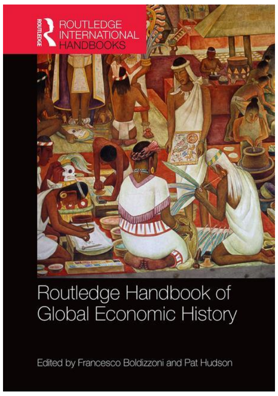

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The Low Countries, Intellectual Borderlands of Economic History

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THE LOW COUNTRIES, INTELLECTUAL BORDERLANDS OF ECONOMIC HISTORY

Erik Aerts and Ulbe Bosma

Two small but economically precocious states on the western periphery of the European mainland have, for different reasons, punched above their weight as far as the global history of economic history is concerned. This is especially so in the case of the Netherlands in recent decades. Two authors here contribute their own interpretations of the emergence and trajectory of the field in their respective countries focusing upon their differing economic, political and intellectual contexts and their relationships with the outside world. The subject, as it has developed in both localities, has much to offer to the future of the discipline particularly because, in neither polity, has economic history been irrevocably divorced from social and cultural history. This is the case despite growing specialization of research tools and methods, and despite a concerning drift towards path-dependency arguments within the new institutional economics of recent years.

I BELGIUM

Erik Aerts

Economic history as an academic discipline in Belgium was a relatively late bloomer, but when it finally arrived it immediately gained a position in the forefront of historiography, both within Europe and further afield. In the following overview, we distinguish five phases. We explain why for the first half-century after the creation of the Kingdom of Belgium, economic history was unable to establish itself. During the last decade of the nineteenth century, the firm foundations were laid on which, after the Second World War, the study of economic history was truly able to flourish. This expansion came to a halt in the last decade of the last century. Finally, we consider the current situation. It should be emphasized that this is a first reconnaissance mission, a provisional picture pending an overview with more definitive and also quantitative support.

No economic history in the age of the archivists, 1830–85

In the autumn of 1830, revolutionaries proclaimed Belgium an independent state. The young nation was actively engaged at the time as the first country to introduce the industrial revolution to continental Europe. Large-scale industrialization was driven forward by mechanized coal, steel and textile industries in the provinces of Liège and Hainaut, a mechanized cotton industry in the city of Gent, an expanding world port in the city of Antwerp and an international banking system in the capital, Brussels. The young Belgium was also playing a pioneering role in another area. As early as 1841, the Belgian *Commission Centrale de Statistique* had been established to make government statistics more consistent and complete. This Commission was tasked with providing instruments for policy making and the organization of society. It was also hoped that a better understanding could be gained of the workings of the economy and demographic mechanisms (Bracke 2008: 399). The Commission primarily worked for the government and the administration, but it also served the scientific community. It soon acquired an international reputation thanks to its chairman, the Belgian mathematician, astronomer and sociologist Lambert Adolphe J. Quetelet (1796–1874). He was one of the first to apply statistical techniques in the social sciences.

Impressive industrial growth and the success of statistics in both science and government might have been expected to contribute to the flourishing of economic history. During the first half-century of the country's history, this did not prove to be the case. At this time, three institutions were important for the study of the past: the National or General State Archives, the Academy and the Royal Historical Commission. The historians who worked within these three institutions were cultivated autodidacts or scholars with a legal background; they had great conviction, but usually lacked method. The bulk of historical output was in the hands of archivists, under the powerful intellectual leadership of Louis Prosper Gachard (1800–85), National Archivist from 1831 until his death in 1885. So dominant was the group of archivists, not just in the three major institutions, but also in all kinds of societies and publication series, that Fernand Vercauteren described the half-century from around 1830 to 1880 in Belgian historiography as 'l'âge des archivistes' (Vercauteren 1959: 59). Hardworking archivists staffed the city and state archives as well as dominating the Royal Historical Commission. Among the historians, they were also the largest group within the Academy. At their frequent and well-attended sessions, they decided on projects, chose themes and allocated budgets. Their output was impressive, but the quality was very variable. The archivists were primarily busy with the transcription of sources (the 'véritable chasse aux documents' according to Arnould 1947: 68). However, haste and superficiality marred many editions of texts, which could not withstand comparison with what was being achieved by German historians at that time. In any case, the archivists were not interested in economic history, but in political events, artistic achievements, military actions and ecclesiastical conditions. National Archivist Gachard, who had a personal preference for the sixteenth century, did gradually introduce early modern history into a number of programmes, but he too remained mainly interested in political and religious history. Moreover, amid the nationalist euphoria of the young kingdom, the theme of external domination and foreign tyranny proved popular, while major individual figures were cherished as the forefathers of national history (Tollebeek 1992: 74). Both the economic context and the growing success of statistics went unnoticed by the archivists and romantic narrators (Peeters 2003: 167). It was necessary to wait for another institution, and above all for another generation of historians: the universities and the professors.

The emergence of economic history, 1885–1950

The start of economic history in Belgium can be dated to the last decade of the nineteenth century, and coincided with the concerted 'scientification' (or application of scientific standards) of the practice of history. Archivists and transcribers of texts were replaced by university-educated historians and professors. These also put economic history on the agenda. In 1874, Godefroid Kurth introduced seminars or '*travaux pratiques*' on the German model at the University of Liège, Léon Vanderkindere followed suit at the University of Brussels in 1877, Henri Pirenne imitated the example of his teacher Kurth at the University of Gent from 1886 and Paul Fredericq organized seminars in Liège in 1880. Before the turn of the century, Alfred Cauchie introduced the same innovation in Leuven. The seminar system gained formal recognition in the law of 10 April 1890, which at the same time made the doctoral dissertation a prerequisite for a university career (Schryver De 1997: 300–1; Tollebeek 1990: 8–9).

