

# Introduction to the Debate on *Pioneers of Capitalism*

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TSEG 21 (2): 105–106

DOI: 10.52024/c7ktdn09

On 30 June 2023, the Centre for Urban History at the University of Antwerp, the Posthumus Institute, and the Antwerp Interdisciplinary Platform for Research into Inequality hosted a workshop dedicated to *Pioneers of Capitalism. The Netherlands 1000-1800*, a book by Maarten Prak and Jan Luiten van Zanden published by Princeton University Press in 2022.<sup>1</sup> This recent authoritative synthesis of the social and economic history of the pre-industrial Northern Netherlands builds on an earlier thought-provoking work, in which the same authors explain Dutch history through the key idea of the ‘polder model’.<sup>2</sup> While Prak and Van Zanden no longer explicitly rely upon this concept, the framework of capitalist development within the context of a strong civil society still runs as a major thread throughout the new book. The initiative to host the workshop at the Brantijser, home to the University of Antwerp’s History Department, came from the last pages of *Pioneers of Capitalism*, where the authors employ ‘the Low Countries’ paradox’. A group of Flemish historians linked to the Centre for Urban History coined this paradox in a recent volume to describe the confluence of middle-class emancipation and (eventually rising) social inequality, a two-edged process that went hand in hand with capitalist development – not just in the Northern Netherlands but across the late medieval and early modern Low Countries.<sup>3</sup>

1 Maarten Prak and Jan Luiten van Zanden, *Pioneers of capitalism. The Netherlands 1000-1800* (Princeton 2022).

2 Maarten Prak and Jan Luiten van Zanden, *Nederland en het poldermodel. Sociaal-economische geschiedenis van Nederland, 1000-2000* (Amsterdam 2013).

3 Bruno Blondé et al., ‘The Low Countries’ paradox. Historical perspectives on inequality and the

In contrast, for decades now Dutch economic historiography has been captivated by a firm conviction, if not belief, in a Dutch exceptionalism, a *Sonderweg*. The ‘Golden Age’ is sometimes framed as the ‘first modern economy’,<sup>4</sup> or even described as a genuine ‘miracle’.<sup>5</sup> The recent synthesis of Prak and Van Zanden, borrowing from a diverse range of literature on capitalism rather than a dead-end ‘polder model’, needs to be located in this tradition. To quote from the short description delivered by the authors themselves: “*Pioneers of Capitalism* examines the formal and informal institutions in the Netherlands that made this economic miracle possible, providing a groundbreaking new history of the emergence and early development of capitalism.” Yet the authors’ own emphasis on the medieval roots of the societal model that arose in the Netherlands, as well as recent evaluations of the urban roots of the Low Countries’ peculiar society in the north and south alike,<sup>6</sup> call for a critical reflection on the alleged causalities and historical path-dependencies. Hence, participants in the workshop were challenged to reflect on the broader geographical applicability of the ‘coordinated market’ variety of capitalism that Prak and Van Zanden see emerging in the Dutch Republic after the Fall of Antwerp in 1585. Both during the workshop and in this special issue, the participants engaged in a lively, stimulating discussion with the authors of *Pioneers in Capitalism*, undoubtedly a landmark publication. The need for comparative research looms large, and we can only express our hopes that disseminating these discussions will leverage intensified comparisons across time and place: within and especially also beyond the Low Countries, between and within societies, between town and countryside, and across social hierarchies.



city’, in: Bruno Blondé et al. (eds), *Inequality and the city in the Low Countries (1200-2020)* (Turnhout 2020) 15-42.

4 Jan de Vries and Ad van der Woude, *Nederland 1500-1815. De eerste ronde van moderne economische groei* (Amsterdam 1995).

5 Karel Davids and Jan Lucassen (eds), *A miracle mirrored. The Dutch Republic in European perspective* (Cambridge 1995).

6 Bruno Blondé, Marc Boone and Anne-Laure Van Bruaene (eds), *City and society in the Low Countries (1100-1600)* (Cambridge 2018).