared to suggest, had been one of the rare exceptions.

In his 1982 memoirs, the Catholic jurist André Molitor – who would become Camu's personal secretary at the Royal Commissariat for Administrative Reform from 1937 onward – confirmed that the Belgian civil service in the mid-1930s had 'virtually no technocratic characteristics'. Even though Molitor acknowledged that the government administration of that period was 'solid' and staffed by 'devoted' people, he also criticised an absence of managerial innovation and intellectual 'brilliance'.³⁶ For an academically oriented generalist like Camu, this context offered career opportunities. Patrons of various denominations were indeed willing to make use of his scholarly expertise: in 1935, Camu was,

³² Paul Macq, 'Camu, Louis', in Jean Stengers et al., eds., *Nouvelle biographie nationale*, vol. 3 (Brussels: Académie Royale des Sciences, des Lettres et des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, 1994), 68.

³³ 'Omtrent onze handelskamer', *De Volksstem*, 18 Apr. 1929.

³⁴ On Camu's early career and his links with the Liberal Party, see Macq, 'Camu', 68; André Molitor, *Souvenirs: Un témoin engagé dans la Belgique du 20^e siècle* (Paris: Duculot, 1984), 141; 'M. Louis Camu', *Pourquoi pas?*, 17 Dec. 1937, 4527–8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 4528.

³⁶ André Molitor, *Servir l'État: Trois expériences* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Association universitaire de recherche en administration, [1982]), 25.

for instance, asked by the Catholic Minister of Economy Philip Van Isacker to negotiate a trade agreement between Belgium and the United States.³⁷ On this occasion, the young political scientist travelled to America, where he was confronted with the dynamism of F.D. Roosevelt's administration. According to Molitor, the New Deal would remain a permanent source of inspiration for the subsequent work undertaken at the Royal Commissariat.³⁸ On behalf of the OREC, the governmental 'office for economic recovery' that had been established in 1935 at de Man's request, Camu also contributed to a report on Belgium's 'economic reorientation' in the first half of 1936, together with Socialist and Catholic economists. Camu thus became increasingly familiar with the concept of economic and political planning, while the experience of co-writing a report with academics from various ideological backgrounds must have made him well aware of the potential of a technocratic approach for solving political problems.³⁹ Even though the 1936 OREC report did not influence government policies in any practical way (much like the OREC itself), the 1936 ad hoc commission of inquiry did function as a temporary meeting place where technocratically oriented individuals could meet and share ideas.⁴⁰ Seen from this point of view, the OREC's activities were certainly not all in vain.

The next step in Camu's governmental career was the indirect result of a major event in Belgian political history: the breakthrough of extreme-right parties during the May 1936 parliamentary elections. The royalist, ultra-Catholic *Rex* managed to secure ex nihilo twenty-one seats in the Chamber of Representatives (out of a total of 202), while the Flemish-nationalist Flemish National Union almost doubled its parliamentary presence to sixteen seats. In response, mainstream parties again formed a tripartite coalition of 'national unity' (Catholics, Socialists and Liberals) under the leadership of Paul van Zeeland, as they had already done in early 1935. To take the wind out of the extremists' sails, the new government placed the principle of 'state reform' (*réforme de l'État*) at the forefront of its agenda.⁴¹ This principle referred to a constitutional revision, with the aim of strengthening the executive at the expense of the legislative. André Molitor would later remember that ideas about state reform were 'in the air in many countries' during the mid-1930s.⁴² Especially with regard to France, the theme has been described as 'one of the major [political] narratives' of the interwar period.⁴³ French politicians defending state reform included ministers such as Charles Spinasse (1936–8), who was a member of the technocratically oriented group X-Crise, and Marcel Déat (1936), who advocated for a 'school of administration' where civil servants would receive training to develop 'technical' competence.⁴⁴ In principle, a state reform could indeed introduce a structural shift towards a technocratic decision making process. In Belgium, the Socialists under the leadership of de Man had – unsurprisingly – kept pleading for reforms along such lines: during the 1936 electoral campaign, they had emphasised that the Labour Plan finally needed to be implemented in its entirety.⁴⁵ Prime Minister van Zeeland, too, believed that

³⁷ Macq, 'Camu', 68; Molitor, *Servir l'État*, 21; Philip Van Isacker, *Tussen staat en volk: Nagelaten memoires* (Antwerp: Sheed & Ward, 1953), 172–5.

³⁸ Molitor, *Servir l'État*, 30–31.

³⁹ On this report, see Léon-H. Dupriez, *Les réformes monétaires en Belgique* (Brussels: Office international de la librairie, 1978), 116; Recording of an interview with Camu, 9 Mar. 1976, CegeSoma (Brussels), Sound archive, file 00126_00001.

⁴⁰ On the absence of influence, see Gaston Eyskens, *De memoires* (Tiel: Lannoo), 1993, 53.

⁴¹ Henau, *Paul van Zeeland*, 110–12, 140–41; Gerard, 'Omstreden democratie', 118–20.

⁴² Molitor, *Servir l'État*, 20.

⁴³ Marc Olivier Baruch and Philippe Bezes, 'Généalogies de la réforme de l'État', *Revue française d'administration publique* 29, no. 4 (2006): 625.

⁴⁴ On Spinasse and technocrat tendencies in the mid-1930s, see Olivier Dard, 'Du privé au public: Des technocrates en quête d'un État rationnel et à la conquête de l'État républicain dans la France des années trente', in Marc Olivier Baruch and Vincent Duclert, eds., *Serviteurs de l'État: Une histoire politique de l'administration française, 1875–1945* (Paris: La Découverte, 2000), 491–4. On Déat, see Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Three New Deals: Reflections on Roosevelt's America, Mussolini's Italy, and Hitler's Germany, 1933–1939* (New York: Picador, 2007), 12–13; Alain Bergounioux, 'Le néo-socialisme: Marcel Déat, réformisme traditionnel ou esprit des années trente', *Revue historique* 260, no. 2 (1978): 408.

⁴⁵ Frederik Verleden, "'Een minister in hemdsmouwen": Hendrik de Man als minister, maart 1935–maart 1938' (Master's diss., University of Leuven, 2002), 89–90.

his preceding coalition (1935–6) had not sufficiently met popular demands for a ‘strong state’, in which the role of parliament was to be significantly limited.⁴⁶ For van Zeeland, this plea for a more vigorous governmental approach was a strategy for safeguarding democracy in an increasingly anti-democratic Europe. In an October 1936 speech, the prime minister asserted that his interpretation of a strong executive was not ‘dictatorial’, but fully in line with the ‘national character’, since Belgians had frequently shown, ‘more than any other people ... , how to use freedom without abusing it’.⁴⁷

Although they could hardly be considered as part of the ‘national character’, technocratic principles continued to feature prominently in the prime minister’s strategy for effective governance. Around the time the second van Zeeland coalition took office in June 1936, two specific innovations were announced, both aimed at facilitating the implementation of expert-driven policies. First, van Zeeland backed the creation of a Centre for the Study of State Reform (*Centre d’études pour la réforme de l’État*; CERE), a private think-tank devoted to intellectual preparations for wide-ranging constitutional reform. Advocating technocratic and corporatist principles, the CERE would exert little practical influence on government policies during its approximately two years in existence, even though – like the OREC – it would function as a meeting ground for reform-minded protagonists of various political groups.⁴⁸ Second, van Zeeland appointed a number of ‘Royal Commissioners’ to investigate various pressing policy issues. The practice of appointing such commissioners was rather uncommon: in Belgian political history, there were about a dozen precedents, only three of which had occurred since the end of the First World War.⁴⁹ Now, no fewer than eight commissioners received a six-month mandate through a Royal Decree. Topics included the armament industry, the insurance business, pensions, unemployment insurance, social policies for the self-employed, the simplification of taxation, the creation of metropolitan districts, and the functioning of the civil service (referred to as administrative reform).⁵⁰ While all Royal Commissioners could be linked to one of the parties in van Zeeland’s coalition, their expert status was clearly decisive: save one, all men possessed an academic degree, while five had a background as a university lecturer.