It was Henri Pirenne (1862–1935) who more than any other historian made an impressive contribution to the shaping of economic history in Belgium. In the young Pirenne, Belgium gained not just an ardent advocate of the new discipline, but an international reputation. Obviously Pirenne was not the first to study economic issues from Belgium's past. Before him, a number of archivists had devoted studies to urban craft associations, while keen amateurs had issued *mémoires* within the Academy about the economic history of Belgium. Numismatists had also done useful work.[1] Pirenne's work differed from that of these enthusiastic dilettantes through his compelling definitions of problems and working hypotheses, his attention to the context in Europe and even more widely, his ability to distil a powerful synthesis from a mass of facts, the rigorous source criticism that he had learned in Germany, and his clear and vivid style. Pirenne was born into a wealthy family of entrepreneurs in Verviers, a city with a thriving wool industry that played a major role in Belgian industrialization. Consequently, he was familiar with economic transformations and convinced of their great social importance from a young age (Sabbe 1936: 81; Pirenne 1938: 8–9). Moreover, while studying in Germany he had met Gustav von Schmoller, the spiritual leader of the young Historical School who was teaching economic history among other subjects in Berlin. Contact with Schmoller, and to a lesser extent with Karl Lamprecht in Bonn and later with Karl Bücher in Leipzig, proved decisive for Pirenne's interest after 1885 in what his teacher Godefroid Kurth called the '*école économiste*' (Rion 1986: 156, 184, 220; Lyon 1998: 508; Thoen and Vanhaute 2011: 325–7; Warland 2011: 435). We know that the liberal Pirenne was also influenced by Karl Marx's historical materialism (Thoen and Vanhaute 2011: 340–1; Dumolyn 2012: 127–8). Pirenne did not publish many individual or small studies on economic history. For the economic aspect of his work, it is necessary to turn instead to his great syntheses (Van Werveke 1938: 249). For example, the economy received extensive coverage in his monumental *Histoire de la Belgique*. Economic factors were also prominent in other key themes he studied during his career: the transition from the late Roman Empire to the early Middle Ages with the expansion of Islam, the rise of cities in the Middle Ages and the birth of commercial capitalism. A recent analysis points out that the development of capitalism in fact runs through Pirenne's œuvre as a *leitmotiv*. In the high Middle Ages, this capitalism was embodied in large cities with their rich merchants and powerful cloth guilds, and from the late Middle Ages by the central state which in the course of time was inevitably transmuted into the bourgeois, liberal and centralized nation-state of Pirenne's own day (Dumolyn 2012: 120–1).

Pirenne also helped ensure the emergence of new specializations such as historical demography. His influence on the emergence and promotion of economic history in Belgium was huge. This was not due purely to the scope and reputation of his own output. The numerous translations of Pirenne's work and his many lectures, his organizational skills and influence in Belgium's leading academic circles, and especially the many students he trained all played an important part. Many of these students themselves became influential professors or ended up occupying key positions in the archives: Guillaume Des Marez (urban land property), Georges Espinas (city finances and the cloth industry), François-Louis Ganshof (urban development and feudalism), Etienne Sabbe (the linen industry), Herman Vander Linden (overseas expansion), Hans Van Werveke (financial and monetary history), Fernand Vercauteren (urban history), Charles Verlinden (overseas expansion and maritime history) and others.

Outside the circle of Pirenne's pupils, historians within and outside the universities were also attracted by the new specialization of economic history. Two good examples are the Gent professor Hubert Van Houtte (1872–1948) and the Belgian National Archivist Joseph Cuvelier (1869–1947). The first of these was a pioneer in the recording of price series from the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries and the author of a powerful synthesis on the economy of Belgium at the end of the Ancien Régime; the second worked under the influence of his friend Pirenne in the field of historical demography. In the first half of the twentieth century, these historians together laid a solid foundation on which the new discipline could flourish further after the most destructive global conflict the world had ever seen.

The great flowering, 1950–90

Various factors contributed to the flowering of economic history in post-war Belgium, and many of these factors were the same as elsewhere in Europe. The enormous material damage, the major problems experienced with economic reconstruction, but later also the prosperity of the 'silver fifties' and 'golden sixties', automatically brought economic factors to the fore. Further, with the development of neoclassical economic growth theory and of course Keynesianism, economic science had opened up powerful macroeconomic perspectives for historians in the first half of the twentieth century. In addition, like other historical specializations, economic history benefited from the expansion of the universities and from increasing subsidization. In 1949, the funding of the *Nationaal Fonds voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek* (NFWO)/*Fonds national de la Recherche Scientifique* (FNRS) was significantly improved by the government. Donations to the foundation were also exempted from tax. In 1965, this funding was further improved by the law on university expansion. While the old universities of Brussels, Gent and Leuven saw their student numbers and academic staff sizes increase due to population growth and the opening up of access to higher education, new initiatives also emerged. Some of these resulted from the linguistic conflict, which was particularly hard-fought in the 1960s. Often, a combination of political factors (e.g. the desire to strengthen the Flemish presence in Brussels) and educational factors (e.g. the desire to bring university education as close to young people as possible) also lay behind the emergence of new academic institutions. Apart from these new universities, economic university colleges or business schools were also created. In Brussels, the best-known were the Flemish Business School (Vlekho) from 1968 and the older Business School of St Aloysius (Ehsal), which became a university-level institution in 1970. In all these new or reformed institutions, economic history was taught and professors of economic history had a place to work.

