

### **13 Conclusion: making a living in rural societies in the North Sea area, 500-2000**

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The central question we asked at the outset of this volume was: what happened to family forms in the rural societies around the coasts of the North Sea in the last one and a half millennium? How did resources become available to the rural family and to its members, and what strategies were employed to generate these resources? The approach of this book is based on an analysis of long-term changes in household formation and in the economic behaviour of its members within a social and regional context.

The North Sea area has a striking regional diversity, both in agricultural, social and institutional regimes. These regions have also a lot in common, above all, a broadly similar physical geography and a common history. They enjoy a moderate maritime climate and consist mostly of lowlands and some low mountain ranges. North-western Europe's climate is characterised by moist winters and dry and warm summers that support an agriculture based on growing dry cereals (wheat, barley, oats or rye) as well as fruit and vegetable crops. To produce food, the land must be heavily worked to be cleared and fertilised, using large numbers of farm animals, both for their work and their manure.

In this setting, the North Sea area developed during the second millennium as one of the most urbanised and commercialised in the world. The area encompassed a wide range of societies and agro-systems, some more market-oriented than others. A triangular zone including the western Low Countries, north-east France and south-east England was the core region, extending its influence throughout the North Sea area and well beyond. After the demise of the manorial systems, most of the inhabitants of the western European countryside owned or rented at least a small farm holding. In many regions, these small exploitations were often combined with temporary migratory or proto-industrial work. Rural communities were already organised at an early stage in the development of the western European countryside. They were responsible for intra-community litigation, poor relief, management of common land, collecting taxes, ensuring the public order, and so on. Except in the most peripheral regions, village societies were strongly oligarchic organised, with the power resting in the hands of a minority of property owners or their representatives who controlled the access to village resources (such as commons, employment and charity). This exercise of power in the village was strongly tied to the ownership of property and landholding. Wealthy householders had considerable power and control over the poor and landless. Possession and use of land were the cornerstone within the wide variety of rural survival strategies, although in the highly commercialised regions of the North Sea area the ties between the land and the rural household weakened during the period under consideration. Credit and exchange networks forged and strengthened social relations within the village communities. After 1500, in more commercialised regions and more generally after 1800, these village networks came under pressure, when a growing number of households sought their income beyond the traditional agricultural sector. Rural society in this area gradually transformed.

The chapters in this book relate how households adapted, some more successfully than others, to these changes. In this concluding chapter we look at common and diverging features and trends of the western European rural family and income systems, set within the context of their social structural and regional transformations. Using a comparative lens we focus on some striking trends and differences. It is our ambition, shared with the teams of the other three volumes in this series, to develop a more general interpretative framework for our understanding of long-term changes in those rural societies around the coasts of the North

Sea. In attempting this conclusion, we follow the thematic outline used in the other chapters of this volume.

### **13.1 The family and demography**

Around 500, almost the entire population around the North Sea lived in the countryside. Today, the experience of the majority is urban: about 80 per cent of the population now live in settlements with more than 2000 inhabitants. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, a process of deruralisation has been evident in every region within the North Sea area. In some agricultural regions such as Brittany, Picardy and Normandy the proportion of urban population came to exceed that of rural population only by the middle years of the twentieth century, while in others, such as in industrialised Belgium, this was already the case at the start of the twentieth century. Deruralisation implies more than the depopulation of rural communities, and also refers to the strong decline of the proportion of agricultural workers in the active population and the detachment from the rural way of life. Today, less than 5 per cent of the active population in the North Sea area works in agriculture compared to more than 50 per cent around 1900.

The regions under study have displayed broadly similar patterns of population movement across the middle ages, the early modern and modern period. The timing and the nature of these movements, however, were marked by significant regional differences. In first instance, most regions within this part of north-western Europe underwent significant growth from the eleventh century through to at least the end of the thirteenth century. There are also earlier indications of population recovery and growth from the seventh and eighth centuries onwards. This period followed a long phase of demographic decline set in motion at the end of the third century, with record lows during the sixth century until the middle of the seventh century. The European economies of the early middle ages were able to experience moments of local intensification of the agrarian economy, leading to population growth and a strengthening of the links between town and countryside. In Flanders and the Paris region for example population density reached between 20 to 50 inhabitants per square kilometre. This early regional growth was small in comparison with the extended growth of the rural population which started in the eleventh century. The start of the late medieval crisis, at which point population growth was replaced with stagnation and decline, appears to have varied somewhat, though how far this is a consequence of historical or representational differences is unclear. There is though plentiful evidence that, at least in some countries (Denmark, England, France) population growth had halted by the first half of the fourteenth century, and decades before the crisis of the Black Death, whether that was the case in other parts of north-western Europe remains unclear. In Norway and Sweden, for instance, it is suggested that population decline did not commence before the plagues of the mid-fourteenth century.

Unsurprisingly, rural dwellers in most countries, in so far as this can be observed, experienced severe mortality in the middle years of the fourteenth century. However, it seems that in the Low Countries the long term fall in population was less pronounced and the consequences of the general crisis were limited. While it is difficult to reconcile the apparently limited effects of such a virulent epidemic which ravaged populations elsewhere, with any endogenous developments such as the policies of lords or central government or the higher standard of living, the reasons for such an aberrant result remain elusive. Although the demographic consequences of plague and endemic mortality were muted in parts of the Low Countries, there is no doubt that they continued apace throughout the rest of the North Sea area. A general stagnation of population, at least surmised for certain countries including England, has given way to population recovery and growth by the decades either side of 1500. In most

countries thereafter population growth continued, though not always in a consistent and upward trend, into the eighteenth century. Denmark for example, only regained its pre-plague population in the early nineteenth century.

In the North Sea area, the demographic variables which can be associated with these movements vary by place and period. Attempts to identify the relative impact of fertility and mortality offer no simple solutions. A relatively recent debate concerning the potential significance of fertility in later medieval England is also mirrored in other national contexts here. The general assumption is that both must have had an impact upon population movement. The relative force of either variable or the extent to which demographic regimes were high or low pressure remains hidden, at least for the middle ages. Mortality is identified as the significant determinant in population movements in the middle ages in most of the studies presented here, our sources tending to direct more to evidence of mortality than of fertility. Both crisis mortality, occasioned both by epidemics and warfare, and background mortality including undoubtedly a lack of appropriate nutrition, high levels of infant mortality and endemic diseases throughout the population, must have had a severe impact upon the population of medieval and early modern northern Europe, even if historical sources which permit close investigation of such issues are elusive. Such crises were more acute in some regions than in others, and the causes could differ. Some regions in northern France, for instance, were less affected because they were mostly spared from military action, and they were far less dependent on grain production. Similarly, in early-modern times, grain-surplus areas such as Denmark and Skåne in southern Sweden suffered less from hunger-related diseases than other parts of Scandinavia. By the same token, there is some evidence of a fertility-driven demographic regime, or at least a regime influenced by changing fertility rates in the middle ages. Age at marriage, where it can be estimated, illustrates the lack of general consistency in terms of either place or period, but there is some sense that the mean age of marriage tended to increase in the middle ages, and the general trend was toward a north-west European household formation system of the kind described by Hajnal, with relatively late marriage for both partners (above age 24 for women and age 26 for men), life-cycle service and the presence of solitary households. In earlier centuries, surviving evidence suggests a household formation system more akin to that associated with southern Europe, with relatively early marriage for women (between age 15 and 20), if not for men (around age 30). We know, unfortunately, very little about other potentially significant elements capable of adjusting fertility rates, including the extent of the use of contraception and breastfeeding.

