
Alone and Far from Home. Gender and Migration Trajectories of Single Foreign Newcomers to Antwerp, 1850-1880

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Abstract
On the basis of nominal data from local foreigners’ files, this article examines gender differences in the trajectories of more than 3,000 single foreign newcomers to Antwerp between 1850 and 1880. The data demonstrate an overall expansion, ruralisation and feminization of the migration field over time, attuned to the evolution of the port town’s dual labour market. Foreign single women were less specialized than their skilled male counterparts and immigrated in large numbers only towards the end of the period under study, supported by the facilitation of travel via rail. Engaged in a catch-up process as well as in the founding of new patterns of migration, single female migrants emerge from this study as both followers and pioneers. By highlighting the latter’s dual role, the results shed new light on gender stereotypes in migration research and on the oft-assumed connection between migration distance and occupational specialization.

Keywords
single men and women, nineteenth century, urban migration, migration field, gender

Introduction
Europe’s nineteenth century set the stage for a marked growth in overall levels of migration and mobility, which intertwined with a strong expansion of urban populations. The connections between migration and urban growth were however not straightforward. The old image of a rural exodus fuelling urban growth has been shattered in the wake of recent
revisions. Rather than a one-directional movement from the countryside to cities, what appears to have been at play was an unprecedented rise in overall mobility levels in many directions. While cities did receive a growing number of newcomers, most of them stayed in towns only temporarily, as many migrants moved back and fro between cities and the countryside or between different cities. Underlying this rise in overall mobility was a structural transformation of the economy, and an expansion of transport and communication means. Notwithstanding these great transformations, migration remained a highly selective affair: not everyone who could benefit from moving did so, and those who did were a very specific subsection of the population, moving to particular destinations and not to other places. Although recent studies and revisions have greatly improved our insight in the overall characteristics of migration in this period, the actual dynamics and mechanisms that recruited certain migrants to specific cities are still in need of further research.

In this article we aim to contribute to a better understanding of the how and why of urban migration patterns in the nineteenth century by focussing on gender differences in the recruitment patterns of single foreign migrants to the burgeoning port city of Antwerp between 1850 and 1880, on the basis of a quantitative analysis of a sample of detailed nominal data on non-national newcomers recorded in the so-called foreigners’ files. The focus on single migrants – who supplied the large majority of newcomers – is motivated by the aim to investigate gender differences in individual migration trajectories, which often become blurred in the context of family migration. Moreover, singles have often been attributed a pioneer role in migration, as when young, single and often more resourceful men paved the way for other migrants. The focus on foreign newcomers is in turn motivated by the aim to explore the social selectivity of migration patterns, which was arguably greater among long-distance migrants.

A major objective of research is the comparison of the migration trajectories of single men and women in order to gain insight in the different ways in which they organised and adapted their migration behaviour to changing circumstances. While female migrants have traditionally been considered primarily as ‘followers’, highly dependent on family decisions and family networks, recent research has demonstrated the intricacy and autonomy with which at least some single women made their migration decisions in the nineteenth century on the basis of their own information networks and contacts. It has been argued that in particular their interurban migration trajectories were the result of choices more complex and independent than often recognized. Still, however, female migrants appear from existing studies as predominantly and sometimes exclusively engaged in short-distance and regional
circuits of labour mobility. A systematic comparison of male and female patterns of long-distance migration to the city of Antwerp, can in that sense help to counterbalance gender stereotypes and shed light on the migration patterns of a specific category of urban newcomers: those single and far from home.

In the following pages, we will first discuss some of the concepts and insights used to explain migration patterns on the basis of existing studies, and then elaborate on the historical setting of the case study and the archival sources used, before proceeding with a discussion of the main results from our empirical analysis and of the implications for research on migration in the period under consideration.

From Push and Pull to Migration Fields

Underlying the observed increase in mobility levels in nineteenth-century Europe, were material push and pull forces emanating from a profound economic and social transformation. Structural economic shifts included the marginalization of rural livelihoods due to population pressure, land fragmentation or concentration, and the decline of rural employment opportunities in both agriculture and protoindustry, while most expanding income opportunities in the wake of the growth of industry and commerce were located in urban settings. The intense movement back and fro between cities and countryside indicates that adapting to these changing constraints and opportunities was a process of permanent adjustment that was by no means a straightforward affair. While structural push and pull forces were crucial, they are at the same time insufficient to explain the directions and patterns of movement that took place.

Recent studies have in this respect therefore highlighted the importance of the so-called meso level in fostering specific migration patterns. This meso level, situated between the macro level of structural economic and social change and the micro level of individual and household characteristics, refers to the social fabric, networks and information channels that provide the social support and information guiding people in their migration decisions. Together they help to understand the selectivity and patterned nature of observed migration patterns, connecting specific groups to certain destinations and not others. One of the most salient meso institutions are those of chain migration, when established migrants support the migration of compatriots by providing information, housing, work and/or other support to recent arrivals. But the meso level is much broader than chain migration. In its most general sense, it refers to all channels of migration information: people do not move randomly, but to places they know of, however incomplete their information. This information is conveyed not
only by family or friends, but could also travel via less personal information channels such as recruitment offices, firms, transport companies, printed word and rumour. The spread of migration information therefore has a clear spatial dimension: the transport and communication connections of a given city provide the infrastructure via which this information travels, and with it the migrants themselves.\(^\text{10}\)