Compared with the United States or Britain, the gap between economics and economic history remained quite large. Almost everywhere, economists and economic historians belonged to separate faculties at the universities and had little contact with one another. All the same, some change was noticeable, and tentative beachheads were established. Whereas in the publications of the pre-war generations of economic historians, economic theory had at best been vaguely implicit, some economic historians were now making a more explicit attempt to establish connections with the work of their colleagues in the economics faculties. Among other places, this occurred in the business schools, where economic historians were attached to economics departments (e.g. monetary history, taught by Valéry Janssens at Vlekho, or fiscal history and the epistemology of economic history, taught by Paul Janssens at Ehsal). At some universities, economic historians were working in economics departments, which were also booming during these years. Two examples are Pierre Lebrun at the University of Liège and Herman Van der Wee at the University of Leuven.

As early as 1948, Lebrun had already published a doctorate on the mechanization of the woollen industry in Verviers, and in the 1970s he went on to develop a *Centre d'Histoire quantitative* in Liège with the help of his teacher Paul Harsin. From 1979, this centre published a number of impressive doctorates on the origin and nature of the Belgian industrial revolution. The work of the Leuven economic historian Herman Van der Wee was more diversified and extensive. With his monumental doctoral dissertation, he can also be described as a pioneer of quantitative economic history in Belgium (Aerts 2014: 619–717). He deserves this title not just because he definitively introduced a number of techniques from statistics, but also and above all because he showed his students the way to quantitative and in some cases even econometric history. Although Van der Wee was influenced by the ideas of renowned British economic historians such as Eleanor Carus-Wilson, Jack Fisher, Thomas S. Ashton, Michael Postan and Richard Tawney as a result of his studies at the London School of Economics, in the field of historical statistics he drew inspiration mainly from the French tradition of the *Annales* and especially from Jean Meuvret. This underlines the fact that the famous 'new economic history' never gained much acceptance in Belgian economic history (Aerts 2007: 259). A small group of historians, less influential than in England, used Marxist-inspired economic theory. Examples include Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly (Brussels) with their analysis of the causes of poverty in pre-industrial Europe, and Erik Thoen (Gent) with his explanation of the relatively mild nature of the depression in late medieval Flanders. The Marxist analysis also attracted considerable interest from a number of economic historians of the contemporary period. A good example is Eric Vanhaute (Gent) with his numerous studies of family labour and income strategies in the Flemish countryside, labour relations and labour markets, and later with his explanation of the development of world systems as part of his approach to global history.

During this heyday of economic history, sources were also diligently published by specialist teams, long before electronic databases were created. The *Interuniversitaire Centrum voor de Geschiedenis van Prijzen en Lonen* (*Centre interuniversitaire pour l'histoire des prix et des salaires*) promoted research into prices and wages from the mid-1950s onwards, while at the University of Gent between 1959 and 1973 Charles Verlinden and in practice especially Jan Craeybeckx and Etienne Scholliers published five volumes of *Dokumenten voor de geschiedenis van prijzen en lonen*, amounting to some 3000 pages mainly on the late Middle Ages and early modern period. At the *Centrum voor Hedendaagse Sociale Geschiedenis* at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel from the mid-1970s onwards, research into these variables was continued in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, under the leadership of Juul Hannes and Etienne Scholliers. At around the same time, the first computers made their appearance in Belgian economic history. For both the classification of data, calculations and descriptive statistical methods, use was made of 'mechanography'. Among other examples, this was done for the study of the finances of the royal demesne and central coinage (Eddy Van Cauwenberghe); mobility among the nobles (Paul Janssens); the reconstruction of traffic in the port of Antwerp (Karel Veraghtert) and of property and income as criteria for social stratification (Léon de Saint-Moulin); the analysis of population censuses (Claude Desama, Etienne Hélin); the analysis of overseas emigration and landownership (Ginette Kurgan-Van Hentenryk) and the study of certain types of serial documentation such as notarial protocols (Paulette Pieyns-Rigo).

The expansion of economic history led to new specializations that developed into fully fledged subdisciplines. Topics such as poverty, income, property, wealth, purchasing power, standard of living, social stratification, but also consumption, material culture, food and social mobility processes were now studied within a separate discipline, social history. This had developed in Belgium under the aegis of economic history (Noordegraaf 1990: 10) and in 1975 gained its own Belgian–Dutch journal (the *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis*). New auxiliary sciences were enthusiastically integrated into economic history and acquired the status of autonomous disciplines. Historical demography, which had already been accorded recognition by Pirenne, truly flourished, integrating the achievements of the French *Annales* school (Prevenier 1979: 558). Mention should also be made in particular of medieval archaeology (Van der Wee 1995: 173; Verhulst 1997: 95) as well as quantitative lexicology (specifically diachronic semantics) and more advanced historical statistics. During the golden years of economic history, there was not only a growing number of professors and projects and a further proliferation of themes, specializations and techniques: but the number of students opting for economic history at universities and the new business schools also grew faster than the total number of students. In the largest university in the country, which at that time also had the most history students, the University of Leuven, the average annual number of students opting for the discipline of economic history was five between 1970 and 1980, and twelve between 1980 and 1990. The total number of PhD students increased over these two decades by 48 per cent, but the number of PhD students in economic history rose by 83 per cent. In the other major Flemish university, the State University of Gent, the number of students with a Master's thesis in economic history grew during the decades 1972 to 1981 and 1982 to 1992 from an annual average of four to five.[2] During the years 1944 to 1960, the annual average had been just 1.6. The rise of social history, interpreted in the broadest sense, was already an established fact at the University of Gent by 1960.