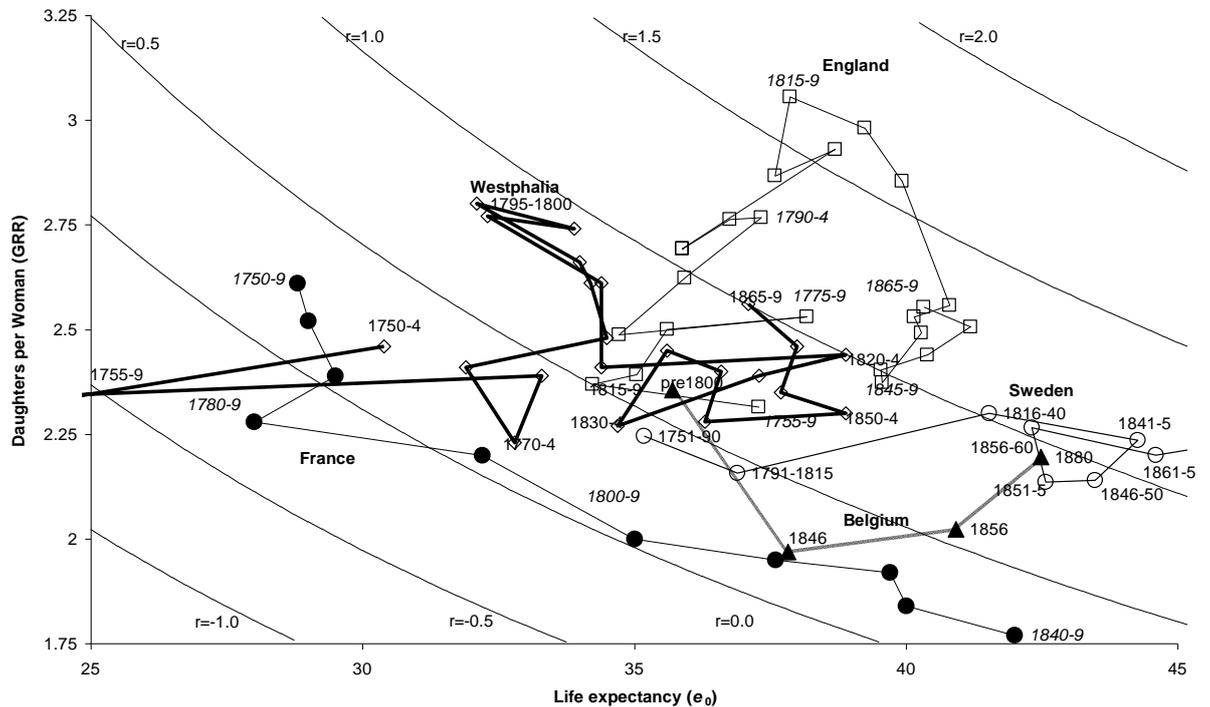
By the early modern period, fuller and more direct demographic data permit a more robust investigation of the causes for the population movements described. In some countries, such as France, a demographic, relatively high pressure regime of heightened mortality and fertility persisted into the early modern period. As is well known, fertility, rather than mortality, has been identified as a prime mover of the demographic pattern evident for early modern England. In rural England (female) ages at marriage increased resulting in a fall in fertility in times when real wages were low and job opportunities were limited. In early modern rural Norway and Sweden ages at marriage were relatively low when there were prospects to create new viable positions for households due to land reclamation and by-employments. Delayed marriage, which was also related to changing female employment patterns, has helped to explain changes in fertility patterns and in consequent population movements, such as in parts of the Low Countries by the seventeenth century.

Changing employment and marketing structures were undoubtedly capable of affecting some of the demographic changes outlined above. An important variable was the extent to which a region developed or failed to develop a significant urban sector. In this respect the experience of the Low Countries stands out as exceptional. While almost the whole population of the Low Countries lived in the countryside at the end of the first millennium, a massive

development in towns in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries led to a significant increase in the urban population. In central parts of the Low Countries such as Holland and Brabant, about 45 per cent of the population lived in towns by the early modern period, a proportion not matched in any other northern European country at that time. Population density in some of those areas reached between 75 and 100 inhabitants per square kilometre. Elsewhere, huge urban centres such as Paris (600.000 inhabitants around 1700) and London (1 million inhabitants around 1800) developed a broad hinterland with a highly intensified and commercialised agriculture. In other countries within the broad North Sea area, most especially Norway and Sweden, population density remained low (up to 15 inhabitants per square kilometre) and the degree of urbanisation remained limited. However, as is pointed out in the discussion on Scandinavian demography and family, the limited extent of urbanisation does not argue against the presence of economic activity alternative to agriculture. The chapters in this volume point to the necessity to discuss demographic patterns within their agricultural and ecological context. Regional differences were considerable and manifested themselves in different agro-systems. Rural households in the southern Low Countries, for instance, used to be larger in the coastal marshlands where the soil was generally more fertile and the agricultural productivity higher, than in the inland areas. The market-oriented economy of the coastal areas resulted in a larger demand for agricultural labour, a predominantly young and male population and large households due to the presence of living-in servants. In the Paris Basin, the market oriented farms worked more with short-term and seasonal wage labour. Differences in agro-systems were thus reflected in the degree of migration, size and composition of rural households, but also in mortality and fertility levels. As such, mortality was chronically higher in the coastal marshlands. In the Low Countries, the lowlands of south-east England and the marshes of the river Weser in north-west Germany, it was linked to the incidence of malaria and the poor quality of the drinking water. In most regions, this high mortality was compensated by early marriage and high fertility levels. In others, such as the Oldenburg area in Germany, quite the opposite was true: the high degree of landless households led to very low birth rates.

Although subject to debate, household formation in the medieval and early modern countryside tends to be seen as a function of a 'peasant' or 'niche' model: households operated in a neolocal system whereby marriage was the moment at which households were formed and the opportunity to marry was a function of land availability. Instances of this system have been discussed in all national contexts, as for instance in Germany before 1750. Alongside such a household formation system, there also existed a 'proletarian' or 'real wage' household formation system, driven not by land acquisition but by the accumulation of capital through labour. In this system, marriage remained a significant moment in household formation but the opportunity to marry was generated differently and was not dependent upon the acquisition of land. Such developments in household formation were not confined to towns. As we see in a variety of contexts, the spread of various types of proto-industry into the countryside created considerable opportunities for the kinds of capital accumulation identified with a 'real wage' household formation system. In some areas in England and north-west Germany proto-industrial workers married earlier and had more children, but in others they married later and had fewer children. In Denmark and inland Flanders, the traditional family pattern with high marriage age survived well into the nineteenth century. The implications of these differing household formation systems are important; systems of the kinds described here reflected the economic and social context in which households were themselves formed. The prevailing system also tended to reinforce the same context, perpetuating the demographic regimes which were, themselves, responsible in part for defining the rural economies in which they operated.

**Figure 13.1: Trajectories of life expectancies and fertility, c.1750-c.1870**



Sources: for Sweden, see Statistiska centralbyrån (1999): *Befolkningsutvecklingen under 250 år: Historisk statistik för Sverige*, Stockholm; for England and France, see E.A. Wrigley, R.S. Schofield (1981), *The population history of England 1541–1871: a reconstruction*, Cambridge, 246; for Belgium, Coale's indicators from R. Lesthaeghe (1974), 'Een demografisch model voor de Oostvlaamse landelijke populatie in de 18de eeuw', *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, 1-2, 93 and Princeton Population Center, data archive. These figures were transformed into TFR using a factor of 12.44 as suggested by J.-P. Sardon (1996), 'Coale's indices, comparative indices, mean generation, total fertility rate and components', *Population*, 8, 252-257, and further into GRR using a factor of 0.5. Life expectancies from I. Devos (2006), *Allemaal bestjes. Mortaliteit en morbiditeit in Vlaanderen, 18de-20ste eeuw*, Gent, 40 (local data for 1750-1800) and from the mortality.org database. For Westphalia, we used a subset of the dataset analyzed for Germany in U. Pfister, G. Fertig (2010), *The population history of Germany: research strategy and preliminary results* (Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research Working Paper 35).

