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Crossing the Dutch borders in the past: Lessons from marriage registers

Peter Ekamper en Frans van Poppel

Introduction

Since the mid-1950s, borders inside Western Europe seem to have lost their political, social, economic and cultural importance. The process of supra-national integration, globalisation and the revolution in communication and transport has challenged the function of state borders. Their role in separating territories and peoples, in ordering our daily life, strengthening our belonging to and identification with others has gradually diminished. During the past ten years, however, it looks as if this process has come to a halt. In many countries in Western Europe but elsewhere too a counter-movement has emerged that again has stressed the legal and political sovereignty of countries and has refocused attention on the traditional function of borders to create barriers to movement.

Borders always have attracted the attention of geographers and historians: Their dynamic nature and their changing function over time make a historical approach essential whereas the local and regional differences in their effects ask for a geographical approach. One way to examine the temporal and spatial effects of borders in different periods of history or in different regions is by studying patterns of social interaction between the populations living on both sides of the border. This kind of information can teach us about the way space and national identity have been interpreted and how this interpretation has determined the effect of the border (Baud and Van Schendel, 1997).

Marital distance

Determining patterns of interaction in historical populations necessitates the use of uncommon sources of information. One of these sources are marriage certificates. This source gives information about intense face-to-face relationships not only between the two individuals directly involved but also between the families of bride and groom (Heady, Gruber *et al.*, 2010). Marital distances between spouses give an indication of social contacts and social knowledge arising through day-to-day life (Coleman and Haskey, 1986) and are indicative of the social distance and contact between communities (Coleman, 1979 and Snell, 2002). Marriages between grooms and brides who were born or lived on different sides of a border thus link individuals and families across borders and strengthen the feeling of those involved that one is part of one community. This kind of information has been used on a small local scale in various Dutch studies (Peeters, 1967; Hart, 1976; Boekholt, 1981; Rutten, 1989; Boekholt, 1990 and Rutten, 2005).

State borders

By using marriage certificates over a very long period of time, for different regions of the Netherlands, bordering to different countries, and by studying whether and how borders had different effects on social classes we explore what Baud and Van Schendel have called the spatial dimension of state borders and the life cycle of borders. The spatial dimension has to do with the fact that the influence of the border on social interaction varies with the (spatial,

cultural and economic) distances between regions on both sides of the border. The authors distinguish between the border heartland (the area dominated by the existence of the border where social networks are shaped directly by the border and depend on it for their survival), the intermediate borderland (the region that always feels the influence of the border but in varying intensity), and the outer borderland (which only under specific circumstances feels the effect of the border). The meanings and consequences of borders change over time and for that reason Baud and Van Schendel speak of stages in the life-cycle of borderlands. A first stage exists just after the border line has been drawn and pre-existing social and economic networks are still visible and people on both sides of the border are connected by close kinship ties. In a second stage the border has become an undeniable reality but old networks have not yet disintegrated and still form powerful links across the border. In a third stage social networks follow the contours of the border and social and kin relationships may continue to exist but become increasingly scarcer and are seen as problematic. This process can be reversed when the border loses its political importance and new networks emerge; eventually the border might be abolished, physical barriers removed and border-induced networks might be falling apart.

Marriage register data

The data that we use include all marriages contracted in the period 1812-1922 in 5 (of the at that time 11) provinces of the Netherlands: Gelderland, Groningen, Limburg, Overijssel and Zeeland. The more than one million marriage certificates in these provinces have been entered into a database within the framework of the so-called GENLIAS project (a joint initiative of the National Archive Services and the Regional Historical Centers and officially started in 2004). The five provinces each have their own particular ecological, social, and economic structure, and include larger and smaller cities, as well as rural areas. All provinces border or to the German border or adjoin a Belgian province whereas Limburg is bordering Belgium as well as Germany. Together, the five regions cover a large part of the economic and cultural landscape of 19th-century Netherlands. The marriages in the five provinces were grouped together. For each place in which the marriage took place we classified the places of birth of bride and groom according to the country of which they were part. We distinguished between Belgium, Germany, France, and various groups of other countries. We used country definitions as these would apply to the current borders. In many cases it proved difficult to determine the exact name and location of the places of birth of bride and groom, usually due to errors and omissions committed during the process of data entry. We also used information on the occupation of the groom to classify marriages by social class and applied for that purpose the HISCLASS classification scheme (Van Leeuwen and Maas, 2011).