Together, the evolution of structural constraints and opportunities and of transport and communication connections shaped urban migration fields: the area from which a given city recruited its newcomers, and the profile of its newcomers. Cities engaged in heavy industry, for instance, recruited predominantly men, while textile cities attracted more women. Regional towns attracted mainly migrants from within the region, while capital and port cities tended to recruit newcomers from more distant places.\(^\text{11}\) Migration fields were moreover not static, but tended to expand or contract in line with the economic developments in the city and its hinterland, and with the evolution of its communication and transport connections.\(^\text{12}\) They were not homogenous either: the interaction of push and pull forces with migration channels and individual characteristics implied that migration patterns were very much socially differentiated and the urban migration field socially segregated. To a certain extent this was the complement of the highly segmented nature of urban labour markets, and of the very unequal access of different groups to certain channels of migration information according to age, gender, skill and resources.

The evolution of an urban migration field can therefore be taken as an important proxy for the development of push and pull forces and the intermediation of social networks. Social segregation within the urban migration field – the extent to which some areas provide certain types of migrants – in turn serves as an indicator of differential sensitivity to structural constraints and opportunities, as well as differential access to certain useful migration channels. Overall, existing research has tended to observe a connection between migration distance and social status: long-distance urban migration often involved migrants who were generally more specialized, skilled and well-off than regional migrants moving over shorter distances.\(^\text{13}\) At the same time, women have generally been considered as moving predominantly over short distances, although there is increasing evidence of their involvement in long-distance migration too.\(^\text{14}\) Existing research on long-distance female migration is however often limited to specific occupational groups and/or specific regions of origin, and often study the trajectories of female migrants only.\(^\text{15}\) In this article we aim to complement this perspective by taking into account the patterns of both male and female long-distance migration to one particular port city over a period of forty years. Did patterns of long-distance
female migration correspond to the same dynamics as those of men, or were other factors at play? The analysis of the differential evolution of their migration fields is taken to gain insight into the adaptive strategies employed by single men and women who travelled to destinations far from home.

**Context and sources**

The city of Antwerp in several respects represents an interesting case for this study. In the course of the long nineteenth century, Antwerp was transformed from a small regional textile centre, exerting only a modest pull on immigrants from its direct hinterland, into a flourishing international seaport and trading centre with a booming population. The city counted about 50,000 inhabitants at the turn of the eighteenth century, which rose to almost 100,000 by mid-century and to 270,000 inhabitants by 1900. Immigration – both regional and international – reached high levels during this period, especially from the later 1840s onwards. In the 1850s, some 5,000 immigrants per year were counted in Antwerp, reaching yearly recorded levels up to 6,000 per year in the 1860s to more than 8,000 in the 1870s and 1880s.16

The fundamental makeover of Antwerp’s economic structure went hand in hand with a growing pull on immigrants both from within the country and abroad, stimulated by employment opportunities in the port town, but also by processes of economic change and proletarianization in its hinterland. The transformation from a small industrial town to a port and service centre had fundamental implications for local income opportunities. Research for the first half of the nineteenth century has demonstrated that Antwerp’s labour market in this period was heavily segmented according to gender, age and origin. While employment opportunities of women and the local population were negatively affected by the disappearance of textile industries, most of the newly emerging employment in port- and trade-related sectors was taken up by young, single newcomers. While most of them came from within the regional hinterland or the kingdom of Belgium, Antwerp’s international recruitment area also expanded hand in hand with its trade and transportation networks. In the first half of the nineteenth century, international migration remained a male-dominated affair, mainly recruiting specialized career migrants such as merchants, clerks, instrument makers and leisure workers to the city’s expanding commercial firms, insurance companies, banks, shipbuilding companies and bourgeois cafés and restaurants.17 In the second half of the nineteenth century, and especially after the redemption of the Scheldt toll in 1863, Antwerp’s maritime and commercial activities further proliferated. The city’s role as a prime node in the increasingly integrated Atlantic economy was underscored by the establishment in 1873 of the
Red Star Line that would transport many hundreds of thousands of Europeans to America. How did patterns of international migration evolve in the second half of the nineteenth century, when the city’s population almost tripled, the port and service activities boomed and its commercial networks expanded further to encompass the globe?

An exceptional source for the study of foreign migration to Antwerp in this period are the so-called foreigners’ files (vreemdelingendossiers) kept in the city archives. In 1840 the Belgian Sûreté Publique – a government agency in charge of supervision over non-nationals – ordered all Belgian local administrations to compile a personal file for each foreigner who came to reside within their municipality and “was likely to stay for a while”. The basis of each file was a printed form – the so-called bulletin de renseignements – with standard questions on the identity, origin and social background of the foreigner and his or her family, including details on employment (occupation, sometimes employer’s name, wage or income), migration trajectories (last residence abroad and in Belgium) and any additional information considered useful to determine one’s eligibility for a temporary residence permit, such as ‘morality’ and criminal past. In principle, subsequent changes in the situation of the foreigner in question – such as marriage, childbirth, changes of address, naturalization or criminal offences – had to be added to the personal file, so that files of long-resident foreigners could sometimes become very substantive and spanning several decades of his or her life story. While many of the personal files kept by the Sûreté Publique for the nineteenth century have been destroyed, the doubles kept by the Antwerp authorities have luckily been conserved in their entirety.