Around 1750, the countries in north-western Europe entered a phase of economic and social change of unprecedented importance. For some of these regions, figure 13.1 assembles two important aspects of what is known about the demographic change after 1750: the long term development of fertility and mortality, expressed in terms of life expectancy at birth ( $e_0$  on the horizontal axis) and the gross reproduction rate (on the vertical axis: daughters per woman, a measure that varies not only with the frequency of births within marriage, but also with the frequencies of ages at marriage). Each data point describes the combination of fertility and mortality values in a specific period (mostly 5 years) for a specific region or country. The intrinsic growth rate of the population ( $r$ ) results from the combination of these two variables; it reached values of about 1.7 per cent annually at the maximum (in the English case, in the years after 1815). For England, France (including the south) and Sweden, these data have long been known; they formed a central result of Wrigley and Schofield's seminal *Population*

*History of England.* For parts of the Low Countries and of north-west Germany, they have been collected for the present discussion in order to get an impression of the entire North Sea area's demographic history between 1750 and 1850. Three features stand out. First, the countries we study were very different particularly in terms of mortality. Deadly pre-1800 Westphalia and France contrast with more healthy England, Belgium and Scandinavia. Second, fertility was not fixed at some 'natural' level, but highly variable. The English case has proven the old model of a demographic transition wrong, which assumed that fertility fell from a high 'natural' level only after a preceding mortality decline. We see that fertility was not 'natural' and invariable in pre-modern north-west European settings, and that the Swedish experience of a mortality decline on a fixed fertility level was not universal. The French example shows that both fertility and mortality could decline in a parallel fashion, and the English as well as the Westphalian examples demonstrate the importance in fertility upswings which did not lead to counterbalancing mortality crises. Third, as predicted by the old demographic transition model, there was a common trend in mortality, as opposed to fertility. Life expectancies rose everywhere, the least in England. An early mortality decline seems to have been the common demographic experience of the entire North Sea area.

In the same period, more people started to live in towns and cities, a trend that continued throughout the twentieth century. Thanks to the establishment of national statistical institutes in the nineteenth century and the data they produced, these changes can be quantified with greater confidence than for pre-industrial times. Population figures in the countries around the North Sea more than doubled during the nineteenth century. The reactions to this rapid population increase, such as reduced nuptiality, increased migration or lower fertility, varied between countries. England where the population had grown faster, managed to escape a Malthusian crisis in which population outstripped the available resources, through a long term transformation of its economy. Industrialisation absorbed surplus population and facilitated early marriage and mass migration. Growth was essentially confined to the towns, and by 1850 England had replaced the Netherlands as the most urbanised country in western Europe. Most rural regions in continental Europe however only lost the pattern of relative high marriage ages and relative high celibacy rates well into the twentieth century. Rural migration reduced the demographic pressure in the countryside especially after the mid-nineteenth century. After the agricultural crisis of the 1840's and during the agricultural depression of the last quarter of the nineteenth century, some regions experienced an emigration wave to the America's. In comparison to countries such as England, Germany, Sweden and Norway, overseas migration in the rest of the North Sea area remained limited. More important was the rural outmigration towards expanding industrial regions such as the German *Ruhrgebiet*, the Belgian Walloon area and northern France.

In rural France, the main response involved a drastic modification of reproductive behaviour. North-western France, the region discussed in this volume, experienced an early demographic transition. It absorbed demographic pressure by excessively fragmenting land holdings and by adjusting the demographic system through systematic fertility control. By the second half of the eighteenth century birth rates started to fall. Although there are indications of family planning elsewhere (such as in parts in Scandinavia) from the late eighteenth century onwards, extensive birth control became only common in the rest of the North Sea area by the end of the nineteenth century. Fertility continued to decline throughout the twentieth century, and after 1970 dropped below replacement level. As a result, a new demographic equilibrium of both low mortality and fertility has been reached. Today, population growth in the countries around the North Sea, as in other industrialised areas, is on the verge of a standstill. Rural depopulation, as in France, has been replaced by a new 'urbanisation', transforming large parts of the rural world in suburbanised areas. The new demographic regime resulted in a new family life-cycle pattern whereby fewer children are born (today, on average less than 2

children per women compared to 4 to 6 around 1750) and more children live beyond childhood. While high mortality was one of the main deterrents to guarantee land tenure within the family in the middle ages and the early modern period, the drastic decline in mortality rates together with falling birth rates during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, went along with new difficulties in perpetuating family lineages on the farms. As a result and together with the rise in life expectancy, the average age of the farmer population increased significantly. Finding a spouse for young farmers became difficult and the age at marriage among farmers continued to be higher than in other rural strata throughout the twentieth century. The farmer household became restricted to the couple and its children, and their demographic behaviour coincided with that of urban families.

### **13.2 The family and its members**

Family farms based on a married couple, its children and additional live-in workers, have been the main organisational form of agricultural production in the countryside in north-western Europe since the early middle ages. Other rural households, more numerous since the early modern period, provided labour or produced non-agricultural goods. These landless and (mostly) nearly landless households were also couple-centred and could include non-family workers as well. Today, the family farm is still dominant among the falling number of agricultural enterprises in the North Sea area. Non-family labour has been strongly reduced as a consequence of the mechanisation of labour on the farms.

To interpret the internal relations within the rural households, the institutional, legal and religious frameworks have to be taken into account. The three main types of social relations (parents/children, husbands/wives, masters/servants) were of course of fundamental significance as categories of association since antiquity. Notions on these three relations of generation, gender and politico-economic domination have been transferred through canon law and political philosophy. Nevertheless, institutions associated with the family farm, such as property rights to buildings, land, cattle and tools, could vary to a considerable degree, and there was also a very broad scope in the ways that internal relations might be organised. In the early middle ages, larger feudal units of production were common, and family farms gained weight and autonomy only in the high middle ages. In the medieval period, the rights enjoyed by young men and women in entering into marriage were extended by the church relative to those of their parents and elders as well as the larger kin group. The north-west European nuclear household pattern is founded upon the fundamental theological innovation that marriage is a sacrament given by the couple to each other (*consensus facit nuptias*), and not by any societal institution. Although family farming had a very long genesis, the classical north-west European household formation pattern of a nuclear family, based upon a married couple and supported by immediate family members and servant and day labour and underpinned by relative late marriage, was only fully in place at the beginning of the early modern period. Despite the rise and decline of proto-industry and the nineteenth century legal changes, core elements of this pattern remained intact. Only in the twentieth century, mechanisation, scientification, and urbanisation changed the needs for and options of family labour. This fundamentally altered the roles and goals of farmers, servants, and children.