Crisis and change after 1990

The publication of Laurence Stone's influential article in *Past & Present* in 1979 is often regarded as a pivotal moment at which the quantitative, generalizing approach to economic history was supplanted by 'the revival of narrative', the vivid account in which, under the influence of historical anthropology, attention began to be paid to the atypical element, to chance, to the specific and unpredictable event, to the small-scale *microstoria* (Soly 1992: 33–4, 37). This methodological shift coincided with a certain loss of prestige for economic history. However, there was no abrupt break in Belgium, or not around 1980 at any rate. In Leuven, Herman Van der Wee made a start in 1984 on a major project to reconstruct the national accounts of Belgium between 1795 and 1953 (Van der Wee and Dancet 1986: 145–68). The intention was to catch up with a number of European countries and the United States, where the first such studies had already appeared in the 1950s and especially in the 1960s, at the instigation of Simon Kuznets (Van der Wee and Klep 1975: 205–6). For reasons of consistency with the accounts published after 1953 Van der Wee preferred to apply the approach of the Belgian *Nationaal Instituut voor de Statistiek* (*Institut National de Statistique*), based on the methodology of the OECD. That project continued into the 1990s and led to a dozen monographs on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and to several estimates for the Ancien Régime (Blomme and Van der Wee 1994: 77–96). In 1992, another major project was started on the reconstruction of time series on prices and wages, population, agriculture, industry, trade and money supply between the National State Archives of Belgium and the Universities of Gent, Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve (Aerts 1995: 365–9).

Slowly, though, the changing *zeitgeist* and the pendulum of historical interest exerted their influence on economic historiography in Belgium as elsewhere. Influential economic historians did not of course abandon their specialist field, but fell under the spell of other aspects of historical reality. Social history was now fully emancipated and outshone economic history. Cultural history, which had been on the rise since the 1980s, also attracted much interest. The result was a shift in themes and in the methodological approach to certain themes, and the use of new sources such as diaries, literary texts, images and probate inventories. New consumption patterns were no longer accounted for exclusively by macroeconomic changes, but were also related to cultural and psychological variables such as identity, status, prestige, taste and fashion, self-perception and so on. Quantitative estimates of output of goods and services were supplemented by an analysis of the diffusion of new products across social groups. In food history, interest shifted from supply to consumers and their preferences. Statistical models of monetary circulation and a meticulous reconstruction of coin production gave way to analyses of the social role of credit relationships and the use of money by certain population groups. Demography was no longer confined to the calculation of a variety of ratios and coefficients: it now also took an interest in relations between husbands and wives and parents and children, health care, hygiene and sexuality. Economic historians discovered in Belgium, as elsewhere, that in addition to population, international trade, class relations and the money supply, nature could also be regarded as an explanatory variable in economic transformation processes. The interest in the environment and climate led in 1996 to the founding of the *Tijdschrift voor Ecologische Geschiedenis*, from which the *Jaarboek voor Ecologische Geschiedenis* originated in 1998.

In the late 1980s, the appearance of economic history in Belgium thus changed. The quantification of hard economic variables was replaced by or substantially supplemented with a qualitative approach that did not rely exclusively on economic theory, but made more explicit use of concepts and techniques from anthropology, communication theory, cultural studies, linguistics, literary studies, geography, ecology, psychology and sociology. Inevitably, economic historiography declined in popularity compared with social history, cultural history and the *histoire des mentalités*. Figures for the number of students at the history department of the University of Leuven who opted for a Master's thesis in economic history confirm this impression. During the decade 1970 to 1980, the percentage of Master's students opting for a topic in economic history was 13 per cent. That figure remained unchanged in the decade 1981 to 1990, but decreased to 8 per cent in the decade 1991 to 2000.

The reorientation within economic historiography did not put a stop to the ongoing process of specialization. Belgian economic historians were constantly tackling new themes: transport, retail, the knowledge economy (the importance of innovation and the transfer and circulation of knowledge for economic development), urban networks, urban mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, the middle classes, perception of labour, the industrious revolution, the significance of the market. The 'return of the guilds' (a special issue of the *International Review of Social History* in 2008) was also greeted enthusiastically in Belgium, as was the renewed interest in institutions (the 'new institutional economics'). It was already being pointed out twenty years ago that this increasing specialization and segmentation was leading to an extraordinary fragmentation that was also characterized by the absence of a comprehensive paradigm or dominant theory. Instead, there was a variety of conceptual frameworks, with a lack of any coherent vision or summative metaphor. Belgium was no exception here to an international trend (Soly 1992: 27–8). Most Belgian historians also continued to write on the history of their own country. This last observation is of course related to Belgium's rich economic history and its abundant and extremely varied source material. Henri Pirenne already regarded his homeland as a kind of micro-Europe, a laboratory in which experiments were performed with the most fascinating institutions and economic organizational forms. For the same reason, the economic history of Belgium has always attracted numerous foreign scholars (Blockmans 1985: 602–3). Suffice it to recall here that in 1969 Franklin Mendels developed his concept of 'proto-industry' on the basis of eighteenth-century rural Flanders.

The current situation

On the eve of the First World War, some scholars still believed that there was a 'definite relationship between the size and power of a nation and the distinction of its historians' (Lyon 1981: 186). Such a mono-causal statement does injustice to other important variables such as the proportion of its income that the government wishes to invest in a particular discipline, the university structure (by the standards of other countries, Belgian professors endure a heavy teaching load), historiographical traditions and so on. But this is not to say that size and scale are unimportant. According to the figures of Baten and Muschallik, Belgium had about 60 economic historians in 2011. For a population of 11 million inhabitants, this represents 5.5 economic historians per million inhabitants. Belgium thus turns out to be an average performer in Europe in this respect, with a significantly lower rate than the neighbouring Netherlands (138 economic historians for a population of 16.7 million, i.e. a ratio of 8.3). The Scandinavian countries and the United Kingdom also score better, while countries such as France, Germany and Italy employ relatively fewer economic historians (Baten and Muschallik 2011: tables 2 and 3).