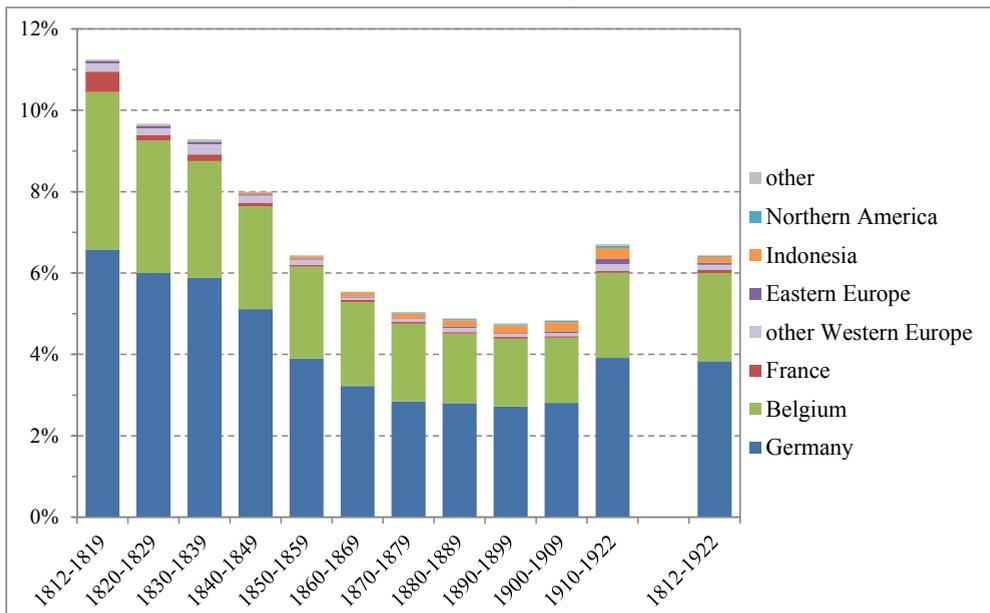
Trends over time

Figure 1 gives per period of marriage the percentage of marriages in which at least one of the spouses had been born outside the Netherlands. The figure shows a clear trend with that percentage decreasing continuously from 11 per cent in the second decade of the 19th century to less than 5 per cent till 1900. Only in the most recent period this percentage started to increase again. As could be expected, given the distance, by far the most important countries of origin were Germany (60%) and Belgium (34%). In the first decade France still occupied a

prominent position, at a time when France had a strong military, economic and political role in the Netherlands. In the second half of the 19th century, the percentage of spouses coming from the Dutch East Indies is increasing. After 1910, the role of spouses coming from Eastern Europe is gaining weight; probably related to the growing numbers of miners in Limburg and increasing numbers of Jewish migrants from Eastern Europe. The number of spouses born in Northern America was limited, but increasing in the last three decades. The number of spouses born in Northern America was limited, but increasing in the last three decades. The figure fits in the consecutive stages that have been depicted by Baud and Van Schendel (1997) with ever-decreasing proportions of cross-border marriages during the process of national state formation and integration.

The decreasing proportions of cross-border marriages over time can be related to a series of changes that fundamentally transformed cultural preferences and the opportunities to meet potential spouses. The Netherlands became culturally more and more a unity. Distinctive local accents and vocabulary decreased in importance, enhancing the communication with members of the national community. Local costume, customs, and habits disappeared, national newspapers and political and economic integration caused an ever-growing connectedness, emotionally as well as cognitively, between different regions and their inhabitants, stimulating cultural homogenization. Identification with the national state created a sense of membership in a national community (Knippenberg and De Pater, 1988 and Knippenberg, 1999). A radical transformation of the communication and transport systems increased the possibility of direct

