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Eric Vanhaute, Isabelle Devos, Thijs Lambrecht (eds.)

Making a Living: Family, Income and Labour,

Turnhout: Brepols 2011
(Rural Economy and Society in North-western Europe, 500-2000, vol. 2), 347 p.

This book is the second in a series of four volumes that aims to cover the transformation of rural society in north-western Europe from 500-2000. This new series is envisaged as a synthesis that updates and broadens the scope of that provided by Slicher Van Bath in 1960. Such an overview is greatly to be welcomed, for its geographical breadth and especially for its chronological length but, above all, for the range of themes explored. The four volumes address four themes: the first addresses property and power relations;[1] the current volume addresses family formation, income and labour; while the third and fourth will address land use and productivity; and production, distribution and consumption. As discussed below, the volume is clearly meant and needs to be read as part of a series. North-western Europe corresponds to the North Sea area, based on the reasonable view that this area shares common geographical, physical, economic and cultural characteristics.

The book is organised as follows: after a very brief introductory chapter that sketches out the central themes, a second chapter deals with the period 500-1000 for the entire region. The remaining chapters are divided by geographical area: Britain, northern France, north-west Germany, and Scandinavia. For each area, there are two chapters, one dealing with the period 1000-1750 and one 1750-2000. A concluding chapter draws out common patterns and divergences for the whole region over the whole 1500 years. Each of the specific chapters follows the same template: a section on family and demography; a section on inter-household relationships; a section on income and a section on family, community and state. There is the impression of a further 'checklist' having been given to authors, thus, all give space to women, servants, labour markets, credit, commons, poor relief, even if in some cases, there is clearly little that can be said. This structure has the obvious merit of allowing for comparisons to be made across time and space, though the lack of an index rather reduces the ease with which such comparisons can be made. At the same time, however, it feels rather artificial and restrictive. There is a strong hint that the authors of the chapter on north-west Germany, 1750-2000 found this structure restrictive (p. 235: 'we are thus actually writing "uphill" against the causal logic we suggest').

On the whole, the book succeeds in its aim of providing an overview of the long-run interaction between production, reproduction and labour. The focus is on two questions: how was the family affected as a unit of production and reproduction and how did families adapt to changing economic and social circumstances. Perhaps the main strength is the authors' ability to draw out in the conclusion several key features of this transformation. First of these is precisely the centrality of the family throughout, established as the main economic actor during the period 500-1000, and dominant ever since. Even today, most farms are still family farms. By and large, this was a nuclear family, shaped by Hajnal's European marriage pattern, arguably one of the defining fea-

1 Bas J. P. van Bavel / Richard W. Hoyle (eds.), Social Relations: Property and Power (Rural Economy and Society in North-Western Europe, 500-2000, vol. 1), Turnhout 2010. See the review in ZAA 60/2 (2012), pp. 127-130.

tures of the North Sea area. Second, the region experienced some common trends in terms of population growth and decline from the later middle ages onwards. Population growth seems to have been rapid everywhere before the Black Death, with a prolonged period of decline afterwards, except in the Low Countries where the impact of the Black Death was much less marked. The early modern period saw fluctuating population levels and rates, with rapid growth almost everywhere in the eighteenth century. Finally, all regions except France, a forerunner in this regard, experienced a transition from high to low fertility levels in the period 1880-1920. Third, taking the long view as this book does compels all the authors to reflect on one of the greatest transformations of the 1750-2000 period, namely, the 'deruralisation' of Europe as the population moved from rural to urban areas and out of agriculture. Today, under 5 per cent of the population of the North Sea area is employed in agriculture. However, shedding labour from agriculture was a long-term process. One of the successes of this story is the rise in labour productivity achieved over the early modern period. In part, this was due to freedom from seigneurial constraints on labour. By the sixteenth century, most households were free to dispose of their labour. A common characteristic was that not all labour was employed directly on the holding. A range of proto-industrial activities flourished in the countryside across the North Sea area, forming part of the income and labour strategies of many households. Similarly, in many areas, a market for agricultural labour existed from at least the later middle ages. Finally, another common theme is the shift in the nature of external political power that operated on households, with the manor gradually replaced by the village community, and the village replaced by the state.