During the period of sharp population decrease in the fifth and sixth centuries, the villa system with large estates and many dependents in the regions formerly occupied by the Romans made way for peasant societies. Peasant families lived in settlements with a limited number of farmsteads, similar to the situation in north-western Europe outside the Roman empire. As a result the core of most of the rural households in the early middle ages consisted of a nuclear family, although some farm buildings also gave shelter to a few dependents

(slaves, relatives). Couples and their children became the principal units of production, reproduction and consumption. This household structure fitted into the Christian model of conjugality as it spread across north-western Europe in the following centuries, a model that might have provoked a more narrow concept of kinship with less responsibilities for more distant relatives. This can be seen in Scandinavia in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the last part of north-western Europe to Christianise. Small scale peasant farming was the prime means of existence of households, whether their members were freemen or serfs. Despite the importance of family farming, even the early medieval rural society was not egalitarian, as an elite of warriors dominated most of the rural peasantry turning them into tenants or serfs. In most places slavery changed into serfdom at the end of the millennium, except in Scandinavia and the British Isles. In the more affluent households, slaves were replaced by a large number of male and female servants (mostly life cycle servants). By the fifteenth century, serfdom had nearly completely dwindled away. It experienced a revival in central Europe in the early modern period, and some seigniorial rights remained in existence until the nineteenth century. The prime household organisation unit was the 'manse', consisting of a farm, land, cattle and equipment enough to feed a 'family' in the broadest sense of the word. Although the manse could be a large household, data for north-western France in the ninth century show that about three quarters of the households consisted of a single nuclear family or a solitary person. The remaining quarter consisted partly of extended households. The same data suggest an average household size of 4.5 to 5.5, which is about the same level to be found in the next ten centuries. In England, for instance, average household sizes fluctuated between 3.7 and 5.2 in the middle ages and the early modern period. Extended and multiple households remained the exception all over north-western Europe in the second millennium.

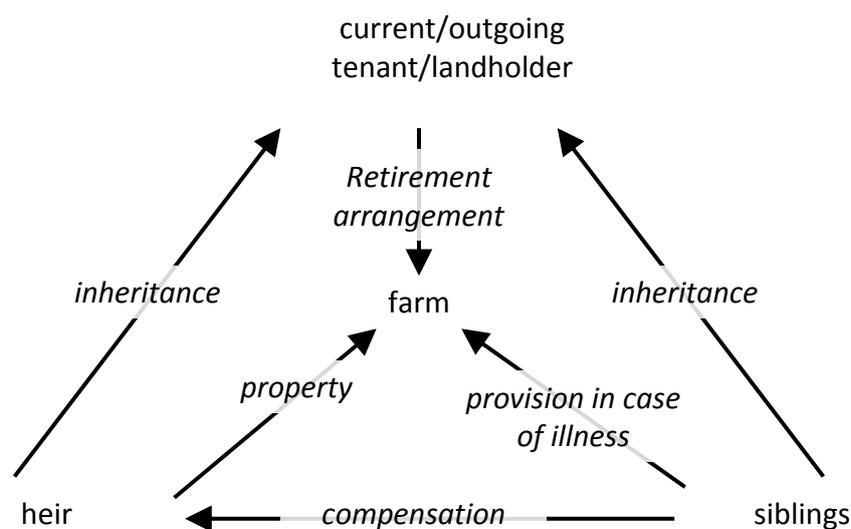
Household structures changed considerably during the life cycle. After marriage most households only consisted of the man and his wife, often supplemented by non-nuclear family members or servants. After the birth of the children, the household size started to increase. When children were able to work, non-nuclear members left the household. By the time grown-up children married and left the parental house, they again could be replaced by servants. Consequently household composition was heavily influenced by factors such as the number of surviving children or family members. The weight of the nuclear family differed strongly between regions. In some of them, the extension of the nuclear family with a survivor of the older generation or some unmarried brothers and sisters was a normal stage in the family life cycle, while elsewhere couples nearly always lived in a nuclear households (neolocality). However, all over north-western Europe a preference for male succession combined with high male ages at marriage limited the frequency of three-generation households already before 1500.

From the ninth century onwards perceived differences between free and unfree tenants had diminished and peasants are sometimes, and not always correctly, identified as a seemingly uniform social group. However, within the European peasantries there were in fact large social differences, mostly determined by the size and the property structure of land holdings. Rich rural households controlling large land holdings were considerably more populous than poor households with a limited access to land. This pattern survived in north-western Europe until well into the twentieth century. The differences in household size are related to the presence in the larger farmsteads of slaves and later on servants (comprising 10 to 15 per cent of the population), and to the absence of teenage and adult children on the smaller holdings. The incidence of non-nuclear household structures was strongly connected to the demand for labour and to the succession strategies of larger farmers. Despite the disappearance of serfdom and notwithstanding sharp regional variations, social differences within the peasantry in the countryside increased nearly everywhere in the course of the second millennium.

Population pressure, agricultural specialisation, proto-industrialisation, concentration of land titles and proletarianisation all contributed to this process. This social differentiation was not a linear process. During the population crisis of the second half of the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries the group of smallholders and landless labourers mostly shrank, to increase again from the sixteenth century onwards. In parts of England and France (for instance the Paris Basin and Picardy) and along the North Sea coasts of the Low Countries and Germany, processes of social polarisation probably started earlier and were stronger than elsewhere. Here the majority of the rural households in the early modern period had only tiny units of land at their disposal or were landless, making them heavily dependent on (proto-industrial) contract labour or wage labour. The growing social differences and especially the increased number of landless rural poor fuelled the life cycle servant system, which became a crucial part of the European rural societies until the nineteenth and sometimes twentieth centuries. The disappearance of this system caused a major convergence in household size between social groups. By the year 2000, the phase in the family life cycle (for instance, whether the head of household is newly-wed or old-aged) has become a far more important determinant of the size of the rural household.

Major variables in household formation are the practices of succession and inheritance. Succession is not the same thing as inheritance. One can succeed into a social position: an office, a feudal relation, the role of leading a business (including the business of farming). One can inherit property: money, tools, land. Before the nineteenth century, peasants in most regions had no full property rights on land, so an absolute inheritance of land was out of the question. The standard case involved four types of actors who had to deal with each other's interests in the farm: the lord, the current tenant/landholder, their successor, and the successor's siblings. In the nineteenth century, lordship as a category largely disappeared in the rural societies studied here, although their role was in some regions replaced by landowners. Where land was owned by the farmers, only three potential parties to transfer were left, the farm still being the central platform of their negotiations (see figure 13.2).

**Figure 13.2: Parties and their claims in property transfers**



Terms in standard type designate parties involved in property transfer, arrows and terms in *italics* refer to claims arising from the expectations of one party and directed towards another. Adapted from C. Fertig (2003), 'Hofübergabe im Westfalen des 19. Jahrhunderts: Wendepunkt des bäuerlichen Familienzyklus?', in C. Duhamelle and J. Schlumbohm (eds.), *Eheschließungen im Europa des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts: Muster und Strategien*, Göttingen, 77 (Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte 197).

In the last two centuries, debates on inheritance and succession practises often revolved around the fear of politicians that subdivision would threaten the integrity of the holding, including its viability in terms of size and structure. Partibility, however, was not the only important aspect of the transfer of resources between generations. In some regions, the overall shares each child would receive were calculated and kept track of exactly, while in other regions parents were free to give as much as they pleased. Another factor is whether daughters were entitled to the same shares of inherited property as sons, as well as the question if they could own land. Gender relations were also dependent on marital property systems (joint property versus separate property), with deep consequences for the roles of widow, widowers, and their new spouses. Finally, the ways resource transfers were organised could be institutionalised through law, through case-by-case contracts between the old and new generations and the lords, or through testaments.

Early evidence for Saint-Remi near Rheims in the ninth century suggests a strong preference on the part at least of lords for the succession of the eldest son on the tenant farmsteads (primogeniture) to secure continuity and the reproduction of a qualified labour force. The rights of women (widows, daughters, sisters) on these hereditary manse were very weak. Presumably this model of primogeniture on larger farms remained dominant in the following centuries. The property rights of females on freehold land were slightly better. Since on average about 4 out of every 10 couples did not have surviving sons, this gave room for the transfer of farmsteads to married daughters and others. Free farmsteads often fragmented after inheritance. The selling of these inherited parts promoted the move from hereditary land tenure to a land market from the tenth century onwards. On the one hand this land market

opened up possibilities for land accumulation of individual households, on the other hand more and more free land fell into the hands of the lords.