For this research, we have compiled a database with standard information from the more than 5,000 foreigners’ files produced in Antwerp in four benchmark years – 1850, 1860, 1870 and 1880. Not all of these files, however, dealt with new arrivals. Especially in the early years, some files contain only signalements on for instance runaway convicts, correspondence over new registration regulations, or details on policing activities and expulsions, while others have been for some reason compiled only many years after a persons’ arrival in Antwerp. In order to arrive at a coherent subset, we have formulated a number of additional criteria of selection, among which the presence of a bulletin de renseignements initiated by the local administration and a maximum time lag of one year between arrival and the drawing up of the bulletin, which resulted in the selection of a total number of 3,948 records. Four in five of those (3,164) dealt with persons who were single when they arrived; the other 784 with migrants arriving as (single-parent) families, (married or common-law) couples and/or referring to a spouse. Our definition of singleness was in practice a negative one: we
considered as single those people who arrived without a spouse, common-law partner or children, and who gave no reference to either in their bulletin. Most of these singles were, as can be expected, young adults: the median age of men was 24, that of women 23, while only 8 and 6 per cent respectively was older than forty. For the large majority, we can safely assume that they were indeed unmarried. Unfortunately, we do not know whether they actually lived alone or were planning to live alone during their stay in Antwerp. Nor do we know what happened to them after their arrival, although most indications suggest that the large majority stayed in town only temporarily. Notwithstanding the dynamic intention of the foreigners’ files, most include only the initial bulletin. It was this ‘snapshot’ information representing the situation upon arrival for 3,164 single newcomers, that was entered into the database and forms the empirical basis of the present article (henceforth: database single foreigners).

Before discussing in detail the most important findings derived from these data, it is worth considering the main limitations of the source materials. One important consideration is its scope and representativeness. Although the initial motivation behind the creation of the foreigners’ files by the Sûreté Publique was no doubt one of control, we have no indication that they were used as an instrument of repression at the local level. We have found no single instance of migrants being refused residence after filling out the bulletin de renseignements. In practice, filling out a bulletin appears to have been considered, both by the local authorities and by the migrants themselves, a purely administrative procedure inherent to migrants’ registration in the local population books, which could have been prompted by employers, landlords, neighbours or simply on initiative of migrants themselves. The information noted down in the bulletins was verified on the basis of identity documents produced by the newcomer, or, in their absence, by enquiries and testimonies of (previous) employers and landlords. There is however no doubt that some foreign newcomers were never recorded. Interspersed with the bulletin de renseignements, we find evidence for instance of removal orders against ‘vagrant’ foreigners who had never declared their presence to local authorities. Some specific transitory groups, such as short-stay visitors, sailors or passengers waiting for departure, were clearly not considered subject to registration in the foreigners’ files, and we see them recorded only very rarely. In addition, some bulletins were drawn up only years after arrival, indicating that it was possible to reside and work in Antwerp without being duly registered with the local population office. These caveats notwithstanding, the foreigners’ files still record an impressive number of foreign migrants to Antwerp: the number of foreigners recorded in the years 1850, 1860, 1870 and 1880 represented between 15 and 23 per cent of total (internal as well as international) immigration as published in yearly
municipal reports, which was comparable to the share of non-nationals among immigrants in the urban population according to the census figures. \(^{27}\) All in all, then, while some specific groups remain out of sight, the foreigners’ files did record the lions’ share of all non-national newcomers to Antwerp during the benchmark years, and the data recorded there can be taken as indicative of the main characteristics of foreign immigration in this period.

Table 1. Single foreign newcomers in Antwerp’s foreigners’ files, 1850-1880 (%)

* Insert Table 1

Source: Database single foreigners

The data explored in this manner record a total of around 600 foreign single immigrants between 1850 and 1870, and then a strong expansion to more than 1,300 in 1880 (Table 1). While these absolute figures are to be taken as a lower-limit, the trends they convey are indicative of the overall evolution in migration patterns. Two trends stand out: a very marked expansion in the total number of foreign immigrants in the 1870s, and a remarkable balancing of the gender ratio over time: whereas only one in three singles were women in 1850, by 1880 this was almost one in two. In absolute numbers, the number of female single immigrants was continually on the rise. Whereas in the first half of the nineteenth century foreign immigration was predominantly a male affair, women appear to have engaged in a catch-up operation after 1850. Was this really a catch-up, in the sense that these single female migrants followed in their male predecessors’ footsteps, or can we discern recruitment patterns that were significantly different for men and women?

**An Expansion, Feminization and Ruralization of the Foreign Migration Field**

Overall, nineteenth-century port towns have been observed to demonstrate a number of demographic and migration characteristics of which we can find important parallels in Antwerp’s foreign migration field during the period under consideration. Commercial port cities were generally characterized by disproportionately high levels of immigration and high proportions of long-distance migrants, whose move was facilitated by the expanding transport connections overland and overseas in which port cities acted as prime gateways. \(^{28}\) In the overall evolution of the foreign migration field of Antwerp between 1850 and 1880, three general trends stand out: expansion, feminization and ruralization. We will discuss them in that order.

