

# Rural Vulnerability and the Ambiguous Legacy of Capitalism

*Reassessing the Impact on Countryside Development in the Transition Period to Capitalism*

Maïka De Keyzer

TSEG 21 (2): 149–158

DOI: 10.52024/1fsvfw39

*Pioneers of Capitalism* is a thought-provoking book that brings together the oeuvre of some of the most prominent Dutch scholars on their national history. For decades now, socio-economic historians have added to the wealth of evidence that the Low Countries, especially the province of Holland, are a rare example of unprecedented market dependence and exceptional premodern economic growth.<sup>1</sup> Maarten Prak and Jan Luiten Van Zanden have pushed the argument further than ever. According to them, land, labor and capital were by the later Middle Ages already primarily allocated through the market. While most scholars have pointed to a century of catastrophes and decline in the eighteenth century, they have focused on the continued growth and market development that took place in this period. While both authors are predominantly urban historians, the countryside plays an important or even defining role in the Dutch evolution toward capitalism. Even though the book provides a wealth of information and points of discussion, I will focus on this aspect in this article.

1 Erik Thoen, 'A "commercial survival economy" in evolution. The Flemish countryside and the transition to capitalism (Middle Ages – 19th century)', in: P. Hoppenbrouwers and Jan Luiten van Zanden (eds), *Peasants into farmers? The transformation of rural economy and society in the Low Countries (Middle Ages-19th century) in light of the Brennerdebate* (Turnhout 2001) 102-157; Bas van Bavel, *The invisible hand? How market economies have emerged and declined since AD 500* (Oxford 2016); Bas J.P. van Bavel, 'Rural wage labour in the sixteenth-century Low Countries. An assessment of the importance and nature of wage labour in the countryside of Holland, Guelders and Flanders', *Continuity and Change* 21:1 (2006) 37-72.

Whereas the countryside has previously been given such a prominent place, the narrative in this book breaks with some of the classical historiographical trends. Since the 1970s, the rise of capitalism in the countryside has been studied and viewed primarily through a neo-Marxist lens. Robert Brenner's work has been, and still is, the study that every scholar refers to when discussing this issue. The shift from a feudal to a capitalist society was explained by looking at the inherent class conflicts in feudal societies. After centuries of feudalism, where peasants performed unfree labor and lords extracted surplus through rents and fines, the Black Death and several calamities during the fourteenth century pushed this inherent tension to the brink. Due to a series of peasant revolts across Europe, peasants broke feudal power, obtained personal freedom, and got rid of most feudal dues.

Nevertheless, while in the Low Countries and England the peasants may have won their freedom, they did not win access to the means of production, especially land. Feudal lords and rural elites which had retained or enlarged their landed possessions transformed themselves from surplus-extracting medieval noblemen into estate managers who leased their land to yeoman farmers. At the same time, most of the peasants became proletarianized laborers.<sup>2</sup> Holland was always perceived as an exception, where peasants owned their own plots of land in a weakly manorialized region. Yet they occupied the most challenging pieces of peatland and water-logged clay soils.<sup>3</sup> The Marxist tradition sees that peasants fought for freedom but in the end lost out. The benefits of the capitalist system were predominantly benefits for a handful of elites who were able to seize the opportunities in the tumultuous late medieval crisis.

In *Pioneers of Capitalism* a much more optimistic perspective is put forward. Feudalism was not a hindrance to capitalism, but rather the foundation of economic growth and market development in later periods. Prak and Van Zanden show that even though the free and prosperous regions in Friesland may have been predominant in the medieval period,

2 Robert Brenner, 'The Low Countries in the transition to capitalism', in: Hoppenbrouwers and Van Zanden (eds), *Peasants into farmers?*; Idem, 'Agrarian class structure and economic development in pre-industrial Europe', *Past & Present* 70:1 (1976) 30-75, <https://doi.org/10.1093/past/70.1.30>; R.W. Hoyle, 'Tenure and the land market in early modern England. Or a late contribution to the Brenner debate', *The Economic History Review* 43:1 (1990) 1-20.

3 J. de Vries and A. van der Woude, *The first modern economy. Success, failure, and perseverance of the Dutch economy, 1500-1815* (Cambridge 1997); Bas van Bavel, 'People and land. Rural population developments and property structures in the Low Countries, c. 1300- c. 1600', *Continuity and Change* 17:1 (2002) 9-37; Peter Hoppenbrouwers, 'Mapping an unexplored field. The Brenner debate and the case of Holland', in: Hoppenbrouwers and Van Zanden (eds), *Peasants into farmers?* 41-66.