At age thirty-one, Camu was by far the youngest of all the Royal Commissioners. His appointment to the post of administrative reform was an endorsement of the generalist and scholarly reputation the political scientist had acquired over the previous years. In September 1936, Camu addressed a note of thanks to van Zeeland, in which he promised to live up to the latter’s expectations: ‘I shall allow myself to make very liberal use of your recommendation to act ambitiously and boldly’.⁵¹ The prime minister, in turn, requested that all civil servants support the Royal Commissioner as much as possible in fulfilling his ‘very important mission’.⁵² These statements outlined the contours of Camu’s task: rather than considering civil service reform as a purely bureaucratic issue with limited societal relevance, Camu and van Zeeland realised that the creation of a ‘strong’ executive depended on the availability of an expert-driven, innovative and effective public administration. As such, a technocratically inspired civil service reform was seen as a prerequisite for technocratically inspired *state* reform in the foreseeable future. From this point of view, Camu’s Royal Commissariat was the most relevant of all, which explains why it was the only one that would continue to exist far beyond the initial six months. While

⁴⁶ Dujardin and Dumoulin, *Paul van Zeeland*, 77–8; Henau, *Paul van Zeeland*, 164.

⁴⁷ ‘Een conferentie van den heer Van Zeeland over de lotsbestemming van België’, *De Standaard*, 31 Oct. 1936, 2.

⁴⁸ On the CERE, see for example Jan Velaers and Herman Van Goethem, *Leopold III: De koning, het land, de oorlog* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2001), 481; Dirk Luyten, *Ideologisch debat en politieke strijd over het corporatisme tijdens het interbellum in België* (Brussels: Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van België, 1996), 83, 173–6.

⁴⁹ In 1919, two Royal Commissioners were appointed to investigate the new franchise law and the ratification of the Versailles Peace Treaty. In 1926, a Royal Commissioner was tasked with analysing the budget of the Belgian Congo. For an overview, see *La réforme de l’État* (Brussels: Centre d’études pour la réforme de l’État, [1937]), 59–60.

⁵⁰ For an overview of the 1936 Royal Commissioners, see Gerard, ‘De democratie’, 1098–9.

⁵¹ Letter, 14 Sept. 1936, National Archives of Belgium (Brussels; hereafter NAB), *Commissariat royal à la réforme administrative* (hereafter CRRA), file 37. In October 2024, during the final production stage of this article, the National Archives of Belgium published the first official inventory of the CRRA collection. The file numbers I refer to are based on an older, handwritten and unpublished inventory; they do not align with those in the new inventory.

⁵² Note by Van Zeeland, 21 Nov. 1936, NAB, *Ministère des Finances (transfert 1992)*, box 323, file ‘986/divers’.

the other Royal Commissariats dealt with relatively narrow technical matters, the field of civil service reform would indeed prove to be a testing ground for new methods of governance.

The Royal Commissariat for Administrative Reform

Similar to state reform, the issue of civil service reform was far from a specifically Belgian phenomenon in the interwar period. Already during the First World War, the French mining engineer Henri Fayol (1841–1925) had responded to calls for a more efficient government, whose functioning would be in line with novel ideas on scientific management. In his best-selling manual *Administration industrielle et générale* (1916), Fayol prescribed that government administrations should follow the same business-like managerial principles as companies.⁵³ To illustrate this idea, he made ample use of biological metaphors: by comparing every enterprise to a ‘living body’ whose ‘organs’ (i.e. functional entities) were interlinked through a ‘nervous system’ (i.e. the hierarchical relations in an organisation chart), Fayol argued that corporations ‘lived’ when they were managed well, and ‘died’ when they were not. Government administrations and state-owned enterprises, in contrast, could not ‘die’ through bankruptcy – and as such, the engineer believed, their leaders (*chefs*) were often oblivious to managerial efficiency.⁵⁴ Following an unsuccessful attempt by Fayol in the early 1920s to reform the French Post, Telegraph and Telephone administration, managerial specialists from various countries would continue to debate the efficiency of government administrations at periodic conferences of the transnational ‘administrative sciences’ movement. In 1931, the International Institute of Administrative Sciences (IIAS) was established to coordinate the movement’s activities. Headquartered in Brussels, the IIAS received financial support from the Belgian government, in an attempt to maintain Belgium’s pre-war position as a major hub of transnational scientific and cultural exchange.⁵⁵ While Camu did not participate in the July 1936 IIAS conference in Warsaw (the last one held prior to the Second World War), in September 1937 he did attend a European meeting of the Public Administration Clearing House (PACH), a US organisation whose aims largely overlapped with those of the IIAS.

At the 1937 PACH meeting, which took place in the Belgian *Château d’Ardenne*, the Royal Commissioner met Louis Brownlow, an American political scientist who had recently served as chairman of the President’s Committee on Administrative Management.⁵⁶ In March 1936, F.D. Roosevelt had tasked this committee with investigating the efficiency of the US civil service. In doing so, the president sought to silence criticism from financial circles, which projected a doom scenario of ever-increasing expenditure for the rapidly growing government administration.⁵⁷ A New Deal enthusiast (a characteristic he shared with Paul van Zeeland), Camu was familiar with Brownlow’s final report on civil service reform (January 1937), the two main objectives of which were in line with

⁵³ Henri Fayol, *Administration industrielle et générale: Prévoyance, organisation, commandement, coordination, contrôle* (Paris: Dunod & Pinat, 1917).

⁵⁴ Luc Rojas, ‘Henri Fayol et “l’industrialisation” de l’État’, *Revue française d’histoire des idées politiques* 22, no. 1 (2017): 169–74. On biological metaphors in Fayol’s work, see also Jean-Louis Peaucelle and Cameron Guthrie, *Henri Fayol, un patron français* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2019), 248.

⁵⁵ On the history of the IIAS, see Stefan Fisch, ‘Origins and History of the International Institute of Administrative Sciences: From its Beginnings to its Reconstruction After World War II (1910–1944/47)’, in Fabio Rugge and Michael Duggett, eds., *IIAS/IISA: Administration & Service, 1930–2005* (Amsterdam: IOS, 2005). On the internationalist ambitions of the interwar Belgian government, see Daniel Laqua, *The Age of Internationalism and Belgium, 1880–1930: Peace, Progress and Prestige* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 12–13; Martin Conway, ‘The Frontiers of Belgium, and of Internationalism’, *Journal of Belgian History* 43, no. 4 (2013).