In northern France and the Low Countries inheritance was usually divided quite equally between surviving sons and daughters; however exceptions to this general rule, such as those pertaining in Normandy, the Paris Basin and the Frisian parts of the Low Countries, remained important. In England, unequal systems of succession prevailed from the late middle ages onwards. Under the system of primogeniture younger sons received some small pieces of land or were helped with an apprenticeship, while daughters were provided with dowries of moveable goods or money. The position of widows was relatively weak; they received usually only a third of their husband's land during their lifetime. Also here, regional diversity remained important, such as the system of equal division between all sons in Wales. One individual inherited the land while his co-inheritors were compensated with rents.

One of the factors defining inheritance practices was the difference between partible and impartible holdings. In Denmark and Norway, for example, freeholders were prohibited by law from dividing their holdings. In north-western Germany and large parts of the Low Countries and Scandinavia the farm holding was not divided between the children, but was taken over by just one heir, who compensated the others for their part of the inheritance. In some regions like north-western Germany this could result in a kind of primogeniture with the oldest son succeeding. Other systems were also possible like ultimogeniture with the youngest son or the youngest daughter taking over the family holding. This strong family-land bond, as for example in early modern Germany, promoted the continuation of the family farm and a preference for the succession of sons. Elsewhere, as in parts of the Low Countries and France, the continuation of family lineage seems to have been of less importance in the early modern period with numerous farms being passed to strangers. Family holdings were divided, with the exception of the large tenant farms, causing land ownership to become very scattered, with numerous freehold peasants owning several tiny plots of land. With each generation, these plots were redistributed among the heirs, exchanging, buying and selling these plots without much signs of attachment to the family land. After marriage a couple started a process of land accumulation, which was partly made possible by dowries and inheritances. After about the age of 55 the size of the land holdings of a household started to diminish again, freeing land for the next married generation. In this way the size of the land holdings of a household remained more or less in accordance with the available labour supply in the household, which of course changed considerably over the family lifecycle.

The transfer of a farm to off-spring was one of the main ambitions of the family in most rural households until the nineteenth century. This transfer was not automatic, hampered as it was by a preference for neolocality. In Scandinavia, for instance, a married child was normally only allowed to take over the farm holding after the death of at least one of the spouses of the older generation. Often, intervivos transfer contracts were concluded in order to guarantee members of the former generation the livelihood on the farm or in a separate house. Comparable retirement contracts can be found elsewhere in north-western Europe. In early modern Sweden and parts of Germany, a strong emphasis was placed upon preserving the family lineage on the farm, thus restricting the rights of newcomers who opportunities tended to be confined to remarriage of a widow or widower. In other North Sea regions the new (and often younger) spouse was able to keep control of the farm. Recurrent remarriages clearly complicated practices of succession and division. In rural England and in the coastal parts of the Low Countries, the concern for the continuity of the family farm seems to have been considerably less, partly due to the increasing number of landless or nearly landless rural households. Within these social groups household formation and the place of settlement were mainly related to the income opportunities of the new couple and less to the acquisition of parental resources upon marriage. In some parts of England, an extensive land market for

tenures existed already in the thirteenth century opening up ways for more well-to-do households to acquire land in other ways than by (post-mortem) inheritances. In early modern England, France and the Low Countries this land market increased considerably, often resulting in the transfer of land and farms to non-family. In early modern Scandinavia and north-western Germany on the other hand the alienation of holdings happened less frequently. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many of the fundamental features of family farming persisted, despite the fast-changing environment. Much more than other social groups, farmers continued the old marriage and inheritance strategies. Both the viability of the farm and a fair distribution of property and resources to offspring remained important goals for the rural family. Since the late nineteenth century, succession strategies changed due to more income alternatives outside agriculture. One of them was to strengthen the non-successors' human capital through schooling instead of guaranteeing large marriage dowries. The mechanisation of farming implied the use of capital instead of labour, making it more difficult to give money to non-successors, while simultaneously reducing the need to keep them on the farm. The new problem farmers faced in the twentieth century was how to find a successor among their declining number of children. Not only had it become harder for a successor to compensate the siblings for their legal share in the increasingly more expensive family farm, the take-over had also become less attractive due to the rise of real earnings and improvements in the standard of living outside agriculture. For the same reasons young farmers frequently had difficulties finding a partner.

Pre-modern rural households were run by a working couple, with unequal legal rights but in practice with equal responsibilities. In legal terms, in medieval, early modern and, to a lesser degree, modern times rural households were strictly patriarchal, with the male head having full authority to act on behalf of his family, while the rights of his wife, children and other members of the household were limited. There is evidence that at the end of the middle ages improving property rights of widows and a diminution of the age differences at marriage strengthened the negotiation position for married women. In fact, the power division within the household was more equal than legal arrangements suggest, a situation that changed again in the late nineteenth century, with the development of a more unbalanced relationship between breadwinner and housewife.

There is ample evidence that in the high middle ages a clear gender division in agricultural labour existed, enforced by cultural norms. Men ploughed and worked in the fields and the forests, while women took care of the children, cleaned the house, kept the garden and cared for the animals near the house. Only in busy harvest times did both sexes work together in the fields. Part of these gender differences were related to gendered capacities, with men doing the physically heaviest tasks. This gendered division of labour restricted female family members mostly to the domain of the farmstead, while males dominated the public sphere. This division of farm work between the sexes remained by and large the same until the twentieth century. By then mechanisation changed the nature of the activities on the farms drastically, partly mixing up the gendered activities inasmuch as physical strength became less important to accomplish tasks. Because women had a very specific role in agriculture and in most proto-industrial activities, their presence was indispensable in most households. The gendered division of work made a certain balance between able-bodied males and females in the household necessary. Shortages in family labour supply were filled by hired labour. From the middle ages onwards an increasing number of households with small land holdings exchanged their labour surplus with larger farm holdings. Their grown-up children usually became life cycle servants. In this way, the local labour market and the life cycle servant system smoothed out discrepancies between supply of and demand for male and female labour inside the individual households.

In many rural regions, such as the southern Netherlands from the twelfth century, and the Scandinavian woodlands and the regions around Osnabruck (Germany) from the sixteenth century, the increasing number of smallholders was accompanied by the rising proto-industrial demand for both male and female work. Proto-industrial work also had a strong gendered character, but not in ways that were immutable. Weaving, for example, was mostly a male task, except in Sweden and Norway where it was predominantly done by women. Everywhere, women were employed as spinners in wool and cloth production. Rural industries flourished mostly in regions dominated by small mixed farms. The combination of small-scale farming and rural industry offered most household members extra security against harvest failures and trade fluctuations. Rural specialisation in economic activities partly directed to local markets (handicrafts, transport, trade) also gained in weight in early modern Europe.

This process of specialisation accelerated all over the north-western European countryside during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, alongside the retreat of agriculture as the prime economic sector. The rise of income possibilities in large scale industry, trade and services transformed the former family economy into a family wage economy, and at the end of the twentieth century into a more 'individualistic' wage economy. As said this affected, in relation to more social provisions and a steep rise in welfare, the female position in the household economy. With the rise of the male bread-winner model, the work of married females was increasingly restricted to taking care of the home and the children, with only limited possibilities for (mostly less-rewarded) economic activities. The traditional central female function in the rural household economy faded away, alongside the rapid decline of independent family businesses (whether a farm, a shop or a trade). Since the 1960's, the female emancipation movement and a strong increase in female education levels, opened up better-paid jobs for women. At the start of the twenty-first century, however, male and female positions on the labour market remain unbalanced, since married females interrupt their professional career and still perform most of the tasks inside the house.