*Figure 1. Marriages with a partner born abroad by region of birth, 1812-1922
(% of all marriages)*



interaction between the border regions and the centre. General conscription led to regular displacement of individuals and to contacts with inhabitants from a variety of regions, with marriage as one result. Educational expansion at secondary and university levels beginning in the last quarter of the nineteenth century brought with it social intercourse between youngsters from a wide variety of areas. The growth of the national community was not confined to the economy and the state. Local sporting clubs, political parties, and labor unions became part of tightly organized national networks. At the same time there was a major improvement in transportation, facilitating mobility, and in methods of communication, which made it easier to keep in touch (telegraph, telephone, postal services). The increase in the means and speed of transportation brought about by new and improved roads and canals, and by new means of transport such as the train, the bicycle, and the tram brought a wider range of potential spouses within reach. In 1850 the geographical center of the country could be reached by people living in Groningen, most parts of Limburg, and large parts of Zeeland in around 12.5 hours. In 1870 travel time to the center had been reduced to between, at most, 7.5 to 10 hours from the more isolated parts of the provinces, and in 1920 people from almost all parts of the country were able to reach the center of the country within 2.5 to 5 hours (Thurkow, 1984).

Border regions

By focusing on the municipal level and calculating for each place of marriage the proportion of marriages with brides or grooms from Belgium and Germany one is able to differentiate between the spatial dimensions of border regions. *Figure 2* depicts the percentage of marriages with brides or grooms from either Belgium or Germany per place (municipality) of marriage over the period 1812-1922. The map clearly shows higher proportions of foreign born spouses in municipalities closer to the border. In the southern part of Limburg high proportions of both Belgian and German spouses can be observed. In particular the municipality of Vaals stands out with 15 per cent Belgian and 27 per cent German spouses. Outside the border regions proportions of foreign spouses are (slightly) higher in urban areas and garrison towns. The general observed pattern is first of all explained by the structure of interaction opportunities. When people live near each other, they tend to meet more frequently, increasing the chances of meeting a potential partner. Proximity thus increases meeting probabilities and thereby has a direct effect on partner choice and thus in places directly on the border chances are higher that people marry over the border. Factors that could lead to a decreased preference for a nearby partner from over the border such as physical and mental barriers (hampering circulation, differences in religion, in dialect or language) did play only a limited role. Drenthe and Groningen shared with the bordering German areas a regional language that deviated slightly from the standard Dutch and German and for the Limburg area bordering to Germany and the Zeeland area bordering Flanders that was the case as well. The bordering regions also shared the same religion and in their political history the orientation at the Dutch state had started late. Isolation partly due to underdeveloped infrastructure, common to many national states that looked more to the interests of the centre than to those of the periphery played a role as well. Until the middle of the 19th century, particularly in the eastern and southern parts of the country, connections between one settlement and another were relatively poor and the means of transport limited.

Figure 2. Marriages with a partner born in Belgium or Germany by municipality of marriage, 1812-1922 (% of all marriages)