⁵⁶ On the Public Administration Clearing House and its Belgian meeting, see Fisch, ‘Origins and History’, 45–6. On Camu’s presence at the meeting, see the report concerning a ‘conversation avec MM. Brownlow et Moffet’, Sept. 1937, NAB, CRRRA, file 37.

⁵⁷ Lyndal Urwick and Edward F.L. Brech, *The Making of Scientific Management: Thirteen Pioneers* (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1994 [first ed. 1957]), 155; Klaas van Berkel et al., *Franklin D. Roosevelt en het moderne Amerika: Beeldvorming rond de president en de New Deal* (Heerlen: Open Universiteit, 1986), 132–4, 157.

Camu's.⁵⁸ Brownlow and Camu wanted to simplify ministerial organisation charts in order to eliminate superfluous agencies and establish shorter lines of command. Both reformers were also seeking a professionalisation of the civil service: instead of relying predominantly on political appointments, new recruitments had to be made via a central personnel agency, which would set objective qualification standards. To a large extent, the managerial rationality behind these recommendations was in line with principles of scientific management – and for this reason, the British administrative specialists Lyndall Urwick and Edward Brech praised the Brownlow Commission in a 1957 essay, stating that 'for the first time, the philosophy developed from the work of F.W. Taylor and other pioneers [was] applied ... to the government of a great nation'.⁵⁹ As it turned out, Belgium would not lag far behind. (Figure 1)

From October 1936 onward, Camu pursued his research mission by investigating the working conditions and procedures in various ministries. The results of those surveys were disclosed in internal reports that shed light on the professional image and social role the Royal Commissioner sought to craft for himself. In this respect, Camu's self-image matched Thomas Etzemüller's characterisation of interwar period experts as 'cool-headed specialists who [recognised] processes and systemic relationships, analysed these on a strictly empirical basis, and planned rational solutions'.⁶⁰ In a report on the Ministry of Agriculture, the Royal Commissioner for instance suggested that the writing of an 'objective account' required a good deal of stamina: 'We will say what is to be said because it is the truth – not because we like to say it'.⁶¹ While the Royal Commissioner emphasised that many officials were 'decent servants whose devotion is not always acknowledged',⁶² his reports on departments such as those of Economy and Agriculture essentially read as a syllabus of errors by a backward and amateurish civil service. Staff in the industrial accident statistics department were, for instance, reported to be still working on the 1931 statistics: rather than using machines, calculations were all done by hand. Statistics on strikes were the domain of one medium-ranking official who did little more than maintain a haphazard collection of newspaper clippings on the topic. And the director-general of the department for territorial affairs employed one of his controllers to 'fill out crosswords in a daily newspaper'; periodically, this controller was sent to 'look for fish at the Ostend market'.⁶³

The remedy for such situations was the focus of an officially published 'Report on Administrative Reform' (April 1937), which outlined an overarching plan for a managerial overhaul of all ministries. The report's centrepiece was the recommendation to create an apolitical 'secretariat' for the recruitment and examination of new ministerial employees – from the lowest to the highest hierarchical levels. Salaries, rights and duties were to be unified into a single 'statute' for all departments: civil servants would, for instance, not be allowed to strike, but they would be given the right to join a union.⁶⁴ This set of legal and technical proposals served a distinct *moral* aim. Camu explained that civil servants had an edifying societal mission to fulfil: instead of having an everyday salaried job, they were permanently and indissolubly connected to the state, irrespective of the coming and going of politicians. Hence, they were to be perceived as both representing and embodying governance: 'The civil servant is devoted to public affairs and should direct all actions towards the realisation of the common good'.⁶⁵ Using a Fayol-inspired biological metaphor, the Royal Commissioner further

⁵⁸ The report was mentioned in Louis Camu, *Le statut des agents de l'État* (Brussels: IMIFI, 1937), 35–6. On Van Zeeland's appreciation for Roosevelt, see Henau, *Paul van Zeeland*, 180–82; Gerard, 'Omstreden democratie', 104.

⁵⁹ Urwick and Brech, *The Making*, 156. On the Brownlow Commission, see also for example Alasdair Roberts, 'Shaking Hands with Hitler: The Politics-Administration Dichotomy and Engagement with Fascism', *Public Administration Review* 79, no. 2 (2018): 267–76; Molitor, *Servir l'État*, 30–31; Judith A. Merkle, *Management and Ideology: The Legacy of the International Scientific Management Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 264–71.

⁶⁰ Thomas Etzemüller, 'Social Engineering als Verhaltenslehre des kühlen Kopfes: Eine einleitende Skizze', in Thomas Etzemüller, ed., *Die Ordnung der Moderne: Social Engineering im 20. Jahrhundert* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009), 20. Report, 1937, NAB, CRRA, file 15, 1.

⁶² Louis Camu, *Rapport provisoire sur le Ministère des Affaires Économiques* (s.l: s.n., [1937]), 1.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 73, 75–6.

⁶⁴ Camu, *Le statut*.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.



Figure 1. Louis Camu, c. 1936–1940. CegeSoma, Brussels, Photo collection, 30485.

prescribed that all officials should see themselves as ‘organs of the state’, while those in senior positions would have to act as ‘pillars’.⁶⁶ In its capacity as gatekeeper, the future recruitment secretariat had to make sure that only ‘intelligent’ and ‘cultivated’ people having ‘zeal and character’ would take up leading roles: ‘[Senior] administrative positions ... must be the domain of a number of elite citizens, who, because of the mission that has been entrusted to them, deserve esteem and confidence’.⁶⁷ With such ideas, Camu tapped into the topos of the leader as meta-expert or ‘genius’, which could – once again – be found in the work of Fayol. For the French managerial theorist, too, top-ranking managers were to be men of superior intellectual and ethical standards, who could act as uplifting examples to lower-ranking staff.⁶⁸ A similar elitism also pervaded the political thinking of de Man, whose 1932 essay *Massen und Führer* (republished in a 1937 French translation as *Masses et chefs*) likewise contained a strong defence of charismatic leadership. For de Man, the ideal leader of tomorrow was accountable not to a parliament but rather to his personal conscience.⁶⁹

Soon after the publication of the April 1937 report, the van Zeeland government translated its recommendations into a Royal Decree (October 1937), which still forms the legal basis (albeit with many subsequent amendments) for the ‘statute’ and recruitment of Belgian civil servants today.⁷⁰ By the time the decree was published, the duration of Camu’s term had been extended, allowing the Royal Commissariat to control the implementation of the new regulations and to continue

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 53, 64.

⁶⁸ Fayol, *Administration industrielle*, 103–4, 108, 142. On Fayol’s leadership ideas, see also Yves Cohen, *Le siècle des chefs: Une histoire transnationale du commandement et de l’autorité (1890–1940)* (Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2013), 32–5, 268.

⁶⁹ On this essay, see for example Schivelbusch, *Three New Deals*, 51–2; Pels, ‘Hendrik de Man’, 224–5; Herman Balthazar, ‘Henri de Man dans la “révolution avortée”’, *Revue européenne des sciences sociales* 12, no. 31 (1974): 213.