As the number of single foreign immigrants increased between 1850 and 1880, so did their migration distance. This is paralleled in regional terms by a declining importance of
immediate bordering regions in the Netherlands and a growing importance of more distant areas, most spectacularly so among women (Table 2). Whereas in 1850 the Dutch border provinces (North-Brabant, Zealand and Limburg) supplied 31 per cent of male and 67 per cent of female newcomers, by 1880 this had fallen to only 26 and 33 per cent respectively. As Dutch cross-border migration became less important, Germany stepped up its importance as a recruitment area. In 1850, 32 per cent of men and 17 per cent of women was born within the current boundaries of Germany, by 1880 this was 38 and 39 respectively. The majority of the latter (21 and 29 per cent) came from the bordering regions of Nordrhein-Westfalen and Rheinland-Pfalz-Saarland, but other German regions were remarkably important too (17 and 10 per cent). The share of French migrants fluctuated around 10 per cent for men, and increased markedly from 5 to 14 per cent among women. Unlike their Dutch and German counterparts, among the French there was no outspoken predominance of border migrants: the majority came from beyond the border regions of Nord – Pas-de-Calais, Champagne-Ardennes and Lorraine. Migration from more distant areas, finally, was also on the increase, but remained limited in numbers and a male-dominated affair – although the importance of women did increase over time. Here we can observe a reshuffling in recruitment area, where the British Isles declined in relative importance in favour of Southern, Central and Eastern Europe, Scandinavia and the America’s and Asia.

Table 2. Birthplace of single foreign newcomers, 1850-1880 (%)

* Insert Table 2

Source: Database single foreigners

In terms of gender differentiation, male patterns of recruitment appear to have remained more stable in relative terms – although expanding in numbers – than those of women. In mid-century long-distance migration was still very much a male affair, when most ‘foreign’ women were in fact cross-border regional migrants from North-Brabant. By 1880, however, the female migration field was much more comparable to that of men. The growth of the female recruitment range was the result of two mutually reinforcing trends. The first is the decline in relative and absolute terms of migration from the bordering province of North-Brabant, which only in name constituted ‘international’ migration, but in practice represented the outer range of the Antwerp regional hinterland. The second trend was the growth in female migration from particularly the German Rhine area and France. The feminization of
foreign migration, then, was realized by a marked growth in the number of German and, to a lesser extent, French women.

A third general trend, finally, is a ruralization of foreign immigration over time. Overall, migrants from more distant regions were more likely to come from cities, while men more often had an urban background than women. Even so, the proportion of rural-born migrants increased over time, and more so for men than women: while in 1850 40 per cent of men and 55 per cent of women were born in villages with less than 5,000 inhabitants, by 1880 this was 54 and 59 per cent respectively (Table 3). The fact that this ruralization took place in the context of decreasing cross-border migration and increasing migration distance, indicates a growing penetration into more distant regions: long-distance migrants became less necessarily urban born.

### Table 3. Population size of birthplace, 1850-1880 (%)

* Insert Table 3

**Note:** Definition of urban is more than 5,000 inhabitants in 1850 according to Paul Bairoch, Jean Batou, and Pierre Chèvre, *La population des villes européennes, 800-1850: Banque de données et analyse sommaire des résultats* (Genève: Droz, 1988).

**Source:** Database single foreigners

This ruralization went hand in hand with the growing importance of indirect migration to Antwerp (Table 4). Whereas in 1850 66 per cent had moved to Belgium directly from their place of birth, by 1880 this was only 46 per cent, both for men and women. Among women, the fall in the proportion of direct migrants was slower but eventually as marked than among men. More and more single men and women had therefore previously migrated elsewhere before coming to Antwerp. In combination with a growing proportion of rural-born migrants, this points to a growing importance of stepwise migration: first from a village to a regional town, and subsequently to more distant cities. Patterns of stepwise migration help to explain how distant rural areas could become part of Antwerp’s orbit, and highlights the increasing role of regional centres as gateways between regional and inter-urban patterns of migration.

### Table 4. Place of birth and last place of residence before moving to Belgium, 1850-1880 (%)

* Insert Table 4

**Source:** Database single foreigners

What the above observations on migrants’ places of origin add up to, then, is a general broadening of recruitment area between 1850 and 1880: single foreign migrants came to Antwerp in increasing numbers, from further away, and from a more varied range of both
urban and rural places, and engaged in more complex mobile trajectories. Furthermore, single women were clearly involved in a catch-up operation: still relegated to mainly short-distance movement in 1850, by 1880 their recruitment trajectories showed many similarities with those of men. The broadening of Antwerp’s recruitment area appears in line with what to expect from a booming port city which further expanded its transport and commercial contacts and networks worldwide. Yet notwithstanding the growing importance of intercontinental connections, very long-distance immigration remained marginal and an almost exclusively male affair. While we can observe a decline of cross-border migration from North-Brabant, the large majority of foreigners came from neighbouring countries, and in particular from border regions. More than overseas connections, the dense economic interactions between the port of Antwerp and its continental hinterland, where the German Rhine area in particular was an important trading area, appear to have been a crucial factor in foreign migration patterns.\(^{32}\) In addition, the precocious development of the Belgian railway system and its subsequent integration in a proliferating Europe-wide rail network greatly facilitated migration over medium distances. During the period under study here, the total mileage of railways in Belgium, the Netherlands, France and Germany combined increased more than six fold, from 9,887 km in 1850 to 63,053 in 1880. The establishment of rail connections to Cologne and Aachen via the Iron Rhine in 1843, to Trier and Strasbourg via Luxemburg, to Amsterdam via Boxtel, and to Paris via Amiens or St Quentin, greatly facilitated travel from the border regions of neighbouring countries, where the lines in turn linked up with other lines crossing the European continent.\(^{33}\) This extended Antwerp’s orbit to regions that were undergoing marked increases in overall mobility levels in this period. Particularly in Germany, the last quarter of the nineteenth century has been noted for its major upsurge in overall mobility, driven by a structural and rapid disintegration of rural livelihoods. This growing mobility went hand in hand with heightened migration from the countryside to regional cities, which could in turn act as gateways to further destinations.\(^{34}\) Push forces and transport connections, however, are by themselves not sufficient to explain the evolution of Antwerp’s foreign migration field. The individual migration decisions involved with the moves observed required (also) pull forces and social connections that conveyed migration information. How and why did the increasing number of single foreign men and women find their way to Antwerp? The question then becomes what motivated their move and how they accessed migration information, and how this might explain the observed gender-differentiated dynamics of change in this period.
A Specialized but Segmented Occupational Profile