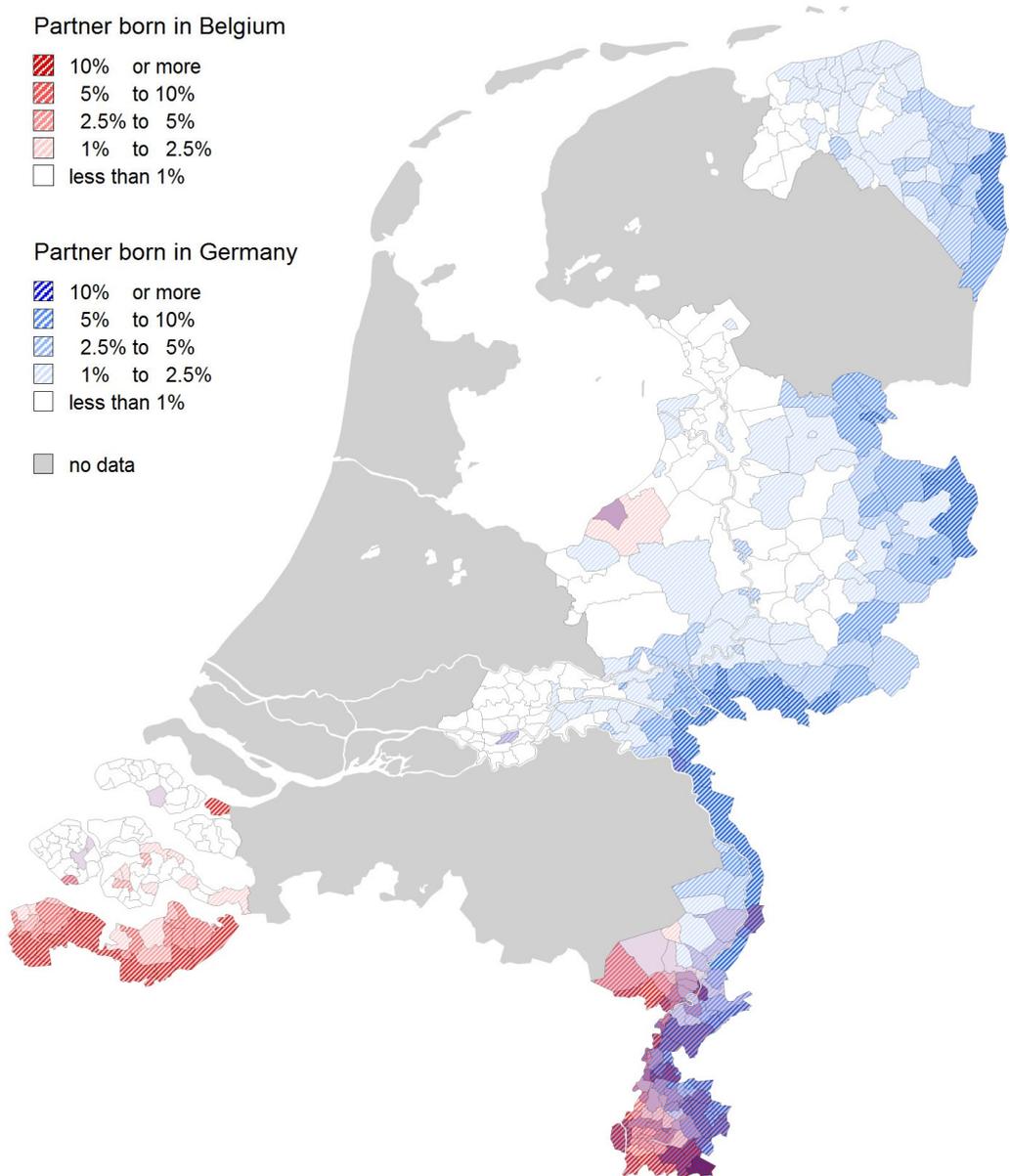
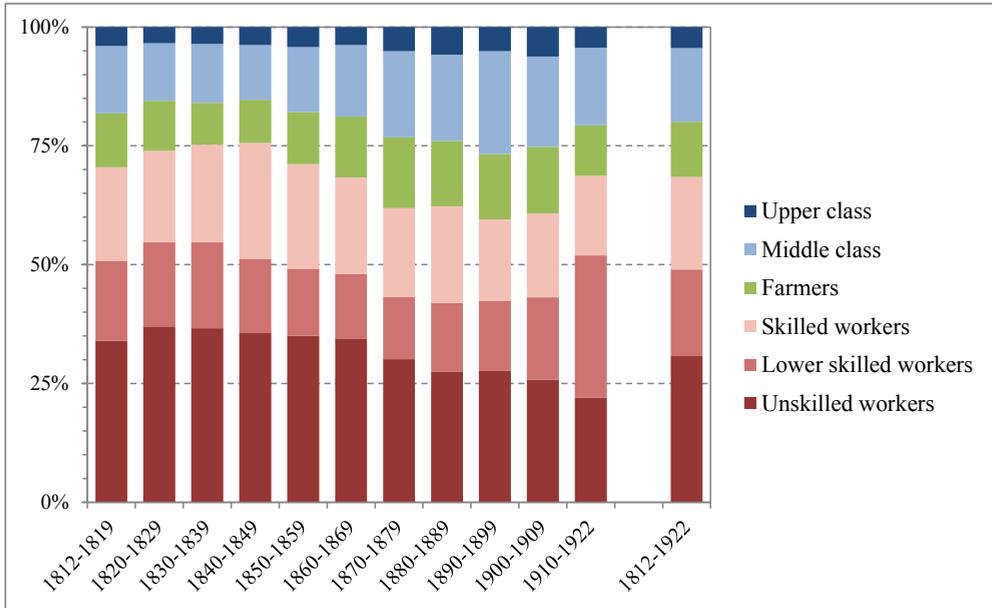
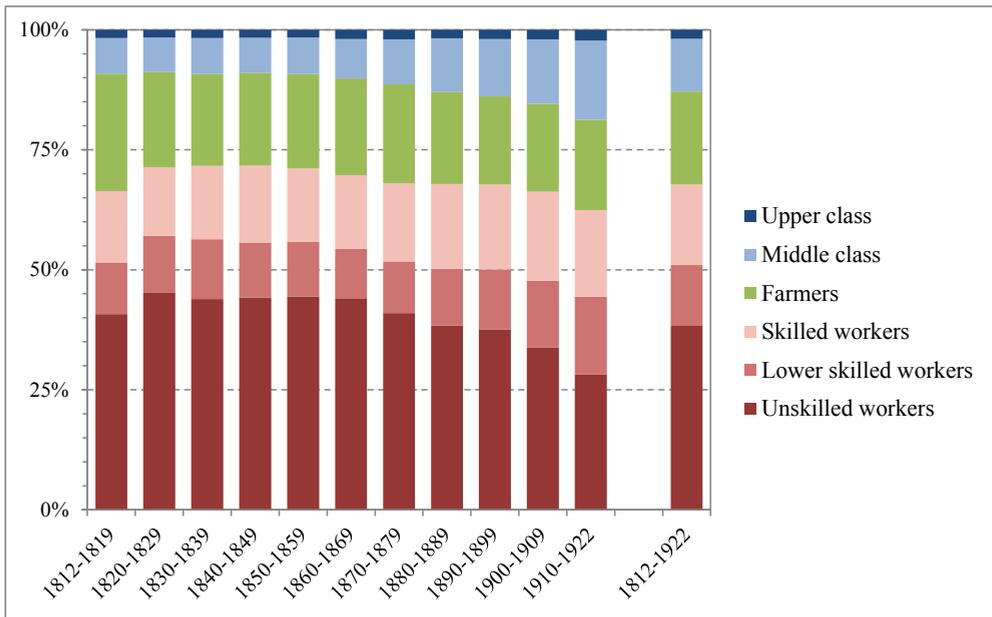