⁷⁰ ‘Arrêté royal portant le statut des agents de l’État’, *Moniteur belge*, 8 Oct. 1937, 6074. See also Thijs and Van de Walle, ‘Administrative Reform’, 43.

monitoring ministerial working conditions.⁷¹ Concurrently, Camu looked into the possibility of building a large office complex, where all civil servants could be accommodated in modern, ‘efficient’ workspaces.⁷² Lastly, the Royal Commissioner sought to create public awareness of his work. Like de Man and van Zeeland, he engaged in multiple outreach initiatives, leading to a stream of articles, interviews and speeches.⁷³ On those occasions, Camu systematically emphasised the moral relevance of his reforms. At a talk for the judicial and government elite in Brussels in November 1937, for instance, he explained that governments depended much more on their civil service than was commonly acknowledged: ‘The administration, dare I say it, undertakes legislative action itself ... , since most laws are completely written by civil servants’. Consequently, weak government officials resulted in weak policies and weakened the reputation of politics: ‘When people complain about bad laws or excessive and incoherent rules, they often point the finger at Parliament, while the problem almost always lies with a faulty public administration’. Societies that had neglected to foster good practices in their civil service, Camu further declared, were bound for downfall, while those with a good administration but ineffective politicians could sometimes survive long beyond their prime: ‘Many centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire, its postal system and road network continued to function, thus allowing the people to maintain normal economic relations’.⁷⁴ (Figures 2 and 3)

Camu’s November 1937 statements were unambiguously technocratic. They contained a warning to politicians who remained oblivious to the ascent of experts in government: a professional and neutral civil service could (and should) take on many duties that were traditionally believed to be the domain of party politics. Even though Camu was careful to emphasise that the concept of ministerial responsibility had to be preserved, his reforms had – at least in theory – put an end to a time-honoured prerogative: ministers would no longer be able to appoint their own pawns in the government administration. Crucially, in his public communication, the Royal Commissioner considered his reforms not only as a means of strengthening the Belgian state, but also as a strategy for deepening the state’s democratic essence. Keen to demonstrate his own ‘cultured spirit’ (a quality he believed to be essential for every top-ranking administrator), the Royal Commissioner outlined his views on the latter theme in his April 1937 report by drawing on classic political philosophy: ‘Montesquieu has stated that democratic “virtue” should be the hallmark of the organs of the State’.⁷⁵ In his 1748 treatise *De l’esprit des lois*, Montesquieu had conceived the concept of the *trias politica*, which has ever since been recognised as one of the cornerstones of the liberal democratic constellation. The French philosopher declared that true democracies were additionally characterised by ‘la vertu’: a ‘civic virtue’ leading to ‘a love for the fatherland and its laws’.⁷⁶ As such, Camu associated democratic systems with a well-developed sense of public responsibility. Remarkably, he suggested that a lack of ‘civic virtue’ had affected not only the political-administrative field, but also Belgian society at large, since both were marked by ‘a crisis of moral values that, since the war, has seriously corroded the country’s social framework’.⁷⁷

⁷¹ For a chronological overview of Camu’s activities, see Note, 14 May 1938, NAB, CRRA, file 37; Note, 6 Apr. 1939, NAB, CRRA, file 37.

⁷² On these architectural plans, see Jens van de Maele, “‘As Efficient as a Factory’: Architectural and Managerial Discourses on Government Office Buildings in Belgium, 1919–39”, *Architectural History* 65 (2022): 30–36; Jens van de Maele, ‘Gläserne Zwischenwände für effektive Kontrollen: Das belgische Regierungsbüro in der Zwischenkriegszeit’, in Gianenrico Bernasconi and Stefan Nellen, eds., *Das Büro: Zur Rationalisierung des Interieurs, 1880–1960* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2019), 89–108; Geoffrey Grulois and Lauréline Tissot, ‘La rationalité urbanistique’, in Maurice Colot, ed., *J.-J. Eggericx: Gentleman architecte, créateur de cités-jardins* (Brussels: AAM and CFC, 2012), 259–61.

⁷³ Documentation on speeches, articles and interviews, 1937–9, NAB, CRRA, file 37.

⁷⁴ Louis Camu, ‘La réforme administrative: un des grands problèmes du moment’, *L’Indépendance belge (supplément économique et social)*, 4 Dec. 1937, 1 (citations), 11–12. On Camu’s speech, see also André Molitor, ‘L’aventure et l’amitié’, in *Louis Camu 1905–1976* (Brussels: Banque Bruxelles Lambert, 1977), 28.

⁷⁵ Camu, *Le statut*, 53, 116 (citations).

⁷⁶ Cited by Céline Spector, ‘La vertu politique comme principe de la démocratie: Robespierre lecteur de Montesquieu’, in Michel Biard et al., eds., *Vertu et politique: les pratiques des législateurs (1789–2014)* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires, 2015), 63.

⁷⁷ Camu, *Le statut*, 7.



Figure 2. Example of the Royal Commissioner's public relations campaign: cover of a 1937 periodical featuring an interview with Camu, who is portrayed by cartoonist Jacques Ochs as the potential 'saviour of the office workers'. *Pourquoi pas?*, 24 December 1937.

For Camu, displaying signs of moral panic did not contradict his self-stated aim of detached objectivity: in service of the common good, such evaluations could effectively be made by a small group of highly cultivated elite leaders like himself. This selective morality was not only characteristic of the technocrat mindset, with its typical 'synthesis of science and conscience' (to use a description by Olivier Zunz).⁷⁸ It also reflected broader sentiments of discomfort about liberal democracy which pervaded the public opinion of non-fascist European states during the 1930s. Camu's personal secretary, the aforementioned jurist André Molitor, had for instance expressed similar fears in a 1936 article for the Catholic periodical *La cité chrétienne*, calling the Belgians 'a people with an underdeveloped civic spirit'. This posed a particular problem for the government and its administration, both of which were generally held in low esteem by the public: 'A civil service reform ... cannot be envisaged without a parallel recovery of public mores; only then will the civil service ... receive the place it deserves within the social hierarchy'.⁷⁹ Statements like these indicate that the Royal Commissariat's ambitions reached beyond the notion of administration in a narrow sense. Since popular morality was at stake as well, reforming the civil service also implied reforming – or indeed 'administrating' – convictions and behaviours occurring in society at large.

⁷⁸ Olivier Zunz, *Why the American Century?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 39.

⁷⁹ André Molitor, 'La réforme administrative', *La cité chrétienne*, 5 June 1936, 460–63.



Figure 3. Example of the Royal Commissioner's public relations campaign: 1938 poster announcing a speech at the University of Liège. National Archives of Belgium, Commissariat royal à la réforme administrative, file 33.

