

COMMERCE AND THE COUNTRYSIDE

The rural population's
involvement in the commodity
market in Flanders, 1750-1910



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The idea that 'peasants' oriented at least some of their produce towards markets in pre-20th century Western Europe – be that local, regional, or urban – is not particularly contentious: indeed, this process was already in evidence during phases of the Middle Ages. The simplistic notion that rural societies could either be entirely dominated by the market or entirely autarkic and dominated by self-sufficiency has been replaced by a more moderate notion that rural producers in pre-industrial and 19th-century Western Europe sometimes marketed some of their goods, and yet sometimes produced only to consume the goods themselves – and the balance between the two often changed over time, depending on external events and internal social context.

What has had much less agreement between scholars is the reasons why producers in rural societies either decided to be more market- or subsistence oriented. What determined the ratios between the two? Why were some rural societies producing more for markets than others – what was the precise rationale behind the choices made by rural producers? On the one side, we have those interpretations which revolved around the agency of rural producers. For Jan de Vries, for example, even the smallest peasant producers actively sought to trade their surpluses at market, so long as transaction costs and other 'barriers' remained small enough to facilitate this process. Linked to this is the broader notion of rural production of goods for markets

being driven by an 'Industrious Revolution': rural populations over the course of the early modern period became 'aspirational consumers', and the desire to secure greater and higher quality consumer goods was a phenomenon that came to descend further down the rural social hierarchy. On the other side is the Neo-Marxist structuralist view, most obviously associated with the work of Robert Brenner, who suggested instead that pre-industrial rural societies, particularly those dominated by smallholding peasants, were inherently reluctant to market their goods, and rather than being any kind of aspiration, were ultimately forced into selling their goods at markets as a way to deal with extra-economic extraction, coercion and taxation from above.

As with most of these kinds of debates, further historical research and empirical examples tends to bring out a more moderate 'in-between' interpretation. So we now probably would veer away from saying that all rural producers were 'coerced' into the market, yet at the same time we probably would also refute the notion that the market is inevitably 'a good thing' and something that inevitably rural societies would aspire to produce for. Certainly the refinements and nuances to the New Institutional Economics literature over the past 20 years has taught us that the market is never simply a 'blank slate' with intrinsic qualities, but offers its benefits according to being embedded within a broader social context and network of social relations, and often depended ultimately on what the alternatives to market orientation were. Other forms of distribution such as the commons may have proved at times favourable alternatives to the market, or other forms of reciprocal relationship within rural communities.

The quality of Dr. Ronsijn's book then is that it indeed does not take for granted the inevitable 'superiority' of the market, and as Eric Vanhaute rightly notes in the foreword, is an excellent antidote to the more ideologically-driven battles over its role. For Ronsijn in a nutshell, the extent to which rural producers in pre-20th century Europe decided (or were able) to participate in the marketing of goods was not dictated by the basic accessibility to the markets themselves, but 'mediated' (in the words of Ronsijn himself) by very context-specific social relations within rural societies. The drivers of rural commercialisation and market orientation were not necessarily from the cities and urbanisation, but could also be found in the contours of the countryside itself.

The way Ronsijn tries to assert this overarching point is by resorting to systematic comparative analysis of two rural regions of Inland Flanders roughly simultaneous to the process of Western European industrialisation. Such a choice gives the book an even broader narrative, in that it also partially links up with a historiography on the 19th-century retardation of the Flemish economy. The book zooms in on two parts of Inland Flanders; in particular, the town of Sint-Niklaas and the surrounding rural region of Land van Waes to the northeast of Ghent, and the town of Oudenaarde and its surrounding rural hinterlands to the south of Ghent. Overall, Ronsijn is able to compile and assemble a wide range of archival and printed materials in order to show that while in both rural areas the entire rural population was to some degree involved in production for a commodity market, there were some key differences. Ultimately the rural producers of grains sold a much larger proportion of their surpluses at the urban market of Sint-Niklaas than in Oudenaarde, and furthermore, a much

larger proportion of the rural population in the Land van Waes actually relied on the urban market of Sint-Niklaas for their grain provisioning needs. After establishing this point in the early chapters of the book, Ronsijn then goes on to explain the divergent developments by creating a narrative of considerable complexity – making distinctions between the different rural social groups that had access to markets (i.e. not considering rural communities as a homogenous whole), making distinctions between local and 'extra-local' trade, assessing the balance between rural agricultural and non-agricultural activities, asserting sharp differences in property structure and the functioning of the rural labour markets, and highlighting the various ways in which rural people related to one another, which in the same way as other Flemish rural historians have done before such as Eric Vanhaute, Thijs Lambrecht, and Reinoud Vermoesen, asserts the importance of reciprocal relationships within the countryside an important filter or mediator of rural producers involvement in urban markets. All this is established on considered treatment of a wide range of sources, with appropriate recognition of all their flaws and limitations, a careful approach that is perhaps a hallmark of the historical school at the University of Ghent.

The limitations of the work perhaps sit in the design of the comparative approach itself. As mentioned already, at the core of Ronsijn's thesis is the idea that the drivers of rural propensity to sell surpluses on the market were not urban but rural. Rural social structure had more influence on the extent of market participation than the simple invoking of 'urban factors' such as physical or institutional access to urban markets themselves. However,

in order to test the impact of rural social structure as a hypothesis, more effort needed to be made to control for the other potentially important independent variables. At present, Ronsijn is comparing not only two different 'types' of rural society, but also two different towns. On pages 29-30, Ronsijn sees the differences in the towns almost as a 'rationale' for the comparative study, but this is actually in the end a hindrance rather than a benefit. Ultimately we are left with this : divergent rural social structures may have had an effect on divergent propensities to market goods in these towns, but to what extent are the results also shaped by the fact that Sint-Niklaas and Oudenaarde are two very different urban contexts ? Ronsijn plays these factors down through the course of the book, but the choice of comparison at two levels – an urban one and a rural one – has not helped his cause. What would have been more illuminating, perhaps something to think about for the future, is to offer a comparison of two different rural societies that are marketing produce to the same town. In that way, further control of the comparative 'experiment' is enforced.

Nevertheless, despite these concerns over the comparative method, as well some disappointment over the conclusion (which fails to link up explicitly to some of the big debates well discussed in the introduction), the book is a highly valuable one. Certainly this book offers much support to the line of research already performed for a number of years by Eric Vanhaute at Ghent regarding the significance of informal relationships and reciprocity in the countryside, and furthermore, in addition to some of the classic terms now firmly ensconced in the minds of rural historians of the Low Countries such as 'social agrosystems' and 'commercial-survival

economies' (the lasting impact of Erik Thoen), we may have a new term to coin in the form of 'mediated market dependencies'. The trick now is make sure that some of these important ideas coming from Flemish rural historians do not remain as explanatory devices for Flemish (or Belgian) developments in isolation, but are shown to have wider applicability to broader developments across pre-industrial and 19th-century Europe. The discipline of rural history would be all the richer for it.

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