Holland and the region around Utrecht would become the drivers of growth and prosperity. They could do so because of the accumulation of capital by the feudal lords in these areas. The poor water-logged soils of the North Sea area, which could be perceived as a hindrance to economic development, play an indispensable and positive role in this book. The flooding of former peatlands and poor soil quality are essential root causes of the development of a capitalist economy. The relatively free and independent rural dwellers that were confronted with these challenging circumstances ditched arable farming and instead opted for commercial crops or dairy production. In a climate of high real wages and economic opportunities, rural households could quickly become landless laborers and work on the farms of bigger landowning farmers. Many peasants abandoned agricultural production altogether and became fishermen, sailors, artisans, and the like. This shift provided the labor force and the commercial products to become a trading and seafaring nation that jump-started the economic boom of the seventeenth century. Finally, when the eighteenth century is discussed, the countryside is again perceived as one of the driving forces of the economy. While some sectors experienced economic decline, the export-oriented countryside, together with the country's colonial activities, were why GDP levels did not drop off significantly in the period that until recently was seen as an age of crisis.

This narrative does raise some questions, however. First, is the path toward capitalism a rural phenomenon or a trend spurred or accelerated by urban actors that played out in the countryside? Second, were the results beneficial for rural households and especially farmers? Did the allocation of land, labor, and capital through the market lead to greater prosperity in the countryside, especially in capitalist areas such as Holland and Zeeland?

"It was not an orgy of violence [...] forceful expropriation of the means of production by the newly emerging capitalist class, that gave birth to capitalism." Prak and Van Zanden say that the transition was peaceful and a rational choice for rural dwellers who had the freedom and the means to engage in the market. To refer to a Beyoncé song here, they were served lemons, but they made lemonade. In a period of ecological hardship (floods, infertile soils, and war), the peasants of Holland reshaped the environmental conditions and came out stronger in the end. While I agree that the choices being made were rational, whether it was voluntary may need some discussion. Suboptimal soils, relative freedom, and market forces are not unique to the Low Countries.

Nevertheless, the choice to become entirely dependent on markets for commodities, land, labor, and capital is exceptional. The risk-averse peasant might be a bit of a cliché, but if we take a closer look around Europe, then mixed farming, common property, strong communal structures, and a makeshift economy seem to be an equally rational and preferred choice of rural societies. Regions confronted with poor soil, such as marshy coastal zones, mountainous regions, and forested areas on the fringe of the cultivation line, have never been fully incorporated into the feudal heartlands, giving peasants the independence and opportunity to develop agricultural systems. From the mountain communities in the Alpine and Swiss regions to the Veluwe, Ardennes, and Campine areas in the Low Countries or the frigid climes of Scandinavia, for peasants similar levels of freedom and environmental challenge did not necessarily lead to the same outcomes.<sup>4</sup> While it is becoming increasingly clear that peasants were active participants in commodity markets, despite the existence of communal property, few seem to have chosen total market dependence, far-reaching specialization and a polarization of land ownership.<sup>5</sup> In most peasant studies, the involuntary disappearance of peasant communities as a result of market forces is highlighted. Due to shifting commodity frontiers and socio-economic disruption brought about by market integration and competition, small-scale peasant producers lose out. According to Vanhaute, that process is exacerbated today by climate change, resource depletion, and weather extremes. While we could see the replacement of peasant agriculture by proletarianized waged labor,

4 Jakob Starlander, 'Conflict and negotiation. Management of forest commons in seventeenth-century northern Finland', *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 69:2 (2021) 177-194; Anton Kos, *Van meenten tot marken. Een onderzoek naar de oorsprong en ontwikkeling van de Gooise marken en de gebruiksrechten op de gemene gronden van de Gooise markegenoten (1280-1568)* (Hilversum 2010); Maurice Paulissen et al., 'Dire necessity or mere opportunity? Recurrent peat commercialisation from raised bog commons in the early modern Low Countries', *The Commons Journal* May (2021), <https://doi.org/10.5334/ijc.1054>; Theo Spek, *Het Drentse esdorpenlandschap. Een historisch-geografische studie* (Utrecht 2004); Maïka De Keyzer, *Inclusive commons and the sustainability of peasant communities in the medieval Low Countries* (London 2018).