The authors also stress the variety of experience. The conclusion does a particularly fine job highlighting the differences in the demographic experience after 1750, when data are sufficiently robust. To the already known English, French and Swedish experiences can now be added those of Westphalia and Belgium, all showing marked divergences in the relative weight of fertility and mortality over time (p. 328, Figure 13.1). Similarly, patterns of inheritance and succession varied hugely. Law and custom often governed preferences for partible versus impartible inheritance, with the added complication that, before the nineteenth century, most peasants lacked full property rights in land. The family-land bond appears to have been stronger in areas of impartible inheritance, such as north-west Germany, compared with areas of more partible inheritance, such as some parts of France and the Low Countries. Having the next generation succeed to the farm could also be tied up with retirement contracts and arrangements for care of the older generation, a particular feature of Scandinavia. In other areas, such as England, the strength of the family-land bond was eroded by a growing market for land and leases. Variation was to be found not just across space, but within communities. A particular strength of the book is the weight given to describing social differentiation among the peasantry, and the different strategies pursued by smallholders and the growing class of landless labourers. Households everywhere depended on formal and informal networks of credit and kinship. Access to commons was important everywhere in the survival strategies of poorer households. By contrast, poor relief is dismissed as a significant contributor to household income before the twentieth century (p. 345), except for England.

As a survey, therefore, the book is a success. However, there are a number of weaknesses. With the exception of the early medieval chapter, a superb introduction to the period for non-specialists, all the specific chapters are largely descriptive, rather than analytical. Not until the conclusion is there much assessment of the significance of changes. The preference for description and narrative, coupled with clear prose and structure, undeniably makes the work accessible. At the same time, however, it inevitably glosses over much debate. For example, women's work is described in terms of a gendered division of labour everywhere, despite the difficulties inherent in the sources and work such as Sheilagh Ogilvie's, which finds women performing more diverse tasks than stereotypes would suggest.[2] In the interests of accessibility, bibliographical references have been kept to a minimum, with readers referred instead to the first volume of the CORN series.[3] Unfortunately, this often results in a lack of clarity as to whether the different weight given to certain aspects reflects real differences between areas, or simply differences in research traditions or available sources. One example is poor relief, which looms large in the chapter on Britain 1750-2000, but is underplayed everywhere else. Poor relief clearly was distinctive and arguably more important in England, but it is also fair to say that the topic has attracted far less research interest elsewhere (and the availability of sources may also be an issue). The only chapter that really discusses evidence in depth is the early medieval chapter, which provides a careful and cautious account that stands in sharp contrast to subsequent chapters.

Another weakness is that the family emerges from this account as rather passive in the face of change. Short-term strategies are more to the fore than long-term ones, and class conflict barely features. It may be that such aspects are discussed instead in 'Social Relations: Property and Power', but only in a couple of instances is the reader specifically referred to this volume. Reading different works in tandem will not annoy all readers, but if this is what the editors intend, then much more signposting needs to be provided.

Finally, there is surprisingly little reflection on key concepts and debates. I was surprised that Jan de Vries' 'industrious revolution' did not feature, beyond a rather veiled hint on pp. 339-40 ('the more efficient use of the work capacities of the group'). Similarly, the 'economy of makeshifts' appears only in Samantha Williams' chapter on Britain 1750-2000, though it surely has a much wider applicability, while 'agrosystems' and 'ecotypes' are used only for the Low Countries and Germany respectively. In the introduction, the authors limit themselves to defining only 'peasants', 'farmers', 'households' and 'household strategies'. Related to this is a lack of clarity as to what constituted a 'family farm', or 'small', 'middling' or 'large' farms. Different authors offer different sizes of holdings (pp. 137, 147, 200, 222), but nowhere are these different figures brought together.

Minor flaws aside, this is, nonetheless, an effective survey of a central issue in European rural history over a very long period. I look forward to seeing the series completed.

Julie Marfany
Oxford

2 Sheilagh C. Ogilvie, A Bitter Living: Women, Markets and Social Capital in Early Modern Germany, Oxford 2003.

3 Erik Thoen / Leen Van Molle (eds.), Rural History in the North Sea Area: An Overview of Recent Research (Middle Ages-Twentieth Century) (CORN Publication Series, vol. 1), Turnhout 2006.