Today, economic history in Belgium is mainly studied at the universities; the federal scientific institutions (in particular the National State Archives and the Royal Library) and some financial institutions (such as the National Bank) also have a limited number of economic historians on their staff. There are no close-knit research clusters at individual universities and no division of labour between the universities, although a number of research focuses can be distinguished. At the University of Antwerp, the Centre for Urban History strives to investigate 'important aspects of urban culture, economy, religion, politics and institutions from the Middle Ages to the present' (according to the website). More or less the same objective is pursued by the research group HOST (Historical Research into Urban Transformation Processes) at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, where the basic 'point of departure is how the interactions between diverse social groups shaped urban dynamics of change and stability within a long-term perspective' (again according to the website). At the same university, FOST (Social & Cultural Food Studies) conducts interdisciplinary research into the history of food. The Université libre de Bruxelles is internationally renowned for its research into the early medieval economy. In recent years, research has been conducted by a new generation of historians into urban geography, urban space, environmental challenges, and the relationship between natural resources and urban populations. At Gent there is a long tradition of urban history, agricultural history and demography, and these disciplines are still pursued actively there. Areas of focus include the social and financial aspects of the medieval and early modern city, rural and ecological history since the late Middle Ages and various aspects of the Belgian population in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. At Leuven, research is conducted into late medieval and early modern monetary history at the department of history and into contemporary banking and business history at the department of economics, while at ICAG (or the Interfaculty Centre for Agrarian History) an interdisciplinary approach is taken to food, agriculture and the countryside after 1750, including in the former Belgian colony of Congo. At the universities of Liège, Louvain and Namur, economic historians are less numerous. Liège has a reputation for historical demography, while regional history and environmental history are high on the research agendas at Louvain and Namur.

Between universities there is tentative collaboration, sometimes for joint publications, formerly in the context of informal research groups and today within research projects or even more formally within institutes and associations. Between Flemish and Walloon universities, however, cooperation is rather limited. One exception to this is the Inter-university Attraction Poles Project 'City & Society in the Low Countries (ca.1200–ca.1850)', which brings together universities in Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels (as well as federal scientific institutions) and the universities of Leiden and Utrecht in the Netherlands.

It is appropriate to end this overview on a positive note. It has been suggested that Belgian historians in general adhered to their archival sources, excelled in the 'meagre and desiccated' reporting of facts about hyperspecialized topics, and showed a lack of vision, boldness and suggestiveness in grand and compelling syntheses (Soly 1992: 55; Pasture 2005: 421–2). This argument does not seem valid for economic history (see also Aerts 2000: 24). Indeed, there is no sense of crisis in Belgian economic historiography at present. Despite the difficult budgetary situation, there may never have been more economic historians active than today. Many of them publish, more than before, in the best general and specialized international journals. New and original syntheses on vast subjects are published regularly (e.g. Blockmans 2010; Blondé et al. 2015). While Belgium and the Southern Netherlands remain extremely important in economic historians' choice of topics, a global approach is becoming increasingly common. Examples of this international focus are found, for instance, in the Gent research group Communities–Comparisons–Connections which brings together historians and social scientists to analyse research topics in world history, world-systems analysis and globalization. Today global historiography also incorporates the colonial past of Belgium, including the controversial history of the Congo Free State under the Belgian king Leopold II. Research on the history of the Congo, Belgium's former colony, only started in the 1950s, meaning that for a long period British and American historians have been more active in imperial research than Belgian scholars (Vanthemsche 2012: 10). Apart from the economic colonial and postcolonial history of the Congo itself (see already ICAG above), its contribution to the economic development of Belgium and the long-term effects of colonial exploitation, a more global approach has developed. Recent research focuses on how parts of the Congo became integrated into complex world production systems, transnational division of labour and international capital movements. Much attention is given to the global strategy of multinationals (for example the *Union Minière*) in mining extraction which 'in terms of size and diversity was unique in colonial Africa' (Frankema and Buelens 2013: 4).

Even before the financial crisis of 2007–8 and the disappointing economic growth that followed, economic history in Belgium was enjoying a modest revival which has since grown further. Economic historians have learned to include social and cultural factors in their explanatory models and social and cultural historians are no longer averse to the economic context. This double realization means that the former twins have been drawing closer to one another again.

II THE NETHERLANDS

Ulbe Bosma

In the eighteenth century the Dutch Republic went through a period of institutional, technological and economic stagnation. While Britain introduced coal and iron, the Dutch continued with peat, wood, wind and water. While most states in Europe centralized, the Dutch elites were happy with their strongly federalist state. Seemingly devoid of entrepreneurial spirit the country was imbued with the mentality of the rentier who was content to have his abundant capital resting in public debt: a solid but low interest investment. Nevertheless, as Adam Smith rightfully pointed out, the Republic was the richest country in the world. This miraculous economic anachronism collapsed, however, during the French occupation, when Napoleon was siphoning off Dutch wealth on behalf of his ambition to conquer the world and the old federalist political system was abandoned in favour of a unitary state.

Under the dire economic circumstances of the French period a first attempt was made to reconstruct a balance of income and expenditure of the Dutch Republic that was based upon a division of agriculture, trade and manufacturing (van Zanden and van Riel 2004: 13). It would take yet another century before economic statistics became institutionalized. In 1892, the Central Committee for Statistics was established – provided with a Central Bureau for Statistics seven years later – to assemble material about the social question, the poor conditions of the working class.[3] From its very beginning economic and social history in the Netherlands has been developed in tandem with such welfare concerns as well as with regularly returning anxieties about the putative lack of scientific content of our profession. This combination of desires to catch up with the hard sciences and to become relevant to society marked the inaugural lecture of P. J. Blok, the first professor of social history in the Netherlands. He pleaded for history as a social science looking for universal laws in human society. The belief that the natural science approach could be equally successful in solving social questions as in clarifying the mysteries of the universe was not confined to universities. The ambition to apply scientific rigour to welfare concerns resonated among the authorities of the extensive colonial possessions of the Netherlands Indies with its 50 million or so inhabitants at the turn of the twentieth century. In 1910 the colonial government started the so-called Declining Welfare Investigation (*Mindere Welvaart Onderzoek*), a highly detailed multi-volume exercise on the economic development of Java and Madura, where the majority of Indonesians lived.