5 M. Kowaleski, J. Langdon, and P.R. Schofield, *Peasants and lords in the medieval English economy. Essays in honour of Bruce M.S. Campbell*, (Turnhout 2015); Maïka De Keyzer and Eline van Onacker, 'Beyond the flock. Sheep farming, wool sales and social differentiation in a late medieval peasant society. The Campine area in the Low Countries', *The Agricultural History Review* 64:2 (2016) 157-180; Matteo Di Tullio, *The wealth of communities. War, resources and cooperation in renaissance Lombardy* (Milton 2014); Peter Lionel Larson, *Conflict and compromise in the late medieval countryside. Lords and peasants in Durham, 1349-1400* (London 2006); Daniel R. Curtis, 'Tine De Moor's "silent revolution". Reconsidering her theoretical framework for explaining the emergence of institutions for collective management of resources', *Journal of the Commons* 7:1 (2013) 209-229.

industrial jobs, and urbanization as a rational choice, I would agree with scholars like Vanhaute that it was not a voluntary and beneficial evolution. Instead, he pleads for the revival of peasant and agro-ecological agriculture as a path to the future.<sup>6</sup>

It is not far-fetched to see the same processes as being behind the transition toward capitalism in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century countryside. In Holland, as in the entire coastal zone of the Low Countries, urban elites invested fortunes in draining water-logged former peatlands, building dikes around polders, and buying land in the newly developed rural areas. After centuries of predominantly peasant agriculture in the coastal zones, urban absentee landlords dominated the countryside in Flanders, Brabant, Zeeland, and Holland.<sup>7</sup> In South Holland, peasant landownership remained strong. Still, after the first period of economic growth, a significant group of peasants had to give up their land and their security.<sup>8</sup> In North Holland, urban investors pumped at least ten million guilders into draining the lakes around the middle of the seventeenth century.<sup>9</sup> Even though peasant landownership did not disappear in Holland, peasants were stuck with the worst pieces of land. At the same time, the socio-economic conditions that had sustained their way of life were fundamentally changed. Bas van Bavel added that many of Holland's peasants were facing financial problems due to high taxation rates and the effects of the Revolt. Market opportunities may have been abundant, but most peasants lacked the chance and means to grab them. Instead, urban dwellers and investors bought up most of the land, pushing out the same peasants that had been the most important social group until the sixteenth century.<sup>10</sup> Adjusting

6 Erik Vanhaute, 'The end of peasantries? Rethinking the role of peasantries in a world-historical view', *Review* 31:1 (2008) 39-59.

7 Tim Soens, 'Capitalisme, institutions et conflits hydrauliques autour de la Mer du Nord (XIIIe-XVIII siècles)', in: P. Fournier (ed.), *Eaux et conflits dans l'Europe médiévale et moderne. Actes des XXXIes journées internationales d'histoire de l'Abbaye de Flaran, 8 et 9 octobre 2010* (Toulouse 2012); Idem, 'Dijkenbouwers of rustverstoorders? De Vlaamse graven en de strijd tegen het water in de laatmiddeleeuwse Vlaamse kustvlakte (veertiende- zestiende eeuw)', *Bijdragen en Mededelingen Betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 122:3 (2007) 321-355; Tim Soens and Erik Thoen, 'The origins of leasehold in the former county of Flanders', in: Bas van Bavel and Philippe Schofield (eds), *The development of leasehold in northwestern Europe, c. 1200-1600* (Turnhout 2008) 31-56.

8 Bram Hilken, 'Living off the land? Land inequality and the emergence of agrarian capitalism in Holland, 1543-1708', paper presented at the EHS Conference 2023. In 2024 Bram Hilken's study on Holland's inequality levels will appear.

9 De Vries and Van der Woude, *The first modern economy*, 202.

10 Bas J.P. van Bavel, 'Rural development and landownership in Holland, c. 1400-1650', in: Oscar Gelderblom (ed.), *The political economy of the Dutch Republic* (Aldershot 2009) 167-196.

to industrial production, labor on larger farms and dairy production was the rational choice given the circumstances, but perhaps not the preferred strategy from their point of view. Since we are debating the late medieval and early modern period, though, this question of motives is doomed to remain unanswered.

Whoever was responsible for the shift toward capitalism, the data on market integration are convincing. The Dutch countryside, especially the regions bordering the North Sea, had fully developed into market economies by the sixteenth century, and this trend was only pushed further during the seventeenth century, when urban investors literally created a new countryside with a highly productive rural sector, aiming at local, regional, and distant markets. However, the data concerning the impact on the rural population are patchy. First is the revised series on GDP figures between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries. While all literature until quite recently acknowledged a period of decline during the calamitous eighteenth century, now, due to new testing and measuring techniques, an unbroken positive trend from the Black Death onward is revealed. The authors themselves question how they can reconcile this somewhat paradoxical finding (p 20) with the consensus about the eighteenth-century crisis. The answer is that some regions may decline or experience periods of distress and crisis, but in general the North Sea area experienced favorable conditions in the long term. Production centers moved, products no longer sought after were replaced, and new hubs of innovation and supply took over. Tim Soens has addressed this optimistic perspective in his article on “resilient societies, vulnerable people”. If we take a bird’s eye view, most societies in the past were remarkably resilient. Faced with floods, pandemics, or economic crises, premodern economies bounced back with extraordinary speed. Even so, behind that overall rosy picture, real people’s real distress tends to be forgotten or ignored.<sup>11</sup>