In terms of income opportunities, nineteenth-century port cities have been noted for the existence of a marked dual labour market and restricted employment opportunities for women. Their employment structure was generally dominated by international trade and shipping, while industrial activities were often restricted to a limited number of port-related processing activities. As a result, commercial port cities tended to provide employment opportunities mainly to high-skilled commercial occupations on the one hand, such as merchants and clerks, and to unspecialized casual labour along the docks, quaysides, warehouses and construction sites on the other hand. Conversely, the near absence of textile and garment industries so important for women, implied that female employment opportunities were generally restricted to domestic service and work in shops, hotels, inns or clubs, in addition to a small number of positions for schooled women as governesses, teachers or employees.

The occupational data recorded in the bulletins provide an important way of gaining better insight into the motivations and dynamics structuring the migration patterns of men and women over time, and to examine the extent to which these correspond to the general characteristics of a port labour market. Ample references to employers and income in the bulletins indicate that most were already employed or active in the stated position at the moment of registration, while in a limited number of cases we learn that they are seeking employment in that particular occupation. At the very least, the information on their occupation refers to the activity they intend to carry out in Antwerp at the time of their arrival, and in that sense provides an indication both of their occupational background and their motivation for coming to Antwerp. Due to their very different occupational profile, it is convenient to discuss this for men and women separately. Because of their divergent occupational profile, their occupations have been categorized in a different way.

Table 5. Occupations of single male foreign immigrants in Antwerp, 1850-1880 (%)

*insert table 5

Source: Database single foreigners

The occupational distribution of single foreign men demonstrates a differentiated but high-end occupational profile, that remained relatively stable over time (Table 5). Important concentrations were present among (mainly commercial) clerks (17%) and master artisans and specialized workers, for instance as mechanics, diamond cutters or printers (16%). Together
with wholesalers (6%), liberal professions (3%), retailers (3%) and proprietors (2%), almost half (48%) of all foreign men were active in occupations that can unambiguously be identified as socially superior. In addition, actors, singers and other artists (3%) and students, mostly at the Royal Academy of Arts (3%), made up another 6 per cent. Most of these specialized or well-off newcomers were attracted to Antwerp’s booming houses of commerce or were active in the luxury crafts and artistic occupations catering for the city’s affluent and mundane bourgeoisie. Casual labourers and construction workers, so prominent among the Antwerp resident population, were far and few among its foreign immigrants (10%), while also in other industrial sectors the proportion of subordinate and unspecialized workers (10%) was smaller than that of master artisans and specialized workers (16%). The small proportion of sailors and other shipping crew (3%) in the foreigners’ files attests to the fact that most of them were generally considered as passant rather than resident. One last major category were domestic servants (6%) and shop assistants, waiters, garçons coiffeurs and other retail workers (10%), who likely worked in the upper segments of Antwerp’s mushrooming bourgeois shopping and café culture.

While all regions shared a propensity towards relatively specialized activities, significant origin-specific patterns of specialization existed. These were most marked among the relatively small number of long-distance migrants: one in two Scandinavians for instance was a sailor, one in two Swiss was either a pastrycook or artistic painter. Yet also among the more numerous migrants from more nearby regions, origin-specific occupational concentrations were marked. Germans were overrepresented as clerks (34%), wholesalers (9%) and retail workers (13%), hinting at their heavy involvement in Antwerp’s international commerce. The French in contrast counted disproportionately large numbers of artists (13%), wholesalers (8%), liberal professions (5%) and proprietors (5%), attesting to a high-brow and leisurely orientation. It is only among migrants from the Dutch border regions that we find a more low-key and less specialized profile, with overrepresentations as construction and casual workers (20%), subordinate and unspecialized industrial workers (17%), transport workers (5%) and domestic servants (14%). From the perspective of the urban labour market, this resulted in strong origin-specific niches: no less than 63 per cent of all foreign clerks, 43 per cent of all merchants and 42 per cent of all retail workers were German, while 58 per cent of all artists were French, resonating the allure of French culture in bourgeois theatre and music. Conversely, 73 per cent of all domestic servants, 72 per cent of construction and casual workers and 66 per cent of subordinate and unspecialized industrial workers were Dutch. The relatively high-end and specialized occupational profile of these foreign male migrants when
compared to the Antwerp population as a whole, together with their origin-specific patterns of specialization, then, attest both to the considerable high-end opportunities opened up in the wake of Antwerp’s commercial expansion and to a clear link between distance and occupational status: the further away migrants came from, the more specialized, skilled workers or well-off merchants they counted among their ranks. As most were young and stayed only temporarily, their residence in Antwerp was likely part of an inter-urban pattern of career migration.39

