Wouter Ronsijn, ***Commerce and the countryside. The rural population's involvement in the commodity markets in Flanders, 1750-1910*** (Dissertation Ghent University 2011; Economy, Environment and Demography in History; Ghent: Academia Press, 2014, 359 pp., ISBN 978 90 382 2103 8).

The commercialisation of the countryside is a key economic history problem. Since we do not know better than that market exchange stimulates economic growth, we need to find out how and when markets penetrated the countryside to stimulate production and increase productivity. When doing that we should conceive markets as being more than institutions for economic exchange. The old, simplistic sequence of *Naturalwirtschaft-Geldwirtschaft-Kreditwirtschaft* has long proved insufficient to capture complex processes as commercialisation. Nowadays we know that we can only understand the exchange of goods and services between people if we see them as more than an economic process, as part of wider socio-economic, even socio-cultural relations between individuals and social groups.

That broader interpretation is still a fairly recent one; ten, twenty years old at most, but it has led to a very important reappraisal of peasant mentalities. Peasants used to be seen as blindly conservative, resisting clear and supposedly favourable economic incentives to change, whereas we now appreciate that those incentives were often outweighed by the importance of networks of social exchange on which their existence depended. As a rule the goods and services exchanged within those networks had a clear price, but they were bought and sold on credit while accounts were cleared without the use of money. As a consequence, transactions and settlements remained invisible to earlier generations of economists and historians, who, taking cash as the hallmark of commercialisation, interpreted such exchange systems as backward barter.

If we accept a broader concept of commercialisation, we face a new problem: what then shapes those socio-economic and socio-cultural networks? Wouter Ronsijn took that question as the lead for his PhD thesis defended in Ghent and it does not surprise that he finds a familiar answer: the social structure and more in particular the distribution of property ownership and access to property determined the way in which those networks operated. If the answer sounds familiar, it does not diminish the value of Ronsijn's meticulous research and of his results, which build up to a superb panorama of the social and economic dynamics on the Flemish countryside between about 1760 and 1910.

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For his research Ronsijn focused on two east Flemish regional market towns, St. Niklaas and the somewhat smaller Oudenaarde, and their *hinterland*. Both towns are equidistant, some 30 kilometres, to the supraregional centre of Ghent, Oudenaarde to the southwest, St. Niklaas to the east. For each region Ronsijn examined closely the evolution of property distribution, farm prices, farm production, product flows and sales, and the character and regulation of the actual product markets in Oudenaarde and St. Niklaas. That careful reconstruction enables him to document how, at every step, deep social and economic changes had a profound impact on the markets of Oudenaarde and St. Niklaas, whose character changed to suit the new patterns of production and consumption. He also shows convincingly that the costs of market transactions at no time hindered access.

Ronsijn split his 150-year timespan into two subperiods, 1750-1825 and 1825-1910. Throughout that period the population in both areas proved highly responsive to changing incentives and opportunities, but not in the same way, because the local social structure shaped their response and that structure differed markedly. The Oudenaarde region was characterized by a highly polarized property distribution, a smallish number of big farms dominating numerous smallholdings. The latter were too small to provide a living, so their holders worked as labourers on the big farms and in the proto-industry, notably the processing of flax into linen. Smallholders consumed all they produced and were usually paid in kind, i.e. produce from the big farms, so they sold nothing on the Oudenaarde market. Nor did the big farms, which tended to export their grain out of the region. As a result the Oudenaarde market had a distinct retail character, selling small quantities of produce directly to consumers.

By contrast, medium-sized farms dominated the St. Niklaas region. Those farms had no need for extra hands, so smallholders had to look elsewhere for work, with interesting consequences. The medium-sized farms sold their produce wholesale on the St. Niklaas market, smallholders worked for cash in the proto-industry or as seasonal labourers in the nearby Dutch part of Flanders, in Wallonia, or further away in France or Germany. Consequently the St. Niklaas region was far more cash-oriented and its market trade livelier and on a bigger scale.

Social structures also determined the response to periodic crises. Oudenaarde proved far more vulnerable than St. Niklaas to the collapse of the linen industry during the second quarter of the nineteenth century, which destroyed the precarious economic balance of the peasants and ruptured the bonds of mutual dependency between large farmers and smallholders so characteristic of the area. By contrast, the St. Niklaas region proved more resilient, people switching from the linen industry to work as seasonal migrants or in the fledgling industries that the more buoyant city attracted. It was only following the great farming crisis of the 1870s and 1880s that the marked polarisation of the Oudenaarde region began to level as big grain

growing farms were broken up into smaller holdings and the rise of intensive stock raising opened up new opportunities to smallholders. By that time the rise of new wholesale channels and the food processing industry absorbed most farming output, supplanting the function of market towns like St. Niklaas and Oudenaarde.

Summing up, Ronsijn has produced a highly valuable study detailing the interaction between social structures and commercialisation in the Flemish countryside. I fervently hope his approach will serve as inspiration for similar studies in other Low Countries regions.

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