Jan De Vries’s and Ad Van Der Woude’s figures on the Dutch and especially Holland countryside are still the most detailed and complete data. In their account of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the image of the Holland and Zeeland countryside is much bleaker. Specialization in dairy production had pushed the Holland farmers into a corner that could not easily be changed when the market climate shifted. While the Holland farmers could make significant profits by moving toward dairy farming, despite steeply rising rents and costs of production in the seventeenth century, dependence on

<sup>11</sup> Tim Soens, ‘Resilient societies, vulnerable people. Coping with North Sea floods before 1800’, *Past & Present* 241:1 (2018) 143-177.

this specialized niche market had already backfired from 1650 onward. The costs of maintaining levees, ditches, and windmills to keep the soil drained and productive were high. When the economic boom of the Golden Age had waned and the taxes were increased after 1650, many farmers could not continue their farming practices as before. Milk production fell significantly, the arrears on rents rose sharply, and drained land had to be abandoned.<sup>12</sup> Adam Sundberg has recently painted a similar picture. He points to the commercial and specialized nature of the Dutch economy to explain the disastrous effects of the first cattle plague in 1713-1720. In seven years, 60 to a startling 90 percent of the total cattle population perished. While the whole of the Netherlands was affected, especially those farmers in the specialized regions such as Holland were hit the hardest.

On top of that, severe floods and different plagues added to a period of economic distress for these farmers.<sup>13</sup> De Vries and Van Der Woude said, "Farmers in mixed farming areas enjoyed more options than did dairy farmers in responding to the new market pressures." "On the sandy soils of the Eastern provinces, the crisis struck with less severity."<sup>14</sup> So the entire North Sea area may have been resilient and had GDP levels showing no actual declining trends. The fluctuating economic circumstances of this period had a profound and tangible effect on the real farmers of the North Sea area. Few Holland farmers can have been comforted by the idea that on a regional and especially transregional scale, GDP figures had not fundamentally declined, and neighboring regions had taken over the leading role.

In addition to actual distress on a personal or group level, the general welfare and prosperity indicators of the capitalist regions bordering the North Sea do not look that favorable, either; if we compare them with other less market-oriented areas. Look at table 8.2 (p. 176) in the book, picked up from a 1995 study. After centuries of growth, Holland and Zeeland scored remarkably low on key welfare indicators such as height, infant mortality, inequality, and poverty. This measure is in stark contrast to the further claims in the book. On several occasions, Prak and Van Zanden indicate remarkably positive indicators of welfare: high education levels, dwindling violence, low gender inequality, church-building schemes, and a vibrant political civil society. However, these

12 De Vries and Van der Woude, *The first modern economy*, 202-220.

13 Adam Sundberg, *Natural disaster at the closing of the Dutch Golden Age. Floods, worms, and cattle plague* (Cambridge 2022).

14 De Vries and Van der Woude, *The first modern economy* 219-220.





Illustration 1 Peasant interior (charity or poverty)

(source: watercolor by Gesina ter Borch, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.476921>)

parameters are not unique to the capitalist regions in the Dutch Republic. The state monopoly on violence has been attested to in other areas, and low gender inequality is a common feature in the Southern and Northern Low Countries, in all the urban, rural and non-market-oriented regions. In the study from 1995, Noordegraaf and Van Zanden had argued that Holland and Zeeland's surprisingly bad welfare indicators must have been due to the economic crisis of the eighteenth century.<sup>15</sup> Yet since the narrative has shifted and a consistent growth pattern has been put forward in this new book, that explanation no longer holds good.

I want to put forward the hypothesis that we tend to overestimate these capitalist societies' overall wealth and prosperity levels. While the elites and upper-middle classes may have profited from a capitalist system, indicators for overall well-being are dragged down by the poorest groups that have lost out. When the Antwerp polder area, a market-oriented and capitalist society like Zeeland and Holland, is compared to the Campine area, a typical peasant and subsistence-oriented society, the latter region stands out remarkably well considering several welfare indicators. First of all, education levels were

<sup>15</sup> Leo Noordegraaf and Jan Luiten van Zanden, 'Early modern economic growth and the standard of living. Did labor benefit from Holland's Golden Age?', in: Karel Davids and Jan Lucassen (eds), *A miracle mirrored* (Cambridge 1995) 410-437.



high. Jan Peeters analyzed 250 marriage certificates from five different Campine villages between 1779 and 1788.<sup>16</sup> In total, 44 percent of the Campine brides could personally sign their names; 63 percent of the grooms could do the same. When adding the signatures of the two male witnesses, the literacy ratio for Campine men becomes 67 percent.