Despite Blok's clarion call, Dutch economic history in the early years of the twentieth century shunned any attempt at finding universal laws governing human economic behaviour let alone seeking societal relevance. Much of the best and most innovative work on economic history was conducted on the Middle Ages or early modern history. Dutch economic history was strongly influenced by the German Historical School with its strong empirical approach and its professed preference for studying economic trajectories in their historical specificity. Up until the 1930s, Dutch economic history continued its course of deeply empirical and quantitative work and, with the exception of some ideas of Werner Sombart, stayed aloof from international debates and from economic modelling in particular.

Although one can detect some familiarity between the Dutch emphasis on *longue durée* and data collection on the one hand and the *histoire sérielle* of the *Annales* School and the work of Werner Sombart on the other, one should not overstretch the similarities. In contrast to the *Annales* School, Dutch social-economic historians showed scant interest in the history of mentality. Although this approach was brilliantly represented by Johan Huizinga, in his work one will search in vain for any table or graph. Nevertheless, in the 1960s Dutch social-economic historians produced important work that could have fitted, in part at least, into the French mode of history writing. Bernard Slicher van Bath's research on demographic constraints and rural economic development serves as an outstanding example in this regard (e.g. Slicher van Bath 1963). The Wageningen School, which is the Agricultural University of the Netherlands, established a widely recognized reputation for its research on demography, occupational change and rural economics. Again, this 'sociographic' approach was deeply suspicious of theory, although at the same time permeated by a rather grim Malthusian perspective that brushed over the agency of the rural population.

Thanks to the absence of theoretical and methodological controversy, and thanks to the nation's proclivity for dialogue, social and economic history was able to develop as a single historical subdiscipline in the Netherlands. The unity of social and economic history was personified in N. W. Posthumus, generally considered to be the founder of Dutch economic and social history. According to Posthumus economic history should concern itself with business and bosses, whereas social history had to focus on the workers. The two complementary approaches were literally united under one roof. The two institutes created by Posthumus, the Netherlands Economic History Archive (NEHA) and the International Institute of Social History (IISH), are located in the same building in Amsterdam. Up to the present, history students are not trained as economic historians or social historians but as *economic–social* historians and their journal is the Dutch–Flemish *Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History.*

Overcoming Dutch parochialism

In 1959, Z. M. Dittrich and A. M. Van der Woude – the latter would become a PhD student of Slicher van Bath one year later – threw a stone in the pond with their blistering attack on their colleagues' solipsistic indulgence in writing articles and books according to literary standards rather than collaborating to create, for example, one immense database of historical knowledge (Dittrich and van der Woude 1959). Nevertheless, Dittrich and Van der Woude must have noticed with satisfaction that in the 1970s chairs in social–economic history were established at every Dutch history department. It was not enough, however, because during these very years historians from abroad concluded that Dutch history was too important to be left to the historians of the Netherlands. Jan de Vries had begun to study the Dutch Republic as the first case of modern economic growth. Immanuel Wallerstein dealt with the Republic as the first hegemonic power possessing productive, commercial and financial superiority over all other core powers. Jonathan Israel wrote an entire volume about the Dutch Republic as the first global entrepôt. And last but not least there was Simon Schama's *The Embarrassment of Riches*, an immensely successful work on the Golden Age of the Dutch Republic. The message could not have been more painful to Dutch historians: they were assigned a seat on the backbenches.

Seeing that the Dutch historians were hardly participating in the burgeoning international field of their own history, the baby boomers who entered the profession in the 1970s and 1980s felt that there was an urgent need to elevate the status of history in the gaze of their colleagues abroad. In 1988 Karel Davids, Jan Lucassen and Jan Luiten van Zanden, all in their thirties and early forties, published a pamphlet, the title of which in English reads as 'Dutch history as the exception from the common pattern'.[4] By picking an approach that highlighted the singularity of Dutch history while firmly embedding it in European historiography they hoped to rally a group of historians from various disciplines both from the Netherlands and abroad around a common theme. The aim was a reappraisal of the Dutch Republic as part of Europe, by comparing the Dutch Republic with earlier city-states like Venice or Antwerp, with the only difference – and the sting is in the tail – that 'the Dutch Republic turns out time and again to have dwarfed all of its precursors' (Davids and Lucassen 1995: 440).

Another silver lining was less visible for most Dutch historians but nonetheless important for the international reputation of historical research in the Netherlands. This concerned the connections between history and scholarship in Asian cultures and societies, an academic interest that had been fostered in the context of the country's extensive colonial empire. Although on a smaller scale than Fernand Braudel, who succeeded in broadening the research agenda of his École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales by attracting specialists on histories beyond Europe, Posthumus and his successor at the helm of the IISH, A. J. C. Rüter, managed to widen the horizon of social and economic history beyond the European orbit in to late 1950s. Posthumus established the *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient* (JESHO) and Rüter inaugurated the *International Review of Social History*. Despite its orientalist name, JESHO did a highly commendable job in connecting the discipline of economic and social history with scholarship on the languages and cultures of a wide range of Asian societies. Dutch historians had an advantage in this respect through their immediate access to the immense collection of sources of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) with its unique documentation about Asian economies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The *Review* encountered more obstacles than JESHO in overcoming methodological nationalism as it faced the dominant paradigm within labour history of the white industrial male wage worker. In the late 1990s the IISH decided to tackle this obstacle head on and launched the concept of global labour history. This was against the grain of the cultural turn, to which a generation of talented labour historians in the world, including those of the Subaltern Studies Group, felt attracted. The Dutch stayed within a classical framework of studying labour relations, which has been steadily widened to include gender, coerced labour, rural transformations and commodity chain approaches and this is now the international vanguard of labour history (e.g. van der Linden 2008).