The Royal Commissioner's Networks

Firmly establishing Camu's name in the Belgian political field, the approval of the October 1937 Royal Decree ironically coincided with the sudden exit of Prime Minister Paul van Zeeland. Van Zeeland's successor, the Liberal Paul-Émile Janson, continued to support the ongoing civil service reform by appointing Camu as his principal private secretary in November 1937. In his memoirs, André Molitor explained that Camu saw this job change as an opportunity to increase his influence: while formally remaining Royal Commissioner, he would now attempt to have the reform package practically implemented via the more informal networks of political cabinets.⁸⁰ True to his persona as a cool-headed reformer, Camu had indeed remained sceptical of the political-administrative system, as he believed that many ministers and high-ranking civil servants were actively trying to ignore or circumvent the rules laid down in the Royal Decree. In a January 1938 letter to Louis Wodon, the *chef de cabinet* of King Leopold III, Camu described this situation as 'extremely embarrassing', citing the 'current state of our political mores and a climate of idleness in our public services' as major obstacles.⁸¹ Another letter, addressed some months later to a director in the Finance Department (April 1938), saw Camu expressing increasing dissatisfaction with the slow implementation of his reforms: 'I have investigated all problems and I have suggested reforms in all domains of administrative life; now the solutions only have to be implemented'.⁸² Camu's discontent was possibly also fuelled by the recent parliamentary rejection of F.D. Roosevelt's civil service reform plan, the content of which had been based on the work of the Brownlow Committee. Characterised by historian William Leuchtenburg as 'the worst [congressional] rebuff ... Roosevelt was ever to

⁸⁰ Molitor, *Souvenirs*, 141.

⁸¹ Letter, 17 Jan. 1938, Archives of the Royal Palace (Brussels), *Cabinet Léopold III*, file 1479.

⁸² Letter, 11 Apr. 1938, NAB, *CRRRA*, file 41, folder 143.

suffer',⁸³ this rejection might have served as a warning: to make expertise sufficiently operative in society, experts would need to become more closely involved in politics themselves.

One of the routes towards greater political leverage could be via a continuous extension of personal and strategic networks. In May 1938, with another change in government, Camu effectively managed to have his prerogatives increased – and this time, it was a Socialist prime minister, Paul-Henri Spaak, who backed the ongoing civil service reform. A rising figure within the Socialist Party, Spaak was another mainstream politician who had repeatedly pleaded for a 'strong state'.⁸⁴ His rise to political prominence coincided with the ministerial exit of de Man, who by early 1938 had lost all hopes of realising his Labour Plan as a government minister. Possibly under the influence of *chef de cabinet* Louis Wodon, who was a strong supporter of Camu's work (and whose ideas were in turn promoted by Leopold III), Belgium's first ever Socialist government leader declared to parliament that he would give 'Mr Camu all the powers he needs to make sure that his theoretical ideas are put into practice', for a two-year period until May 1940.⁸⁵ In practice, the Royal Commissioner was given the right to chair the interdepartmental meetings of top-ranking civil servants, and he worked in close collaboration with the Finance Ministry to secure funding for planned projects. Camu was further granted a salary increase, plus the assistance of a personal cabinet with about twenty members (some of whom were transferred from the now-defunct OREC).⁸⁶ As such, Camu became a political actor *sui generis*: unelected and chosen for his expertise (like a technocrat), vested with executive powers (like a cabinet member), and with a term that gave him a degree of continuity in case the government should fall (like a civil servant). In this capacity, he would continue his mission to have his reform package implemented right up until the beginning of the German invasion in May 1940.

The Royal Commissioner's full integration in the Belgian political-administrative system by the tripartite Spaak cabinet was, once more, not without irony. First, as his formal power expanded, so did his dissatisfaction. This is best illustrated by an extraordinary meeting of the Council of Ministers, convened by King Leopold at the Royal Palace in early February 1939. In a lengthy monologue, Leopold blamed the Spaak government for both its overall weakness and its disrespect for Camu's reform plans. Devoting more than half of his speech to civil service reform, the king passionately defended the Royal Commissariat and urged immediate and complete implementation of the statute: 'I will not hide from you, Gentlemen, the painful impression made on the country by this governmental failure'.⁸⁷ As Molitor would later clarify, Leopold's plea had been penned by none other than Camu himself.⁸⁸ A second element of irony lies in the fact that, parallel to his rise through the ranks of government, Camu had begun to support centrifugal political forces – albeit in secret. From mid-1937 onward, he maintained a personal relationship with Joris van Severen (1894–1940), the strongman of the fascist Verdinaso movement. Established in the early 1930s, Verdinaso – an acronym for *Verbond van Dietsche Nationaal Solidaristen* (Union of Netherlandic National Solidarists) – initially pursued the formation of an authoritarian 'Germanic' state uniting Flanders and the Netherlands. Aware of the

⁸³ Cited by Alasdair Roberts, 'Why the Brownlow Committee Failed: Neutrality and Partisanship in the Early Years of Public Administration', *Administration and Society* 28, no. 1 (1996): 4.

⁸⁴ On Spaak's political views, see Stutje, *Hendrik de Man*, 253; Emmanuel Gerard, *De schaduw van het interbellum: België van euforie tot crisis, 1918–1939* (Tiel: Lannoo, 2017), 263; Mark Van den Wijngaert, *Tegen de stroom in: Leopold III, zijn leven, zijn betekenissen* (Antwerp: Manteau, 2017), 84.

⁸⁵ *Chambre des Représentants – Annales parlementaires*, 18 May 1938, 1641. In his 1970 memoirs, Leopold's former secretary Robert Capelle signalled that Wodon remained an influential figure in the royal household after the latter's retirement in Apr. 1938. See Robert Capelle, *Dix-huit ans auprès du roi Léopold* (Paris: Fayard, 1970), 12. On the relation between Wodon and Camu, see Molitor, *Souvenirs*, 138; Molitor, *Servir l'État*, 39.

⁸⁶ Report of Camu's activities, 14 May 1938, NAB, *CRRRA*, file 37; Note by Molitor, 6 Apr. 1939, NAB, *CRRRA*, file 37; Kurgan-Van Hentenryk, *Max-Léo Gérard*, 179; Molitor, *Souvenirs*, 142.

⁸⁷ Meeting minutes, 2 Feb. 1939, NAB, *Conseil du cabinet*. On this speech, see also Gerard, *De schaduw*, 267–71; Velaers and Van Goethem, *Leopold III*, 85–86; Capelle, *Dix-huit ans*, 100–4. On Leopold's criticism of the political situation, see also Gerard, 'De democratie', 1100–4.

⁸⁸ Molitor, *Souvenirs*, 140–41. See also Jean Stengers, *De koningen der Belgen: Macht en invloed van 1831 tot nu*. Leuven, 1992, 22.

movement's destabilising, anti-Belgian potential, the government prohibited civil servants from becoming Verdinaso members in 1933. Yet in 1934, van Severen – who was called '*den Leider*' ('the Leader') by his followers – drastically changed course by trading his Germanic ambitions for a 'Burgundian' vision. In addition to keeping the Belgian state and monarchy intact, the ultimate aim was now the unification of Belgium with the Netherlands and parts of northern France, in order to recreate the late-mediaeval Burgundian federation. Adopting this so-called 'new line of march', the formerly anti-Belgicist Verdinaso gained followers among the French-speaking bourgeoisie, who particularly applauded van Severen's repeated odes to the king. The movement additionally acquired a degree of social acceptability through the participation (from 1936 onward) of several Verdinaso members in the pluralist political think tank CERE.⁸⁹