Comparable quantitative studies for the Southern Low Countries for this period are scarce. Still, they all indicate a relatively high literacy rate in the Campine region compared to other areas. For the whole of Brabant, in 1778-1792, Ruwet and Wellemans calculated a literacy rate of 62 percent for men and 39 percent for women.<sup>17</sup> The aggregate rate was 50 percent, much higher than in West and East Flanders with 37 and 36 percent, respectively.<sup>18</sup> Even compared to Amsterdam, which had a literacy rate of 73 percent for grooms and 50.5 percent for brides, the Campine area is only slightly behind.<sup>19</sup> A possible explanation for this trend is that many workers worked as proletarianized wage laborers in commercial economies. In these conditions, literacy is not an indispensable skill to obtain. In peasant societies, managing an independent farm required basic reading and maths skills for keeping accounts and signing contracts. Therefore, investing in education was essential in peasant societies but not in highly capitalistic rural communities.

Secondly, peasant societies are not as poor as has previously been assumed, while the hubs of capitalism show signs of economic vulnerability. For Holland and Zeeland, but also Gelderland and Groningen, extremely high wealth inequality levels have been dismissed as irrelevant because the overall welfare levels of the societies as a whole were high enough. The gap between rich and poor was big, but those families on the lowest levels of the social ladder were still better off than their neighbors in less commercial but less affluent regions. Measuring the living conditions of the poor is extremely difficult. Mortality peaks or indicators of acute poverty stress during crises could indicate who was hovering just over the survival limit. Here again, capitalist or market-oriented societies show much higher levels

16 The study is not yet published. The five villages are Balen, Beerse, Brecht, Loenhout, and Zammel. Source: Rijksarchief Antwerpen.

17 Joseph. Ruwet and Yves Wellemans, *L'analphabétisme en Belgique XVIIIème-XIXème siècles* (Louvain 1978).

18 Tine de Moor and Jan Luiten van Zanden, "Every Woman Counts": A gender-analysis of numeracy in the Low Countries during the early modern period', *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 41:2 (2010) 206.

19 Erika Kuijpers, 'Lezen en schrijven. Onderzoek naar het alfabetiseringsniveau in zeventiende-eeuws Amsterdam', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis* 23:4 (1997) 490-522.

of economic vulnerability than peasant societies than one could expect by looking at their landed possessions or real wages. When it comes to forced land sales or transactions in times of famine, food stocks in the attics in times of dearth, or mortality levels during the potato crisis of 1845, the commercialized rural areas in the Southern Low Countries fared worse than the Campine area.<sup>20</sup>

Much more detailed research is needed to fully assess the impact of both economic growth and capitalism on rural societies. Nevertheless, the optimistic picture in *Pioneers of Capitalism* seems to overstress the benefits for most country dwellers. Bas van Bavel has labelled the arrival of capitalism the “commodification of social wealth” with, in the long run, adverse effects for both the broader economy and especially the proletarianized laborers and those households that were unable to withstand the urban and noble elites in the quest for the accumulation of wealth. It is time to look beyond the transregional and abstract GDP numbers and take into account the actual welfare levels of the rural dwellers in these historical times before we start praising the benign effects of capitalism, especially for rural societies.

## About the author

**Maïka De Keyzer** is a senior lecturer in socio-economic and ecological history at KU Leuven. She received her PhD from the University of Antwerp in 2014, with a dissertation on late medieval commons, sustainability, and inclusivity. Since then, her research has focused on the borderlands of economic, social, and ecological history of the pre-modern period. Through an interdisciplinary and comparative approach, De Keyzer investigates the causes and consequences of prosperity, inequality, social resilience, and collective action. Her research currently focuses on two lines of research: firstly, the impact of different social models on the general level of prosperity in the pre-modern period and, secondly, the historical roots of our current drought problem in the Campine region.

E-mail: [maika.dekeyzer@kuleuven.be](mailto:maika.dekeyzer@kuleuven.be)

<sup>20</sup> Maïka De Keyzer and Eline van Onacker, ‘Vulnerabilities avoided and resilience built. Collective action, poor relief and diversification as weapons of the weak (The Campine, Belgium, 1350-1845)’, *Continuity and Change* 37:1 (2022).