The impact of the New Economic History in the Netherlands

While escaping from Dutch parochialism another danger was already looming, namely of a drifting apart of social–cultural history and economic history. This had definitely not been the intention of the initiators of the research agenda on the Dutch Republic as 'the exception from the common pattern', as they had aimed high at an integrated historical approach. Nonetheless, over the past decades concerns about increasing specialization and about a rift between qualitative and quantitative approaches have grown.

Many historians from all over the world believed in the 1970s that social and economic history had to become quantitative history or else it would be nothing. It was another rush hour in the secular drive towards scientific history and again the expectations of what the application of social sciences had in store were set high, some would say ridiculously high. One thing was serious this time, however. The work of the New Economic Historians Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman made such an impression in Europe that Emmanual Le Roy Ladurie, historical demographer and eminent member of the *Annales* group, confessed in his in augural lecture in 1973: 'If we refuse to assimilate the most sophisticated elements of economic theory, our French school of research runs the risk of finding itself one day in possession of a slightly overvalued capital of historical knowledge' (Le Roy Ladurie 1977: 121). These most sophisticated elements were statistical in character and would not just change but redefine the field of social and economic history in the Netherlands. Cliometrics, including the econometric approach in history, became the engine of comparative study of economic growth as well as historical demography.

The quantitative turn in social–economic history inaugurated a long and arduous but eventually successful trajectory for the field in the Netherlands. It required millions of euros from the Dutch Science Foundation, but we can now clearly see the benefits of decades of investment. At the University of Groningen Angus Maddison developed his widely used data series on economic growth worldwide over the past thousand years. His project is continued and was widened in the current so-called CLIO-infra project, a joint programme of the IISH, the University of Groningen, Utrecht University and the Eberhard Karls University of Tübingen. The database presents a wide range of indicators of development (aside from output and GDP, including biological, institutional, environmental, human capital).[5] CLIO-infra comes close to facilitating the writing of integrated history in the spirit of the founders of *Annales* on a worldwide scale. In the field of historical demography, the Historical Sample of the Netherlands was developed as a multi-year project to follow the life courses of 80,000 Dutch citizens born between 1812 and 1922.[6]

The flip side of these successes is that it requires steady specialization in quantitative and digital humanities techniques to stay at the cutting edge of economic history. Just at the time that writing *histoire totale* seems to be technically within reach, social and economic history may succumb to overspecialization. The New Economic History, which so successfully bridged the gap between economics and history that had emerged since the late nineteenth century *Methodenstreit*, was now creating a new rift between the cliometricians and economic and social historians who were not part of statistics-based historical approaches. Meanwhile, the scope of economic history in the Netherlands narrowed towards the history of economic growth. Despite the fact that economic and social history is institutionally united at the Master's and PhD levels in the 'N. W. Posthumus inter-university research school of the Low Countries' (the Netherlands and Flanders), a rift is revealing itself. It is precisely within the setting of the Posthumus Institute that a pillarization of subdisciplines rather than cross-fertilization is taking place.

Some of these concerns were expressed at a symposium in 2007 on social and economic history in the Netherlands in the twenty-first century. The organizers were the same 'Young Turks' Karel Davids, Jan Lucassen and Jan Luiten van Zanden who twenty years before had launched the new research agenda and in the meantime had become leading and internationally acknowledged historians.[7] Satisfaction about the immense progress Dutch social–economic history had made since 1988, which had become visibly present in global academia, was coupled with concerns about the dominance of cliometrics and neoclassical economics. A telling detail was that social historians had not even bothered to send papers to the 2007 symposium. The consequence was, as Ewout Frankema and Jan-Pieter Smits observed in their contribution to this gathering, that while economic history had been attracting the attention of mainstream economists it had become utterly marginalized within the field of history (Frankema and Smits 2008).

The publications emanating from the New Institutional Economic History, fast becoming a subfield, were not however as inaccessible to historians of other persuasions as critics would like to think (North and Thomas 1973). Work of this school is often not only readable, and appealing to a wider audience, it is also daringly paints the big picture as is exemplified by the work of the most prominent of the Dutch economic historians Jan Luiten van Zanden (2009). His book on the nineteenth-century Dutch economy, in collaboration with Arthur van Riel, is a hallmark of New Institutional Economic History research, carefully intertwining the story of the modernization of an economy that was stagnant in the late eighteenth century, with another story of a state that was federalized in structure and developed into a unitary corporatist state in the course of the nineteenth century. I would argue that it is not cliometrics and lack of accessibility that deserve our scrutiny but the risk of an overemphasis on path dependency and the danger of adopting a unilinear perspective.

Beyond unilinear economic history?

To further illuminate the point about unilinearity, I make a brief detour to the economic history of Indonesia, once a Dutch colony. Here, we see debates, conducted mostly by Dutch historians, that are almost entirely focused on its late-colonial and postcolonial trajectories of economic growth: on how the colonial economic impediments impinged upon postcolonial economic growth. These are debates in which a variety of positions are taken (e.g. classical growth economics, institutional economic history, political economy, economic dualism, etc.), but still there is a striking imbalance in perspective.[8] The neoclassical growth model with its emphasis on institutional factors functions as the meta-narrative even though this may not be the approach that takes us closer to answering the classical question, why the former tropical colonies today are poor and Europe rich. Even if we move beyond the explanations that heavily focus on 'what went wrong in colonial times' and how it can account for current predicaments, it is still questionable whether involving pre-colonial times in our explanatory model will help.