Camu was one of the many covert Verdinaso supporters who saw no fault in the movement's inconsistent ideological evolution, and who were attracted to the 'new line of march'.⁹⁰ In June 1937, for instance, he invited van Severen to dinner at his château-like mansion in Aalst. Afterwards, '*den Leider*' noted in his private diary that Camu was to be considered a potential Verdinaso member; in a letter to his girlfriend Rachel Baes, he reported that he had 'completely won over Camu and his wife'.⁹¹ In January 1938, the two men again met at Camu's place, where they 'drank whiskey' (to quote van Severen's diary).⁹² According to journalist Maurice De Wilde (1982), Camu effectively became a Verdinaso member over the course of 1940.⁹³ Even though De Wilde did not provide a primary source to back his claim, correspondence from December 1940 between Verdinaso members Emiel Thiers (who succeeded van Severen after his death in May 1940) and Luc Delafortrie does make mention of 'Mr Camu' being 'an element that may continue to offer many services to the Movement'.⁹⁴ This suggestion aligns with the meetings (1937–8) and correspondence between van Severen and Camu, in which the latter addressed the former on two occasions (in June 1937 and April 1940) as 'dear friend', further indicating a sympathy towards the leader of an organisation devoted to anti-parliamentarism and the *Führerprinzip*.⁹⁵ The fact that Camu had originally been appointed by the van Zeeland cabinet as part of a series of measures aimed at *suppressing* the rise of fascism does not appear to have posed any obstacles for the development of these sympathies. An identical observation applies to Camu's public pledges of allegiance to the Montesquieuan democracy that had appeared in his 1937 official report on civil service reform, and that were in obvious contradiction to Verdinaso's aims. Yet at the same time, van Severen's movement could also be identified with two crucial principles defended in the Royal Commissioner's reports. First, van Severen himself was not averse to notions of technocratic governance: in a 1927 article, for instance, he declared that 'the state of tomorrow must and will be led by engineers and technicians'.⁹⁶ Second, Verdinaso had always presented itself as distinctively elitist: at the height of its popularity, the movement had no more than around three thousand members.⁹⁷ Many of those – and

⁸⁹ On Verdinaso, see for example Romain Vanlandschoot, 'Verbond van Dietsche Nationaal Solidaristen (Verdinaso)', in Ludo Simons, ed., *Nieuwe encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging* (Tielt: Lannoo, 1998), 2739–45.

⁹⁰ On ideological inconsistencies, see in particular Georgi Verbeeck, Book review, *Wetenschappelijke tijdingen*, 59, 2 (2000), 110–12; Dirk Martin, Book review, *Bijdragen tot de eigentijdse geschiedenis*, 4, 6 (1999), 247–52.

⁹¹ Diary entry, 29 June 1937, Archives of the University of Leuven (hereafter: AUL), van Severen files, file 31; Letter, 30 June 1937, Archives et musée de la littérature (Brussels), file ML 08475/0001.

⁹² Diary entry, 25 Jan. 1938, AUL, van Severen files, file 32.

⁹³ Maurice De Wilde, *België in de Tweede Wereldoorlog*, vol. 3 (Kapellen: DNB and Pelckmans, 1982), 90.

⁹⁴ Letter from Delafortrie to Thiers, 31 Dec. 1940, CegeSoma (Brussels), Luc Delafortrie files.

⁹⁵ For the correspondence, see Letter, 16 June 1937, AUL, van Severen files, file 311; Letter, 13 Apr. 1940, AUL, van Severen files, file 537 (other letters between the two men can be found in files 314 and 317). On the links between Camu and Verdinaso, see also Humblet, 'Collectieve arbeidsovereenkomsten', 327; Jef Werkers and Alain Mouton, 'Joris van Severen en "de hogere kringen"', *Jaarboek Joris van Severen* (Ieper: Studiecentrum Joris van Severen, 2008), 163, 172; Walter De Bock, *De mooiste jaren van een generatie: De Nieuwe Orde in België, vóór, tijdens en na WOII* (Berchem: EPO and De Morgen, 1982), 27.

⁹⁶ Cited by Luc Pauwels, *De ideologische evolutie van Joris van Severen* (Ieper: Studiecentrum Joris van Severen, 1999), 243.

⁹⁷ Dieter Vandenbroucke, 'De executie van Joris van Severen aan de muziekkiosk van Abbeville', in Marnix Beyen et al., eds., *Wereldgeschiedenis van Vlaanderen* (Kalmthout: Polis, 2018), 446–48.

especially van Severen himself – prided themselves on their high ethical standards amidst a society in rapid moral downfall. Similar ideas on charismatic leadership had also pervaded the work of men such as Fayol, de Man and Camu.

Additional evidence of Camu's links with the extreme right can be found in the fact that Camu started to frequent Nazi circles in the year prior to the German invasion. Historian Albert De Jonghe has, for instance, signalled that Camu maintained contacts with the German physician and *SS-Gruppenführer* Karl Gebhardt, who was, in turn, a confidant of SS leader Heinrich Himmler. Gebhardt had various Belgian personalities among his patients, including Leopold III, Jan Hendrik de Man (the son of the Socialist strongman) and Camu's wife Denise. In the Brandenburg lakeside town of Lychen, the SS doctor directed a sanatorium where Denise and Louis Camu stayed for about a week in June 1939 – she as a patient, he as a guest.⁹⁸ Immediately, Gebhardt briefed Himmler about the conversation(s) he had had with the Royal Commissioner, calling him a 'young and extremely active German-friendly man'. Since Camu was working on the 'transformation of the Belgian governmental apparatus', Gebhardt explained, he was to be treated with special consideration.⁹⁹ This conviction was probably inspired by the idea that Camu could serve as a valuable informant and/or as a straw man in a future occupied Belgium. Gebhardt's description moreover accurately describes how the Royal Commissioner himself understood his mission, and how he made sure it was understood by others – with the ultimate object of his reforms being the entire structure of Belgian governance. The following month, in mid-July 1939, Camu would invite Gebhardt – who paid regular visits to Belgium – for dinner at his second residence in Brussels. In a new letter to Himmler, the doctor wrote that Camu had expressed being 'deeply impressed' by his recent stay in Germany. Most importantly, the fact that Gebhardt had found himself in the company of, among others, two unnamed 'Rexist leaders' and Hendrik de Man, further indicates the breadth of Camu's connections among authoritarian political actors at this point.¹⁰⁰

The German invasion of Belgium in May 1940 coincided with the end of Camu's term as Royal Commissioner. At that moment, Camu again sought to take up political and administrative responsibilities. Following the death of van Severen (who was illegally extradited by the Belgian government and murdered by French soldiers in mid-May), he remained involved in Verdinaso until at least late 1940.¹⁰¹ Simultaneously, Camu became a member of a new think tank established by his former employer, the Liberal politician Maurice August Lippens. Decidedly pro-German, Lippens had been invited as a guest of honour to the 1937 and 1938 Nazi *Reichsparteitage*.¹⁰² Now, at the start of the war, he sought to unite various right-wing personalities from the financial, industrial, judicial, academic, diplomatic and religious establishment in a Centre for Political Studies (*Centre d'études politiques*), whose actions were concealed from the public eye. Historian Dirk Luyten has characterised the Centre's members as an elitist group that considered the 1918 introduction of universal male suffrage to be a tragic mistake. The envisaged solution was 'an authoritarian corporatism, aimed at an enforcement of the king's power, combined with a political and social silencing of the working classes,

⁹⁸ Albert De Jonghe, *Hitler en het politieke lot van België (1940–1944): De vestiging van een Zivilverwaltung in België en Noord-Frankrijk*, vol. 1 (Antwerp: De Nederlandsche Boekhandel, 1972), 101. See also Stutje, *Hendrik de Man*, 257; Henri de Man (Michel Brélaz, ed.), *Le 'Dossier Léopold III' et autres documents sur la période de la seconde guerre mondiale* (Geneva: Antipodes, 1989), 23. During the Second World War, Gebhardt would perform medical experiments on prisoners at Auschwitz and Ravensbrück concentration camps. He was executed in 1948 for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

⁹⁹ Cited by De Jonghe, *Hitler*, 103.