The position and the life cycle of children below the age of 12-14 in rural households radically changed during the second millennium. There seemed to be a slow increase in investment by the parents in their (broader) education, partly forced by external institutions. With the introduction of a village education system in the early modern period, children (more often boys than girls) aged 6 to 12 usually went to school during certain periods of the year (winter). It was common for young children to perform specific tasks on farms, especially during busy harvest times. In keeping with their physical strength, their role in household production increased between the age of 12 and 16. At those ages, juveniles from the lower social strata became live-in servants in more wealthier households. Everywhere in north-western Europe the role of children in the household economy diminished drastically during the twentieth century. The prime causes were the creation of a compulsory schooling system until the age of about 16, and the strong rise in opportunities for full-time education beyond the age of 16. This development implied a major shift in the position of children as active contributors to the household income, to investors in their own future.

### **13.3 The family and income**

The most striking continuity in the household economy of the agricultural population between 500 and 2000 concerns the access to land. Although its legal status, its distribution and its value changed drastically over the course of fifteen centuries, land remained intimately connected to agricultural production. Fields however do not produce crops by themselves. Land, in combination with labour, enables the rural population to exploit natural resources. A

bird's eye view of the changes taking place between 500 and 2000 indicates that rural societies around the North Sea have successfully managed, albeit in a slow and very uneven way, to release labour from agriculture. In terms of labour productivity, the track record of north-western Europe is impressive. The chapters in this book reveal that all rural regions experienced a gradual shift from an almost purely agrarian society to a more diversified rural economy in the long run.

Between 500 and 2000 different cycles and chronologies can be observed in the relationship between agricultural production and labour organisation. Some forms of labour emerged during this period and then disappeared again. For example, agricultural day labourers were probably as scarce around 1000 as they are in present-day north-western Europe. Geographical differences within the North Sea area were also important. Whereas early modern England was marked by a clear tendency towards a growing number of landless labourers, the vast majority of the rural population in France did have access to property rights. Diverging forces and institutions profoundly influenced household labour and economies at the regional level too. In the Low Countries, for instance, differences can be observed between the coastal plains and the inland regions. In the former, farm engrossment from the sixteenth century onwards led to a greater number of wage dependent labourers compared to the hinterland where a small holding served as the most important source of income for the rural population. Nevertheless, it is possible to discern some significant trends that characterised the rural communities around the North Sea and how they used their local pool of labour.

The overviews in this volume indicate that the self-contained and risk-averse peasant household was at no stage, either geographical or chronological, the dominant form of rural production. The idealtypic 'Chayanovian' peasant family and holding is an interesting analytical category, but proved to be rather absent in north-western Europe. Historically, one of the most important challenges for rural producers was the control over their own labour power. The rural population of north-west Europe gradually attained the right to dispose of their own labour. Although serfdom remained a legal reality in some regions (for instance, in England) until the sixteenth century, the late medieval period generally marked the end of serfdom in Europe. In Scandinavia for example, the late medieval population crisis accelerated this process. By the end of the middle ages, most of the rural population around the North Sea had managed to free themselves from the manorial economy and especially from the labour services imposed upon them by the lords. Coerced labour gradually disappeared and, as a result, enabled households to develop a labour strategy largely independent from the manor and its lord. Although peasant families and the manorial economy remained intricately linked for many centuries hereafter, labour was now fully rewarded and choices could be made more freely in terms of household labour allocation and mobility.

The late medieval and especially the early modern period were characterised by forms of labour organisation that were increasingly complex and varied. A market for labour gradually emerged and governed the decisions of the rural households from then onwards. The Black Death, and the labour shortages arising from the demographic decline, accelerated this emergence of a labour market. Almost everywhere in Europe the first attempts at introducing some form of labour legislation (mostly pertaining to the level of wages and mobility of the labour force) can be traced to the second half of the fourteenth century. This suggests that rural households made the most of the opportunities offered to them by scarcity of labour. The late medieval period was marked by a new configuration of labour that continued to spread in the following centuries. The Black Death had created the optimal demographic conditions that enabled rural households to earn a living outside the boundaries of their own holding. Although England and the northern Netherlands displayed distinct trends towards a growing

share of landless labourers by the early modern period, in most regions however, the bulk of the household incomes was still derived from their own holding. On these farms household members combined forces to produce a variety of foodstuffs that were used first and foremost for their own consumption.

One of the most significant changes concerned the nature and the sources of household income. Holdings gradually developed into production units that extended their reach beyond the typical agrarian activities. Production on agricultural holdings became increasingly diversified throughout the early modern period. The chapters in this volume illustrate that vast numbers of the rural population engaged in activities other than traditional agriculture. Proto-industrial production or rural industries flourished in north-western Europe during the early modern period. Populations in these regions were in particular active in textile production such as wool and linen. In Denmark and eastern Belgium rural household also engaged in the production of potteries and iron. In some regions it was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that these industrial bye-employments ceased to exist; in Sweden many rural industries thrived until well into the first half of the twentieth century. The nature of these bye-employments were strongly determined by local conditions. In the Low Countries for example, urban textile industries triggered the expansion of proto-industrial textile production in the surrounding countryside. In coastal communities it was not uncommon to combine agriculture with commercial fishing activities. During the early modern period many of the rural households in these regions ceased to be purely agricultural producers. In the economically most advanced parts of the Low Countries an important section of the population already relied on non-agricultural production as a vital part of their household economy since the late middle ages. The rural industries continued to flourish until production in centralised units such as factories proved to be less costly. But in hindsight, industrialisation started in the countryside.

To what extent these new forms of activities and sources of household income fundamentally changed the dynamics governing household decisions has been intensely debated by historians. Although in some regions rural industries had an impact on the size and composition of the household and interacted with the process of household formation, these influences were not a general rule. In some parts of England the spread of textile production in the countryside resulted in a lower age at first marriage. In Flanders, an opposite trend can be discerned: the age at first marriage rose and fewer adolescents set up a household in proto-industrial areas. Although different forms of proto-industrial activity can be observed in north-western Europe, no universal proto-industrial economic model has been identified. Most historians however agree that the combination of agricultural and industrial production did have an impact on the use of household labour. Directly or indirectly, the activities of one or more members of a household in non-agricultural activities produced some economic effects. One of these effects was the more efficient use of the work capacities of the household group. As a result of these industrial activities, more members of the household engaged in work and the number of work hours performed by all members of the household probably increased. The rise in the number of activities concentrated on one holding was not necessarily restricted to small holdings. Large farms too were production sites that were characterised by a growth in the variety of activities performed. Although in some regions large farms tended to specialise in specific crops or cattle, in other regions the economic elite of the countryside also turned their activities to commercial textile production or brewing.

Around 1800 the nature of economic activities in the countryside was quite different from around 1000. Rural households engaged in a number of activities that were no longer agricultural. The occupational structure of rural communities had also changed fundamentally as a result of this growing diversification of rural production. The number of rural artisans, catering to the needs of both large and small farms, gradually increased. Next to the

traditional blacksmith, also shopkeepers, shoemakers and carpenters made their appearance in rural communities. From an occupational viewpoint, there was a growing urbanisation of the countryside. This latter trend was only reversed in the second half of the twentieth century. Rural industries were important in the countryside and still continue to absorb some of the household labour in present-day Europe. The period stretching from the middle of the nineteenth to the third quarter of the twentieth century was characterised by a retreat from non-agricultural activities on farms. To a large extent the disappearance of rural industries also resulted in the gradual disappearance of the small farm. In Sweden and Norway, where industry took hold of the countryside, industrialisation seems to have been accompanied in the late nineteenth century by an increase in the number of small freehold farms, and a decrease in crofts and cottages.