Let us now turn to the occupations of single female migrants, which were far less differentiated (Table 6). Most were either domestic servants (69%) or prostitutes (11%), in addition to small numbers of merchants, teachers, retailers and proprietors (5%), textiles and clothing workers (3%), artists (3%) and retail workers (2%), while 6 per cent stated to have no occupation. There was a clear shift through time, as the overall proportion of servantes declined from between 79 and 74 in the years 1850-1870 to 60 per cent in 1880, at the benefit mainly of prostitutes (22%). The strong increase in the number of prostitutes by 1880 is likely in part attributable to a change in registration, but is at the same time indicative of the great importance of prostitution in the wake of Antwerp’s port expansion.40

Table 6. Occupations of single female foreign immigrants in Antwerp, 1850-1880 (%)
* insert Table 6
Source: Database single foreigners

In general, the much less differentiated occupational profile of single women as against that of men corresponds to the typical characteristics of a port labour market, where opportunities for female employment were often limited to domestic service, retail and prostitution. While industrial employment opportunities dwindled, Antwerp’s demographic, commercial and maritime expansion in the second half of the nineteenth century fuelled a growing demand for housemaids in middle or upper class households, and for shop girls, waitresses, artists and prostitutes in the city’s buoyant and socially differentiated leisure sector, ranging from theatre, opera and luxury hotels and brothels to shoddy inns, taverns, lodging houses and whores along the bustling quaysides.

When relating occupation to place of origin, important differentiations emerge. Dutch women were almost exclusively active as domestic servants (80%), and almost never as a prostitute (2%). Those from Germany were likewise overrepresented as domestic servants (71%), but also recorded a significant number of prostitutes (13%). French women in contrast counted
disproportionately large numbers of prostitutes (49%) and artists (18%) next to women in white-collar and commercial activities (13%), while only 12 per cent was a domestic servant. The smaller numbers from further places, finally, had a diverse occupational profile, including proprietors, as well as prostitutes and servants. Looked at from the perspective of specific occupations, this distribution implied that almost all domestic servants came from the Netherlands (65%) or Germany (30%), while 44 per cent of all prostitutes were French, another 34 per cent German, and virtually none (12%) Dutch. Singers, actors and dancers were likewise predominantly French (62%), much less German (21%) and only exceptionally Dutch (10%). As in other port cities, local preferences appear to have played an important role in these origin-specific occupational differences. Although in-depth research is still missing, the growing number of well-off German households in Antwerp appear to have displayed a preference for German domestic personnel, as did French speaking bourgeois families for whom it became fashionable to hire a German maid. This preference was probably partly motivated by their relatively low wages, and appears to have crowded out maids from the Dutch border regions. French women, conversely, appear to have held a particular renommée both as prostitutes and performers.

Unlike the situation among men, the connection between distance and occupational specialization was less outspoken among single women, which was attributable mainly to the specific nature of overall employment opportunities, in which domestic service was by far and large the most important – although the proportion of servants did decrease as migration distance increased. Unfortunately, the sources do not allow to systematically differentiate specialized house servants – such as gouvernantes, cooks, chamber or child maids – from unskilled bonnes à tout faire, but the former were likely to have been more numerous among long-distance than short-distance migrants. Even within the limited variation observable in overall occupational profile, origin-specific clustering among women was nevertheless marked.

During the period under consideration, then, single foreign men in Antwerp were attracted to the better half of the dual labour market that characterized the city’s port labour market. The bulk of unspecialized and unskilled port labour was taken up primarily by the local-born population and regional migrants, while long-distance migrants were mainly skilled and specialized workers active in commerce, specialized industries, luxury crafts or leisure activities, often engaged in patterns of temporary career migration. In this, we see the continuation of patterns established in the first half of the nineteenth century, and parallels with the inter-urban trajectories of career migration observed for Brussels in mid-century.
Notwithstanding a marked increase in numbers, then, the relative composition of the male inflow in terms of origin and occupation remained remarkably stable between 1850 and 1880, indicating an overall continuity in terms of the nature of migration motivations and channels at play. Single women tell a different story, however, characterized by a very limited employment structure that was characteristic for port towns. The remarkable expansion in the female migration field was not paralleled with important shifts in occupational profile – apart from the observed increase in the demand for prostitutes that was mainly filled in by françaises. Rather than the opening up of new opportunities, it appears that what was accompanying the geographical shift in female migration was a substitution process in the major employment sector of single women. Whereas in 1850 domestic servants were still recruited predominantly from the Dutch border region of North-Brabant, by 1880 large numbers came from the German Rhine area. Underlying this shift was likely the interplay of differential dynamics in the home area, with comparatively higher levels of mobility and restrictive working conditions in Germany, together with changing employer preferences in Antwerp in favour of relatively cheap German maids.46

Channels and Networks
The sources used here do not allow us to directly identify the actual migration networks or information channels used by Antwerp’s single newcomers. One way of getting closer to the meso level of their migration decisions would require the identification and tracking of their employers and landlords in the population books – an undertaking that unfortunately remained beyond the research possibilities of the present study.47 However, in the absence of any direct data on channels and networks so far, the evolution of their migration field and occupational profile can shed some light on the matter and provide important clues for further research. Lesger et al. have argued for a three-prong classification of migration channels: (1) personal network migration, “whereby people move because they are informed (and often helped) by people they know or know of”, (2) organisational or non-personal network migration, whereby people move along paths set or organised by occupational organisations or large firms, and (3) non-network or solitary migration, where migrants “have only a general knowledge of the opportunity structure in a certain destination, upon which they make their decision to move, without having personal contacts at destination.”48