Figure 3. Marriages by social class and country of birth, 1812-1922 (% distributions)

(a) Marriages with a partner born abroad



(b) Marriages with both partners born in the Netherlands



Social class

Figure 3 shows how far social classes differ in the degree in which they have face-to-face contacts resulting in marriage with men and women born outside the Netherlands. *Figure 3a* gives by period the distribution of non-Dutch born marriages over the social classes, *figure 3b* does the same for completely Dutch-born marriages. By comparing the two proportions for each social class we can observe whether in some social classes cross-border marriages are over- or underrepresented. In the upper class (higher managers and higher professionals) these cross-border marriages are strongly overrepresented: 4 per cent of all cross-border marriages to 2 per cent of the non-cross-border marriages; the same applies, but to a lesser degree, to the middle class (lower managers, lower professionals and clerical and sales personnel, lower clerical and sales personnel, and foremen): 16 versus 11 per cent. Lower skilled workers (miners included) are over-represented as well: 16 versus 12 per cent till 1910 and rapidly increasing to 30 versus 16 per cent in the period 1910-1922. Two groups are strongly underrepresented: Farmers (12 versus 19%) and unskilled workers (31 versus 38%). These differences between social classes have to do with opportunities to meet potential spouses from more distant areas and preferences for spouses from far-away regions. Peasants tended to be rooted to the soil. The upper and middle classes were more mobile as they possessed the time and money needed to travel far and often, and had more knowledge of farther-off areas, giving them an advantage in getting in touch with areas farther from their places of birth. The higher classes also had a more universalistic value orientation, and spoke foreign languages. They disposed of wider means of communication (including letter-writing) and participated in a geographically more extensive political, economic, and friendship network. Several of them spent an educational and training period outside their own country.

Conclusion

This article shows that marriage certificates can be fruitfully explored to add to our knowledge of the effect of state borders on social interaction. For a more comprehensive view it would be important to complete the dataset with marriage certificates from other provinces, those bordering to Germany and Belgium as well as those from the urban, more market-oriented western part of the country. Furthermore, data from our neighboring countries, becoming available in digitalized form have to be added as well to inform us about the way our neighbors viewed the Dutch grooms and brides. Extending our data in time, forwards and backwards, would allow us to find out whether there are again periods in which state borders had smaller or hardly any effect on the choice of a spouse.

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