A second feature, next to the growth of various types of bye-employments, that characterised rural households during this long period is the growing importance of agricultural labour performed outside the context of the individual household unit. In other words, agricultural labour was increasingly sold to other economic agents in the countryside. Households sold their excess labour power to farms that lacked intra-household labour. In most cases, household members of small farms worked on larger holdings during the peak moments in agriculture. Again, differences in scope and intensity can be observed within north-west Europe. For instance, around the middle of the eighteenth century c.60 per cent of the population in the German district of Belm had no access to land and were forced to earn a living through wage labour. In England and the northern Low Countries a similar social structure can be discerned. In most of northern France and the southern Low Countries however, there were few agricultural day labourers that were employed all year round by large farms. There was nonetheless an undeniable trend towards a greater reliance on wage labour as a complementary source of income. Population growth, the subdivision of holdings, farm engrossment, and so on. all contributed to the emergence of a labour market for agricultural labour. In most cases this labour market was local; small farms sold their labour to larger holdings in the same parish.

During the sixteenth century more complex forms of labour organisation emerged. The development of migrant labour is in fact an important episode in the rural history of north-west Europe. In the regions directly bordering the North Sea, migrant labourers can be encountered from the late sixteenth century. In most cases these migrants were active in harvest labour, but also non-agricultural enterprises depended on migrant labour (constructing dikes, for example). Members of the rural household had to migrate beyond the borders of their own parish in order to secure a livelihood and part of the household income was generated at some physical distance. After 1750 these migration patterns became more intense and a substantial part of the labour performed during peak seasons in agriculture was not hired locally anymore. After 1850 migration continued to be a factor of importance for rural households, but employment patterns also changed at this time. Industry started to replace agriculture as a source of income for rural households. This does not mean that farms in the twentieth century no longer depended on income derived from non-agricultural labour. A large share of households active in agriculture had members employed as wage earners in different sectors. For the vast majority of the rural populations in north-west European, in past and present, agricultural production proved thus to be unsatisfactory in order to make ends meet. Rural industry (or non-agricultural bye-employment) and wage labour were in fact two of the main characteristics of employment in the North Sea area. Historians disagree on the origins of this pattern. Whilst some have argued that changes in household production and labour organisation were primarily driven by economic necessity, others have advanced the theory that market opportunities explain these developments.

The chapters in this volume also reveal some other characteristics. Everywhere in Europe, common land and common rights gradually vanished. In Flanders, for example, common land had already disappeared by the late middle ages. In early modern northern Germany common land was steadily integrated in agricultural holdings. Common land, and access to communal resources, survived in England and France well into the nineteenth century but were almost extinct by the onset of World War I. For the households with access to common land and rights, the income that could be derived from them was not unimportant. Some historians have argued that the loss of common rights, such as the right to pasture cattle, collect firewood, etc. resulted in a net financial loss for the household economy that needed to be compensated for by other forms of household income. On the short and medium term the decline of the commons and the restricted access to common rights produced serious challenges to the household economy. The gradual disappearance of common land and rights as a source of household income indicates that rural households came to depend less on more communally governed means of production.

With regard to the household economy of the rural population, the overviews in this book also stress the importance of credit facilities and networks in the countryside. In fact, credit emerges as a factor of economic significance at a fairly early stage. Usury legislation and the frequent references to debt litigation in late medieval court rolls suggest that the rural families already greatly relied on credit. In the following centuries a vast number of sources testify to the importance of credit for rural households.

Although credit did take diverse forms across time and space, some elements are characteristic of north-west Europe. First, the use of credit was closely linked to the availability of coin and the money supply. Many of the credit transactions used in rural communities were the result of coin shortages. In other words, the value of all goods and services produced and sold in the countryside vastly exceeded the money supply. Credit was a collective strategy to overcome the problem of scarcity of money. In these cases, loans and deferred payment were closely linked to the kin group and the local or village community. For large loans, peasantries frequently resorted to urban moneylenders. Second, the use of credit was clearly linked to events that were crucial in the life course of a household. Large loans contracted by the rural population were in many cases closely connected to the acquisition and the transfer of land. As a market in land accelerated, credit facilities and instruments were introduced that enabled rural households to finance these transactions. Third, credit was also extended by urban entrepreneurs and traders to peasants to optimise production. Especially in proto-industry, credit permitted rural households to acquire the necessary tools and materials to engage in production. This however does not mean that all credit was beneficial to the rural population in the long run. In France, for example, the expropriation of the peasantry in favour of urban citizens was preceded by an upsurge in debts contracted with the latter. There were certainly risks attached to the use of credit, but it is now also apparent that the widespread use of credit contributed to the market involvement of the rural population.

In the course of the nineteenth century credit facilities institutionalised. Banks and other credit institutions took over the role of the amalgam of credit relations that existed during the previous centuries. From that time onwards, credit was increasingly separated from the village communities and a more impersonal market emerged. Financial institutions, and no longer individuals, supplied the credit that rural producers needed.

#### **13.4 The family, the local community and the state**

The interactions of rural households with the larger social, religious and political forces within and beyond the community constitute the last topic in this volume. Again, the interactions were complex, and in some cases highly unique. This was the case in Denmark, for instance, where the old feudal order remained intact much longer than in the rest of the North Sea area. In most regions, discontinuity characterised the long term relationship of rural households with upper-level institutions such as the lord, the village council, the church and the state.

During the early middle ages the manor was not only the centre of economic activity in the village, it also monopolised political and social life. It can be considered the most important external force in the daily life of rural populations around the North Sea. In the following centuries this pattern drastically changed because the lord lost his monopoly of power. The roles once assumed by the lord and the manor were taken over by a number of new institutions in most of north-western Europe between the ninth and thirteenth centuries. Many of these also continued in existence until quite recently. Thus, in northern France and north-west Germany, village institutions developed during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. These institutions consisted mainly of associations of rural populations at the village or community level and ruled a variety of local activities. Some associations were established in order to impose a structure upon economic life, whereas others also served a more spiritual goal. Already, from the seventh and early eighth centuries, certain forms of these organisation can be observed. However, it was not until the twelfth century that village councils, priests and poor relief institutions were regularly installed across north-western Europe. This process was related to the development of numerous villages, often with a church, as a result of the accelerating growth of population since the tenth and eleventh centuries.

As said, throughout the late medieval and early modern period the power of the lord declined, both in economic and political terms. Firstly, from the later middle ages, the lord no longer enjoyed a monopoly on surplus extraction. The emergence of the nation state and state taxation fundamentally changed this pattern. Surpluses produced in the countryside had to be shared with others. The conversion of many seigniorial rights from payments in kind into fixed payments in cash gradually eroded the income and economic power of the lords. Second, in terms of political power, the influence of the lord on village life also declined. For example, litigation in the countryside was no longer restricted to the manorial court. Cities, but also the central state, assumed some of the political and legal roles that had been traditionally reserved to lords. They did however retain a powerful position as landowners. Extensive property rights ensured that they continued to be important political and economic agents within rural communities. Lords also continued indirectly to exert their influence. In some associations such as the village council, the representatives of the lord (in many cases his tenant farmers) continued to safeguard his interests as landowner. As such, lords did not disappear completely from the countryside. Their power however clearly dwindled throughout the early modern period. The French revolution witnessed the abolition of feudalism and lordship in most north-western European regions. In regions unaffected by revolutionary legislation, lords continued to be a factor of importance. In Prussia, for example, lords and nobility enjoyed the right, until the middle of the nineteenth century, to reclaim land when peasants passed away without heirs. Lords, then, did not disappear from the countryside, but their influence was gradually restricted.