The use that migrants (can) make of these different migration channels is socially selective. Organisational network migration, the second type, is per definition the prerogative of relatively well-organized groups with an occupation of a certain standing. At first sight, the
third type appears socially neutral, yet the amount and type of information people have access to (e.g. in print) is socially selective, and therefore limit persons’ migration horizons: wealthier groups generally have access to more and better information, so that the range of migration options they consider is wider. In addition, poorer groups have more need for social networks in situ as a safety net in times of unemployment or distress, and can ill afford to venture to destinations where they have no access to informal networks.

The image drawn on the basis of origin and occupation of Antwerp’s single foreign migrants in the latter half of the nineteenth century allows to speculate that quite a number of them made use of channels of migration that could be characterized as organisational network migration. This was for instance the case for German merchants and commercial office personnel who moved between different branches of international commercial firms in, among other places, Hamburg, Cologne, Mainz, Frankfurt, Brussels and Antwerp. Although, like merchants, many clerks and commercial office personnel came from German regions, we generally lack information on the firms and merchant houses where they were employed, but we can expect that, like elsewhere, their employers were not exclusively Germans. The artistes dramatiques and artistes lyriques who were engaged by the Royal Theatre, Opera or other lesser institutes probably also made use of professional connections between different theatres in Europe. If they moved between brothels or cafés that were somehow professionally connected, the migration circuits of prostitutes and garçons de café might have also shared characteristics of the professional migration channels of commis négociants and artistes lyriques. Others clearly made use of interpersonal migration networks, such as the Swiss pastrycooks and Italian terrazzo workers who all originated from the same villages. Furthermore, organizational and interpersonal networks may have worked together, for instance when commercial clerks moving within a firm also had family living in Antwerp, or when youngsters moved to Antwerp to work as apprentices in established merchant houses of other foreign immigrants.

Yet some of Antwerp’s foreign immigrants might have ventured out more on their own initiative, such as an aspiring German agent travelling between different commercial centres to develop his commercial career, or the Parisian waiter deciding to move up north in search for a better position. Yet venturing out on proper initiative requires the migrant to have at least some information on the destination, and carries many risks for those with few reserves. We can easily picture the aspiring painter from Dubrovnik, who was supported by la fortune de ses parents, travelling Europe’s great towns and deciding at a certain moment to visit Antwerp’s Academy, which held great renown in artistic milieus. The chance of a street
sweep from the same origin to follow a similar trajectory is virtually nil: he has neither the resources nor the information channels or incentive to make such a travel, and he can ill afford to leave behind the social networks that are so materially valuable for the poor. How far can the concept of migration channels help us to better understand the observed gender differentiation in migration trajectories? Overall, Antwerp’s single female newcomers appear to have had access to a less diverse range of migration channels than their male compatriots. Although it is difficult to compare their socio-economic profile systematically, there is no doubt that most women came from more modest backgrounds than their male counterparts. While men could rely on selective, established migration channels by virtue of their socioeconomic background or occupation, women were first to sever the connection between migration distance and specialization. The prostitutes, singers and actors aside, most were maidservants, an occupation requiring relatively little training. Domestic servants in the ancien régime as in the nineteenth century tended to be recruited predominantly from a city’s regional hinterland, making use of the dense interpersonal connections that tied a city to the villages in its surrounding. Although more research is needed on their employers, selective evidence suggests that many foreign maids, especially German maids, entered the households of wealthy compatriots, making use of the geographically wider inter-personal networks between upper-class households, and probably also professional recruitment agencies. By following in the footsteps of their wealthier employers, domestic servants might have in that sense embodied the main link in the chain that connected high-end pioneers with followers lower on the social ladder, who appeared on stage in the last decades of the nineteenth century, when foreign immigrants, especially from Central and Eastern Europe, came to encompass a far larger share of low-skilled and unskilled workers.

Conclusions

Young singles supplied the large majority of non-national migrants moving to the expanding port city of Antwerp during the second half of the nineteenth century. Although female migrants are often portrayed as moving predominantly over short distances, motivated by family concerns, the immigration of growing numbers of single women far away from home indicates that their moves could be more complex and their motives more autonomous, and that these could have a profound impact on the evolution of urban migration fields. Antwerp’s foreign migration field displays a remarkable combination of continuity and change during the period under consideration. On the one hand, there was a marked trend towards more intense recruitment of both men and especially women from a wider area in the neighbouring
countries, stimulated by overall increasing levels of mobility and rural push forces in combination with the pull of an expanding port city and growing importance of stepwise migration. On the other hand, there was remarkable little change in the occupations of newcomers, neither in comparison with the first half of the nineteenth century, nor in the course of the period studied here. Their occupational profile continued to reflect the specificities of a commercial port labour market with a sizeable demand for high-skilled and internationally connected merchants, specialized male artisans and white-collar workers on the one hand, and less specialized female servants and prostitutes on the other hand.