A long-term perspective is illuminating but within New Institutional Economic History, as practised in Holland and elsewhere, economic growth is perceived as a linear process; growth may be slower and/or faster, may even be negative for a while but it has to follow some preordained path of sectoral change. Second, statistical methods cannot explain individual histories for the obvious reason that they can only take a limited number of factors into account. If path dependency could explain individual trajectories it could predict the future. But will we have developed a historical narrative to explain, for example, how the Philippines, an economic promise by 1950, ended up in dire straits economically thirty years later and did much worse than most other Southeast Asian countries? There is no way in which the neoclassical explanatory models with their focus on sectoral divisions and economic institutions can explain how the economies of Thailand and Korea that were a lot more agriculturally based than the Philippines in the 1950s could have surpassed the latter in the 1980s.

New Economic History runs the risk of aiming to explain too much with too little. It was precisely on this weak spot of New Institutional Economic History that the Dutch historian Peer Vries, professor at the University of Vienna, launched a blistering attack on Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson's *Why Nations Fail. The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty* (2012). His article was entitled 'Does wealth really entirely depend on inclusive institutions and pluralist politics?' Referring to Jeffrey G. Williamson and Hekscher-Ohlin's observation that agricultural commodities suffer more from price volatility than industrial manufactures, he criticizes the endogenous bias in the path-dependency approach (Vries 2012: 81). Vries's diagnosis is that New Institutional Economic History might have explained why nations grew rich but not why others 'failed', as the latter usually happened because of factors beyond these nations' control. The rather disturbing conclusion one can attach to Vries's article is that if economic history cannot develop a single explanatory framework for the core and periphery, the New Institutional Economic History is in a blind alley.

Fortunately, there is a way out, one that accounts for the connectivity in history, that comparative historians have always recognized as posing particular methodological challenges. Most variables that econometricians want to correlate to explain trajectories of economic growth are seldom independent, particularly not if units of analysis are entire states. It is not something that can be solved by more sophisticated statistical analysis but requires different methodologies that address global entanglements. Such approaches would bring us closer to evolutionary economics, fathered by Thorstein Veblen and Joseph Schumpeter, with its emphasis on connectivity, creativity and destruction, than neoclassical growth economics

(Drukker 2003). Whereas in many respects economic historians have been considered as more successful than social historians in asking and answering global questions, with respect to the methodological implications of global connectivity and the absence of linearity I would not grant them that position. In this respect, reciprocal comparisons – suggested by Kenneth Pomeranz and elaborated by Gareth Austin – should guide us to avoid the mistake of applying the European experience as the Archimedean point in history (Austin 2007). Social historians have been more aware of these dangers, I would submit, and this is where one major strength of economic history in the Low Countries lies.

The consequence of accepting that history matters in economic history is that historical specificity has to be brought into the fold. The way to do that is by doing archival research, which is neither very popular among cliometric historians nor among poststructuralist social historians for that matter. I have already mentioned the rich archives of the Dutch East India Company, about 5 kilometres, which not only provide us with a detailed insight into the workings of the world's first multinational but also contain immensely valuable data on economic and social history in Asia. These archives – as archives of trading companies and colonial administrations of other European powers for that matter – are indispensable for making progress in the cluster of debates around the 'Great Divergence'. The problem in many countries of the Global South is that these archives are still underutilized in this respect not only with respect to real wages as Prasannan Parthasarathi (2011: 45–6) has emphasized for India, but also with respect to deindustrialization debates. As Tirthankar Roy has lamented, the 'sad state of economic history' still trailed the nationalist industrialization theme and ignored the specificities and ecological constraints of the Indian trajectory (Roy 2004). We can also read in Parthasarathi's and Roy's observations the need for keeping social and economic history as a single discipline.

Conclusion

Up until the 1970s Dutch social and economic history was solidly empirical, shunning theoretical reflections and the incorporation of economic theory. The fact that historians abroad made shining careers with the theme of the Dutch Republic served as a wake-up call. Thanks to economic historians like Angus Maddison and Jan Luiten van Zanden, and the historians they trained, the Netherlands economic historians became prominently visible in the international field. The number of Dutch historians publishing in economic history journals testifies to that. They are making good use of Dutch archives to participate in global debates on causes of growth, economic divergence, global migration and global commodity flows. While no one denies that choices in the past may restrict options for the future, a narrow focus on path dependency on the part of some economic historians runs the risk of being blind to exogenous factors and interactions. This is something outside of economic history: it involves perspectives on entanglements that are more popular among social historians. Fortunately social history and economic history are not yet separated in the Netherlands in the sense that social history has become cultural studies and economic history is only talking to economist–historians. We can thus look forward to the possibilities of reintegration before it is too late.

Notes

1 A general outline of such studies can be found in the detailed bibliographical overview of Belgian historical output up to 1914 (Pirenne 1931: 166–85).

2 For Leuven I have used my own calculations based on Verberckmoes (2008: 30–105). These figures disregard the economic history of antiquity. For Gent, the figures have been taken from François (1993: 21). The figures for Leuven and Gent are not directly comparable. In Gent, for example, François counted subjects such as the standard of living, prices and wages or the labour market under social history rather than economic history. Also the counting periods used are not exactly the same, and for Gent Master's theses about antiquity were included. The figures merely reflect trends *within* each institution.

3 To fill the gap of the absence of nineteenth-century data, Jan Luiten van Zanden would conduct a reconstruction of Dutch national accounts of this century in 1990, to be followed a few years later by a reconstruction of the national accounts of the Netherlands Indies.

4 The Dutch title of their pamphlet was 'De Nederlandse geschiedenis als afwijking van het algemeen menselijk patroon'.

5 https://www.clio-infra.eu/datasets/indicators

6 http://www.iisg.nl/hsn/

7 'Disscussiedossier', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis,* 5 (2) 2008: 87–163.

8 The histories of the various phases of Dutch maritime and colonial history occupy a prominent place in the economic historiography of the Netherlands, too extensive to be discussed here. For an overview see Bosma (2014).

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