Contrary to the experience of the manor and the lord, the village council was an institution that grew in importance during the late middle ages and the early modern period. The role of these different types of village councils was twofold. They played an important part in regulating and organizing intra-community economic life and also acted as an intermediary between the state and the rural household. As such they constituted an important factor for the rural population. The village councils were not democratically composed, and the decision-

making process was strongly influenced by the representatives of the lord and the most important landowners. Both freeholders and tenants took part in the decisions, whilst the landless were usually excluded. It was not until the nineteenth century that measures were taken to democratise the composition of the village councils. As said, the councils regulated many aspects of economic life: they set the dates for the start of the harvest, decided upon communal crop rotation schemes and maintained local infrastructure such as roads and waterways. In some cases they also administered common land and rights. In Britain and in continental western Europe, village councils also interacted with the state, whilst in Scandinavia this interaction usually took place via district courts. The village council, or, in Scandinavia, the district court, were the institutions through which national legislation was enacted and applied at a local level. As such they constituted an important link in the process of state formation during the early modern period. In some regions village councils were responsible for distributing the burden of taxation and collecting state taxes. From the nineteenth century on, the power of these village councils gradually eroded. The political-decision making process shifted to higher political echelons, first to the national state, and in the second half of the twentieth century to Europe. At present the European Union is the most relevant level in terms of rural and agricultural policies.

In short, the role and impact of the village community, or some such entity, changed profoundly during the last millennium. During the late medieval and early modern period, its power and influence, both internal and external, expanded, but during the last two centuries village communities and their like have experienced a steady erosion of their political power. As a result, farmers and agricultural producers have largely retreated from political life at the local level. This withdrawal is not only caused by the decreasing number of farmers in the village, but also because their contribution to the local economy has become less important after the Second World War. Farmers' unions are today of far greater importance in terms of political organisation than are local governments.

At the local level, the church was equally a factor of importance for many centuries. It is however difficult to isolate the church as a separate influence from other actors such as the state and the lords before the middle ages. The church, embodied by the presence of one or more priests in the village, interacted with rural households in a number of ways. Next to its spiritual functions, organising rituals and administering sacraments, the church was deeply involved in the economic and social life of rural families.

Firstly, the church was directly involved in agricultural life. Church taxes, and especially tithes, were quite common throughout north-western Europe. The church continued to benefit from the proceeds of local rural production through tithes until the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Like many other medieval forms of surplus extraction, the importance of tithes gradually declined during the early modern period. In all regions studied in this book, tithes had disappeared by the second half of the nineteenth century. Secondly, the church also governed daily life in rural communities. Like village councils, they mediated the relations between their parishioners and higher administrative echelons. More importantly however, the church also intervened in the household decision-making process. Especially with regard to the process of household formation, some regions displayed examples of significant influence on the timing of marriage and reproduction. The church, for example, justified the pattern of late marriage and sometimes discouraged second marriages. Interference in the context of household fertility, in particular the discouragement of birth control, had also been established long before the onset of the twentieth century. The ability of a household to deploy its productive potentials, especially labour, was thus highly influenced by religion. That said, during the nineteenth century the impact of the church in the countryside, both economically and ethically, declined significantly. Finally, the church also played an important role in the

distribution of welfare in the countryside, and retained this role until well into the twentieth century. Originally, one third of the proceeds of ecclesiastical tithes were distributed to the poor. During the late middle ages and sixteenth century the church however lost the monopoly on rural poor relief and had to share the responsibility with lay welfare associations. Most village communities financed welfare expenditure through charitable donations. These contributions were aimed first and foremost at the deserving poor of the local community. In the lists of recipients, the non-active population was dominant: orphan children, widows, the elderly and disabled people. In most regions discussed in this volume, poor relief in the countryside continued to be financed through charitable donations until the nineteenth century.

At that time, there was a clear shift in the nature of welfare provision. The state intervened more actively in these matters and also forced village communities to raise taxes for the poor. Such taxes for poor relief had already been introduced in England around 1600. As a result, the interference of the poor law supervisors in the household economy of the labouring poor became far stronger. As English parishioners were now forced to share the financial burden of poor co-parishioners collectively, they were also more inclined to supervise the activities of the poor. The chapters in this volume indicate that, with the exception of England, welfare payments were irregular and marginal until the nineteenth century. In areas where proto-industrial activities became dominant, the pressure to reorganise poor relief was often high. Industrialisation pushed poor relief from a local concern to a national problem. For the vast majority of the rural population, poor relief did not constitute an important factor of the household economy. By the twentieth century, this had changed dramatically. Welfare revenue, in various forms, is now an integral part of the household economies and strategies of the rural population.

Throughout the previous sections, the role of the state has been scantily touched upon. However, between 500 and 2000 the rise of the state is undoubtedly the most important change in terms of external influences on the household economy in the North Sea area. At present, the state and supra-state institutions are the single most important external factors influencing the decision-making process in agricultural households. The restrictions faced by present-day farmers in organising their production are set by either national governments or the European Union. The enormous impact of the state on agricultural producers is the result of a long historical process. Especially since the sixteenth century, state structures have increasingly organised surplus extraction and raised the tax burden. Rural households have been greatly affected by these developments. In Flanders, for example, increasing state taxation during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has been linked to the growth of rural industries. The state organisation also affected rural household economies through different forms of legislation. Law enforcement, in the domains of labour markets, land markets, credit markets, common land and so on, has shaped the household economies of the rural producers increasingly since the fourteenth century.

### **13.5 Concluding section**

During the second millennium the gradual integration of large rural areas in regional and, later, globalizing market economies subjugated and transformed peasantries. It put increasing pressure on the access to their essential means of production: land, labour and capital. One of the main conclusions of this book is that within this slow but structural transformation, rural families over time and place followed different trajectories and developed diverging repertoires of adaptation and resistance. The rich and varied pictures drawn in the regional chapters in this volume show that there is not one master-narrative of gradual deruralisation. This implies that trajectories of rural transformation only can be understood within their

regional and social context, at least until the late nineteenth century. The chapters reveal in fact two important periods of change for the rural populations around the North Sea.

The transition from the medieval to early modern period was a first and major historical watershed. At the end of the middle ages most of the rural population in this area had managed to free themselves from the manorial economy and especially from the labour services imposed upon them by the lords. Labour organisation became increasingly complex and choices could be made more freely in terms of household labour allocation. These processes generated a strong regional and social differentiation. Regions with capitalist agriculture, dominated by commercial farms and wage labour, developed in the area around the North Sea. These regions were bound by two other types of peasant societies. The first combined small-scale family farming with an expanding proto-industry, thus creating a commercial subsistence economy. More distant, but still integrated in the regional division of labour, there was a more autarchic rural society with a significant labour surplus. The commodification of labour and surpluses instigated internal social differences. Production on agricultural holdings became increasingly diversified throughout the early modern period. Vast numbers of the rural population engaged in activities other than traditional agriculture. A growing part of rural income came from commodified labour, either through proto-industrial work or as hired labour outside the farm and the village. Village communities and institutions also replicated these patterns, with their inbuilt economic, social and political inequalities. Along with a gradual decline of the commons, property rights became more individualistic.

A second major turn can be discerned in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. As agricultural trade globalized, large-scale grain and food imports provoked a fall in market prices. The number of farmers started to decline in almost every region, though the timing and speed of decline differed. Surviving family farms had to reorganise themselves in order to produce commercial crops and livestock. In these farming households, family labour was more and more restricted to the nuclear household, gradually excluding all forms of labour exchange with other family and non-family relations. Non-agricultural alternatives, such as sub-contracting production, new industrial activities and opportunities for urban workers to commute from the countryside relieved the growing tension between labour and income. Expelled surplus labour could largely be absorbed by urban and rural industrialisation and by the new service sectors. Rural society separated into a smaller fraction of market-oriented, specialised family farmers and a growing portion of households with an income outside agriculture and outside the local economy. Villages in these regions suburbanised and became part of larger systems of employment, transport and trade. Regional differences were gradually fading away in favour of a much more uniform 'subrural-suburban' society.