¹⁰⁰ On Gebhardt's letter, see De Bock, *De mooiste jaren*, 104–5; De Jonghe, *Hitler*, 104.

¹⁰¹ On this involvement, see Letter from Delafortrie to Thiers, 31 Dec. 1940, CegeSoma (Brussels), Luc Delafortrie files.

¹⁰² On Lippens and the *Reichsparteitage*, see Dirk Martin, 'De onafhankelijkheidspolitiek: Enkele aspecten van de Duits-Belgische economische betrekkingen (1936–1940)', *Vlaams marxistisch tijdschrift* 14, no. 4 (1980): 60–61. On his reactionary convictions, see also Martin Conway, *The Sorrows of Belgium: Liberation and Political Reconstruction, 1944–1947* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 293; Jean Vanwelkenhuyzen, *Les gâchis des années 30: 1933–1937* (Brussels: Racine, 2007), 529.

who would lose their right to strike and join a union'.¹⁰³ As such, the Centre's members pleaded for a state reform modelled after governmental principles of both fascism and *Ancien Régime* authoritarianism. In practice, parliament – which was execrated as a 'dictatorial' instrument of the lower classes – would de facto be abolished. In an unconcealed reference to the Nazi state, the prime minister was to be replaced by a 'chancellor' (*chancelier*), while the king would receive wide-ranging legislative powers. A prominent technocratic element can be found in the plan to have the king assisted by a 'Supreme Council' (*Grand Conseil*) of advisers, who, just like the ministers, would be chosen by the monarch himself. As such, the Royal Council of Louis XIV (1638–1715) was earnestly investigated as a model for the prospective Belgian *Grand Conseil*.¹⁰⁴ In this intellectual constellation, Camu offered suggestions on the modifications that were to be made to his pre-war civil service reform plans. Without objections on the part of their deviser, these plans could be swiftly adapted from a Montesquieuan democratic to an authoritarian monarchist framework. Such a transition, in fact, required no more than a few changes in the vocabulary of Camu's discourse, as becomes clear in this passage from his 1940 report for the Centre:

The civil service must be a real 'Corps' where a spirit of abnegation to public affairs reigns; it must be the pillar of the Monarchy and a model of good citizenship. This duty is imperative, because the bureaucracy will play a considerable role in a strong Monarchy ... ; for the public, it will be the daily manifestation of ... the regime.¹⁰⁵

The members of Lippens's *Centre d'études politiques* were political collaborators, in the sense that they swiftly accepted the arrival of a Nazi New Order in Europe, while they simultaneously hoped to find German support for an authoritarian Belgian state led by a domestic elite.¹⁰⁶ It quickly became clear, however, that such political independence was out of the question for the occupier, causing the Centre to lose its relevance by the end of 1940.¹⁰⁷ When the sympathisers of an authoritarian monarchy realised that the war would last longer than anticipated, plans for constitutional change were postponed and eventually abandoned after November 1942, when Germany's war fortunes began to decline.¹⁰⁸

After his participation in Lippens' Centre, the former Royal Commissioner, for his part, began to shy away from involving himself explicitly in political circles. Instead, he embarked on doctoral studies in economic sciences at the State University of Liège, where he would defend his thesis on civil service salaries in 1943. Professionally, Camu became strongly involved in finance: in 1941, he was appointed as a senior manager at the Banque de Bruxelles, one of Belgium's largest private banks. By the end of the German occupation, he joined the right-wing resistance group *Armée secrète*, which had been established at the start of the war to avoid separatist or leftist groups from filling in the political vacuum upon a German retreat. In early 1944, Camu accepted the role of *Chef d'État-major* of this 'secret army' in the provinces of East and West Flanders. In this function, he was arrested by the Gestapo (July 1944) and imprisoned in Neuengamme.¹⁰⁹ According to *The New York Times* (1976), Camu emerged in May 1945 from the concentration camp 'a walking skeleton and barely recognizable'.¹¹⁰ After a two-year recovery period in Switzerland, he returned to the Banque de Bruxelles, which he would come to direct as president from 1951 until shortly before his death in 1976.

¹⁰³ Dirk Luyten, 'Het centrum Lippens: Een Belgische Nieuwe Orde in een nazistisch Europa?', *Belgisch tijdschrift voor filologie en geschiedenis* 71, no. 4 (1993): 905.

¹⁰⁴ Velaers and Van Goethem, *Leopold III*, 484–85; Luyten, 'Het centrum'; Mark Van den Wijngaert, *Het beleid van het Comité van de secretarissen-generaal in België tijdens de Duitse bezetting, 1940–1944* (Brussels: Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van België, 1975), 53–54.

¹⁰⁵ 'Mémoire sur l'organisation administrative' [1940], NAB, Hendrik de Man files, file 1515.

¹⁰⁶ Luyten, 'Het centrum'.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 902–5.

¹⁰⁸ Herman Van Goethem, 1942: *Het jaar van de stilte* (Kalmthout: Pelckmans, 2019), 311.

¹⁰⁹ These biographical elements can be found in a hagiographic portrait that completely ignores Camu's involvement in extreme-right circles: Macq, 'Camu, Louis'.

¹¹⁰ 'Louis Camu, 71, Banker in Belgium, World War II Resistance Leader', *The New York Times*, 23 Nov. 1976, 29.

Concluding Remarks

Camu's career as top banker proved to be highly successful, as he managed to turn his bank into an important player on both the national and international scenes.¹¹¹ To the Belgian political-administrative system, Camu would never return. When the opportunity did arise in 1951 to become an extraparliamentary Minister of Economic Coordination in a homogenous Christian-Democrat cabinet, Camu declined, as he considered the function insufficiently authoritative.¹¹² Instead, he found greater potential in political lobbying, ideally on a transnational level, as exemplified by his active role in the European League for Economic Cooperation (1946–81), which was founded by Paul van Zeeland and the Polish diplomat Józef Retinger, and which promoted free trade and economic integration.¹¹³ The theoretical field of (public) administrative management nevertheless continued to exert attraction on the former Royal Commissioner. For the recently founded UNESCO, he and his former collaborator André Molitor conducted an international survey on study trips for civil servants in 1948, which took him to countries such as Czechoslovakia, Poland, Denmark and France.¹¹⁴ In 1949, Camu was appointed as head of the IIAS 'Supervisory Committee for Administrative Exchange Programmes', aiming to enhance the transmission of knowledge among civil servants across borders.¹¹⁵ On various occasions, moreover, Camu continued to comment on the relation between politics and the civil service. Each time he did so, it became apparent that his technocratic convictions remained steadfast over the years. A concluding remark from his 1948 UNESCO report, for instance, echoed sentiments expressed in the reports and articles he had written up until 1940: 'Senior civil servants play a crucial role in shaping the life of a country by maintaining organisations that significantly impact the well-being and overall prosperity of the population, both materially and morally'.¹¹⁶

