

## 2. Reform of capitalism

### And yet...

Henri Lambert and Eugene Baudoux recognised census abuses (eligible voters), without regarding them as aggressive, however. They had already fingered the exorbitant privileges of capitalists! However, rather than unions, that officially introduce the principle of a struggle, they wanted the workers to form companies or cooperative associations.

In 1896, to prevent or modify the legislative outcome of a proposed bill on associations, Henri Lambert became active in this field, increasing his contacts with the press on the one hand and with politicians on the other.

Prior to the bill's explicit formulation in 1914, the ideas of Henri Lambert had twice almost found their way on to the statute book.



First in France. On November 14, 1899, Pierre Waldeck-Rousseau filed a bill on associations amending his Act of 1884. In France its formulation came closest to the thought of Henri Lambert. But the French Parliament passed a tougher law that departed from the principles of its promoter and led to the law enacted on July 1, 1901. This was the famous law of separation between church and state.

In Belgium, at a meeting of May 6, 1908, Paul Janson, as we have seen, proposed to the office of the House of Representatives a bill on "the simple or sponsored workers collective company" and on February 3, 1909 another on "the organisation of the law of association" in which he declared that he wanted "to translate the theories of Baudoux and Lambert into a legal text," a project that reflects these theories "only imperfectly".



The intransigence of the principles of Henri Lambert, and their severity, alienated those who, fans of the possible, saw in them the expression of a utopia, as well as those who perceived in them a threat to privileges of all kinds. There was no doubting, however, that unbridled freedom, without limits or effective responsibility, could only lead to excesses.

Although Henri Lambert did not really have disciples, in Henri Janne (1908-1991) – a young doctor of philosophy and letters at the time, a future professor of sociology at the Free University of Brussels, and a future Rector of it, and also a future minister – he had a follower of his theories, and in particular that of the law of association. Requested by the Belgian Society of Political Economy to come and "defend his original ideas", Henri Lambert finally accepted to give a lecture in 1934. However, his death prevented him from doing so.

Henri Janne agreed to give it instead on February 26, 1935: *The reform of capitalism through the law of association*. After explaining the concept of Henri Lambert, to which he adhered and which he considered fundamental, he said that for him any reform of the law of association "*will necessarily be some sort of reform of the regime and would have extremely profound even revolutionary repercussions if the reform is radical.*" After explaining the theory and answering various objections to it, he concluded that "*the crowd begins to speak, to proclaim, to shout that at the head of the economy is an oligarchy that is not an elite, but parasitic, "amateur" and dishonest; the day when what should be the elite of society turns its back on criticism; this society – bear in mind the eighteenth century – is virtually doomed...*

*We are at a crossroads; it suffices to study today's economic world to see in which direction it should be modified: towards a sense of responsibility. I think, with Henri Lambert, that for the men of our time this is "something that has to be done".*

But in Europe the boots were beginning to tramp. Totalitarianism of all stripes: communism, nazism, fascism were all sharpening their weapons under the helpless gaze of democracies afflicted by incompetence. Truth has its moment. It was not yet that of the vision of Henri Lambert...