While on the male side we appear to be dealing with a continuation and expansion of migration patterns established earlier in the nineteenth century, in the case of women the patterns observed were radically new. Although women increasingly immigrated from the same distant areas as their male counterparts, their occupational profile remained relatively unspecialized – a pattern that we see for men only in the very last decades of the nineteenth century. In this sense, the period we are dealing with in many respects seems to represent a transitional period in the course of which the connection between distance and specialization became severed. In this transitional period, women appear to have played the role of both follower and pioneer: they were followers in the sense that they caught up with the male migration field, but they were pioneers in the sense that they were the first migrants from modest backgrounds to be recruited from beyond the direct hinterland in substantial numbers. Rather than using exclusive firm-based or inter-personal networks, it is likely that they relied on a general ‘democratization’ of migration information by means of better and cheaper travel and communication possibilities – in particular the spread of railways, travel and recruitment agencies and newspapers. Next to transport facilities overseas, the favourable location of Antwerp in the centre of a rapidly developing continental railway network, facilitated the move to Antwerp, particularly as an intermediate stop in inter-urban migration trajectories to other European cities or even across the Atlantic. Women with a rural background in particular seem to have exploited these new possibilities and engaged in stepwise migration patterns. In this ‘democratization’ of long-distance migration, they were foreshadowing the future.

Bio

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Notes


16 Winter, Migrants, 60–62.

17 Catharina Lis, Social Change and the Labouring Poor: Antwerp, 1770-1860 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); Winter, Migrants.


19 City Archives Antwerp – Felixarchief (SAA), Modern Archief, Vreemdelingenzaken, MA 44.284-44.787.


21 City Archives Antwerp (Felixarchief), Modern Archief, Vreemdelingenzaken, MA 44.311-44.314, 44.338-44.340, 44.363-33.367. We could build on pre-existing databases compiled by students from the Seminar in Contemporary History at the University of Antwerp, which were subsequently meticulously checked and corrected by Alexander Coppens, Ellen Debackere, Frederiekje De Cauter, Guillaume Dekoninck, Bob Grumiau, Jana Van Bouwel, Laurence Van Goethem, and ourselves. We would like to thank the seminar students, assistant Bart Tritsmans and our collaborators for their valuable contribution to the composition of the database.

22 A standard question as to the identity of one’s spouse was included in the bulletin, and we find several instances of married persons who arrived on their own, but did give details on their spouse staying elsewhere. Hence, it is defendable to assume that those who did not refer to a spouse were generally unmarried.

23 de Schaedrijver, Elites; Winter, Migrants.


25 We plan a follow-up research on precisely the characteristics of this group of foreigners who were expelled.

26 From the figures (see below) it is clear that these groups were recorded in far smaller numbers than their actual presence. When we do see them recorded, this is often as a consequence of unintended extended stays, for instance due to illness.

27 Compare the census results published by the Ministry of Domestic Affairs with the yearly immigration figures published in the municipal report, Rapport sur l’administration et la situation des affaires de la ville d’Anvers, from 1840 onwards.

We opted to use current administrative boundaries to classify birthplaces in regions (for the Netherlands’ provinces, for France the départements, for Germany the Länder, etc.), which were subsequently reordered in larger units of analysis in the tables for the sake of simplicity. See also: Winter, Migrants, 206-09. We also opted to discern between border regions – immediately adjacent to Belgium – and other regions, further away from the Belgian borders.

Over the whole period, 59 per cent of migrants from (Dutch, French or German) border regions came from a place with less than 5,000 inhabitants in 1850, while this was only 43 per cent for more distant migrants. Men were rural-born in 49 per cent of cases, while this was 58 per cent for women.

See also Kooij, “Migrants”; Moch, Moving Europeans.


Jackson, Migration and Urbanization; Hochstadt, Mobility; Moch, Moving Europeans.


de Schaepdrijver, Elites; Winter, Migrants.

Especially the presence of clandestine and also foreign prostitutes, often travelling and working in an international circuit, encouraged the Antwerp government from 1852 onwards to oblige prostitutes to enrol in prostitution registers and to undergo a medical check-up. See Catharina Lis, “Ein politioneel-medische orde: de reglementering van de prostitutie in West-Europa, in het bijzonder te Antwerpen, tijdens de eerste helft van de 19de Eeuw,” in Het Openbaar Initiatief van de Gemeeneten in België, 1795-1940, vol. 2 (Brussel, Gemeentekrediet, 1986), 573–579. The data suggest that in the earlier years some women working as prostitutes may have been recorded as maidservants or another occupation.

In Bremen, for instance, older and more experienced servants from adjacent regions were preferred, while in Liverpool servants tend to be younger and came from further away: Lee, “Domestic Service.”


de Schaepdrijver, Elites; Winter, Migrants.

Wehner, “German Domestic Servants.”


Lesger, Lucassen, and Schrover, “Is There Life.”

Winter, Migrants.


See for examples earlier in the nineteenth century also: Hilde Greefs, “Exploiting International Webs of Relations: Immigrants and the Reopening of the Harbour of Antwerp on the Eve of the Nineteenth Century,” in


55 Fostered both by growing rural push forces, among which also religious persecutions of Jewish minorities, and the increasing industrialization of Antwerp’s port-related activities, see: Lieven Saerens, *Vreemdelingen in een wereldstad: Een geschiedenis van Antwerpen en zijn Joodse bevolking (1880-1944)* (Tielt: Lannoo, 2000); Devos and Greefs, “The German Presence.”