Yet, in two crucial respects, Camu adjusted his discourse to align with the changed ideological circumstances. The word '*chef*' disappeared from his texts; instead, top-ranking officials were described in neutral terms such as 'leading functionaries'.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, while his wartime 1940 report for Lippens had advocated for the introduction of a *chancelier*, political corporatism and an impotent parliament, the post-war texts firmly placed Camu in the camp of the victors of the Second World War. In his UNESCO report, he emphasised that the civil service, as part of the executive branch of government, should operate 'under the authority of the legislative power'.¹¹⁸ Likewise, in a 1954 preface for a book by the French administrative specialist Roger Grégoire, he approvingly cited a 1937 speech by F.D. Roosevelt:

Government without good Administration is a house built on sand. Our fathers fought against tyranny, class spirit, and the privileges of birth and wealth. We must fight against confusion, waste and uselessness.¹¹⁹

¹¹¹ Macq, 'Camu', 69–70. Simultaneously, Camu was involved in numerous other businesses and organisations. On his activities and networks, see also Ruud Geven, 'Transnational Networks and the Common Market: Business Views on European Integration, 1950–1980' (PhD thesis, Maastricht University, 2014), 59, 131, 135–6, 156, 160, 195–7, 203; Klaartje Schrijvers, "'L'Europe sera de droite ou ne sera pas!' De networking van een neo-aristocratische elite in de korte 20^e eeuw' (PhD thesis, Ghent University, 2008), 158, 161, 167.

¹¹² Letter, 9 Nov. 1951, NAB, Joseph Pholien, file 974.

¹¹³ On the League, see Michel Dumoulin and Anne-Myriam Dutrieue, *La Ligue européenne de coopération économique (1946–1981): Un groupe d'étude et de pression dans la construction européenne* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1993).

¹¹⁴ Louis Camu, 'De l'organisation de périodes d'étude à l'étranger pour fonctionnaires', *Revue internationale des sciences administratives* 14, no. 2 (1948).

¹¹⁵ Files on the history of the IIAS, IIAS archives (Brussels), box 1.

¹¹⁶ Camu, 'De l'organisation', 264.

¹¹⁷ Camu, 'De l'organisation', 252.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Camu, 'Préface', in Roger Grégoire, ed., *La fonction publique* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1954), 6. On Roosevelt's original statement, see John Marini, *The Politics of Budget Control: Congress, the Presidency, and the Growth of the Administrative State* (London: Routledge, 1992), 82–83.

The Camu case does not only illustrate the ideological manoeuvrability typical for advocates of technocracy. The Royal Commissioner's activities from 1936 to 1940 also offer a concrete example of technocratic thinking being operative in Belgian politics. Part of a prominent technocratic momentum (whose instigators included politicians such as de Man and van Zeeland), its effects would long outlive the specific political and economic context of the 1930s. Without Camu's personal involvement, the first post-war governments would even continue to implement proposals from the Royal Commissariat's pre-war reports, resulting in 1946 in the creation of a *Conseil d'État* (an administrative court dealing with civil service appointments) and a *Service des bâtiments* (a centralised body overseeing the construction and maintenance of government buildings). The Royal Commissariat's successful operation stemmed not only from a clear societal need (with calls for a more vigorous governmental approach being widespread at the time), but also from the personal ambition – the 'iron will' described in a 1929 newspaper report – of the Royal Commissioner. By ensuring that he had the continuous support of the three mainstream political parties, Camu effectively managed to modernise the Belgian civil service, even though the practical implementation of his proposals left, in his own view, much to be desired. His integralist and uncompromising approach to solving problems during the pre-war years was similar to de Man's, and most likely played an important role in the development of his sympathy for authoritarianism. As Martin Conway has argued with regard to the broader European scale, many technocratically oriented government elites of the 1930s were indeed 'frustrated by the immobilism and perceived corruption of parliamentary regimes'. For them, the speed, strong leadership and clear hierarchies – in other words the *efficiency* – promised by 'fashionable projects of authoritarian reform' proved to be particularly seductive.¹²⁰

The technocratic moment in 1930s Belgium should not only be understood as the outcome of the transnational development of administrative expertise (driven by actors such as Fayol and Brownlow), or as a reaction to the economic crisis and the emergence of fascism. The moment also resulted from a desire to correct an old system fault in the political-administrative constellation: the weak position of the central government administration. The Royal Commissioner wanted to firmly shift the balance of power from local authorities, ministerial cabinets and pillarised institutional actors to the civil service, which he sought to establish as an actor that deserved (and required) respect from the citizens. The members of Lippens's *Centre d'études* considered the incorporation of Belgium into a German New Order (May 1940) as a chance to have the technocratic moment of the 1930s definitively consolidated. The Centre's vision was a clear example of 'reactionary modernism', with a modern, technologically and managerially up-to-date civil service on the one hand, and a political system partially inspired by premodern examples (Louis XIV) on the other hand. Eventually, the wartime association of state-strengthening principles with fascism would only serve to reinforce the traditional 'anti-etatist' basis of the Belgian government system after the Second World War.¹²¹

Finally, the Camu case also shows that government experts of the 1930s were not solely concerned with the creation of a predictable and 'objective' bureaucratic apparatus. In Max Weber's ideal typical description, the modern bureaucrat had appeared as the exponent of a rationalisation process (Weber famously made mention of a 'disenchantment'), resulting in a dehumanised figure who was no more than a cog in a machine.¹²² While many business and government elites of the interwar period were content to have this Weberian definition applied to what they considered as lower-ranking figures (whether 'ordinary' citizens or corporate employees), they happily made an exception for themselves.

¹²⁰ Martin Conway, 'Democracy in Postwar Western Europe: The Triumph of a Political Model', *European History Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (2002): 75.

¹²¹ The notion of 'reactionary modernism' belongs to Jeffrey Herf. For a discussion of this concept in the context of the Belgian intellectual climate during the Second World War, see Marnix Beyen, 'Nostalgie naar een nieuwe tijd: De Tweede Wereldoorlog en de roep van de traditie', *Belgisch tijdschrift voor filologie en geschiedenis* 79, no. 2 (2001): 465–506.

¹²² On Weber's characterisation, see Philippe Burrin, *Fascisme, nazisme, autoritarisme* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2000), 42; Peter Becker and William Clark, 'Introduction', in Peter Becker and William Clark, eds., *Little Tools of Knowledge: Historical Essays on Academic and Bureaucratic Practices* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 9.

In this context, Philippe Burrin has called attention to the fact that fascist ideologues were the first to reintroduce an almost mythical leadership figure, with the aim of 're-enchanting the cold and anonymous universe of modernity'.¹²³ A similar figure of a heroic *chef*, who was gifted with extraordinary moral capacities (and who could even enhance the ethical standards of the masses), also made a prominent appearance in the texts of Royal Commissioner Camu.

¹²³ Burrin, *Fascisme*, 42.

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