

PETER DHONDT

Un double compromis. Enjeux et débats relatifs à l'enseignement supérieur en Belgique au XIX^e siècle

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Over the years Pieter Dhondt has become one of the leading figures in the history of universities and higher education in Belgium and Europe. His appointment as lecturer at the University of Eastern Finland, which illustrates his strong commitment for the advancement of international scholarship in the field of university history, also marks a significant loss for the Belgian academic scene in general and for the “Ghent tradition” in the history of education in particular. Dhondt’s expertise focuses primarily on nineteenth-century developments, but his knowledge of modern and contemporary universities makes him an irreplaceable analyst of present-day academic issues, much like his mentor Hilde De Ridder-Symoens. *Un double compromis* is the result of the author’s doctoral dissertation, which he sustained in 2005 at the University of Ghent. To a large extent, the title is evocative of Pieter Dhondt’s own intellectual enterprise : the manuscript of the dissertation has been converted into a true book leaving aside many technicalities and it has been translated in French from the original Dutch version.

Hence the book is also the outcome of a double compromise, but one that has not the flavor of tasteless concession or flabby settlement. Contrary to the book’s modest subtitle, the argument is quite strong and original indeed. Dhondt contends that something as a Belgian academic model has emerged from the constructive opposition both to the French model of higher education and

to the German system of *Wissenschaft*. While the latter was seen as a leverage for vocational and professional disciplines, the former was considered excessive in what it provided in terms of *Lern-* and *Lehrfreiheit* – the backbones of the Humboldtian conception of a research university. Further, the author insists that the adaptation (rather than adoption) of these two foreign models was neither automatic nor neutral. As it happened, it has been supplemented by a subtle search for balance between what he calls inside and outside freedom, both of which were regulated by successive legislations throughout the 19th century.

Herein lies the core of the book’s innovation : the development of curricula and programs, the changing conditions of university entrance, the organization and validation of examinations are always analyzed under the prism of permanent political, cultural, and ideological tensions between the four universities. Miles away from being a scholarly single-sided study, this approach brings the institutional history of universities at its best, which could also be read as a new history of 19th-century Belgium. In fact, the competitive dialectics taking place between the universities of Liège, Ghent, Louvain, and Brussels is highly instructive and telling of Belgium’s current academic marketplace. Resting on the shoulders of scholars such as George Weisz and Christophe Charle, Pieter Dhondt makes a strong case adopting a comparative approach as his research focuses on three different subtopics – the education in the humanities, the study of medicine, and the training of teachers (a topic that has been particularly overlooked in the historiography). Other special case studies include the role and scope of



foreign students and the extension of female students within the Belgian academic system. There may be some flaws in the volume; for instance, a tendency to depict each academic establishment as a single entity loaded with a common ideology, whereas contradictions and contrariety often run across each university. One could also claim that he remains sometimes superficial on specific issues, e.g. in the domain of the social history of medicine. But these comments would be rather unfair for they all stem from the author's understanding of the university system as a *fait social total* embedded and woven in a complex web of historical developments, as sociologist Marcel Mauss would put it. Overall, *Un double compromis* stands out as a major achievement in the historiography of universities, providing a first-rate historical assessment of the Belgian academic system. It should appear in the compulsory reading list of academic authorities, as well as that of self-proclaimed university experts.

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