

## Introduction

*Economic History in the Netherlands between 1914 and 2014*

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**Keywords:** economic history, historiography, the Netherlands, Twentieth Century

This special issue of the *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* (*The Low Countries Journal of Economic and Social History, TSEG*) presents an overview of the way the discipline of economic history in the Netherlands developed during the past century. This is to celebrate the centennial of the Netherlands Economic History Archives (*Nederlandsch Economisch-Historisch Archief*, or NEHA), the oldest and most distinguished organisation in the field of economic history, set up in 1914 by the first professor in the field, N.W. Posthumus. Much has already been written about the pioneering role played by Posthumus, and about the NEHA and the other institutes he set up, such as the International Institute for Social History (IISH, 1935).<sup>1</sup> For this centennial, it was decided to focus on the development of the discipline itself that Posthumus helped to found, rather than on the history of the institutions he created. However, a brief overview of the history of the NEHA is presented in the second chapter in this issue.

To introduce the topic, we give a brief overview of the different stages the profession went through, in particular with regard to its most important sources of inspiration. During the period before 1940, economic historians were strongly influenced by German scholarship, by Karl Marx and Werner Sombart and other scholars from the German Historical School. This changed after 1945, giving way to a period in which French influences – in particular Fernand Braudel and the Annales School – were predominant. The best example of this, the Wageningen School established by B.H. Slicher van Bath, however, initially developed its approach more or less independently. In the 1970s, the international orientation changed again, and since then the Anglo-Saxon world has been the source of the most influential

<sup>1</sup> E.J. Fischer et al., *De Vereeniging het Nederlandsch Economisch-Historisch Archief, 1914-1989* (Amsterdam 1989); Jaap Kloosterman and Jan Lucassen, *Rebels with a Cause: Five Centuries of Social History Collected by the IISH* (Amsterdam 2010).

scholarship affecting debates and approaches in Dutch economic history. In the 1970s, the New Economic History, which had emerged in the US in the early 1960s, entered the Dutch scene to become increasingly influential.<sup>2</sup> In the 1990s and 2000s, Dutch economic historians fully participated in the growing internationalisation of the field and began to play an increasing role in the discipline. That this special issue of the only Dutch journal devoted to economic and social history is now published in English, is telling in itself.

We distinguish the following three phases in the evolution of the profession: the German-oriented first four decades, the French 'interlude' between 1945 and 1975, and the current (and probably continuing) focus on British and American debates and prototypes. This approach seems suitable for this brief outline, although it neglects other foreign influences, such as Flemish, which have also been important in various periods. We present classic studies by representative scholars to illustrate the three phases, and inter alia discuss the main topics and periods in which they were interested. To a certain extent, our choices are arbitrary, as the other, more comprehensive, chapters in this volume will show. These chapters cover both economic and social history, but like the introduction, with a focus on the economic as this has been the 'core business' of the NEHA.

## 1900-1940: German orientation

Although in the nineteenth century a few economists and historians had already published literature concerning various aspects of the economic past of the Netherlands,<sup>3</sup> it is good practice (and convenient for this overview) to start the 'modern' writing on economic history with the classic study by Henriette Roland Holst, *Capital and Labour in the Netherlands*, the first edition of which appeared in 1902.<sup>4</sup> As the title suggests, Holst,

2 J.W. Drukker, *The Revolution that bit its own tail. How economic history changed our ideas on economic growth* (Amsterdam 2006).

3 Studies by W.C. Mees, *Proeve eener geschiedenis van het bankwezen in Nederland, gedurende den tijd der Republiek* (Rotterdam 1838); P.J. Blok, *Eene Hollandsche stad in de Middeleeuwen* (Den Haag 1883); source oriented publications: R. Fruin (ed.), *Enquete ende informatie upt stuck van der reductie ende reformatie van den schiltaelen etc.* (Leiden 1876); R. Fruin (ed.), *Informacie up den staet faculteyt ende gelegenheit van de steden ende dorpen van Hollant ende Vriesland etc.* (Leiden 1866); and much more; see the overview by J.L.J.M. van Gerwen, 'Voorgeschiedenis', in: Fischer et al., *De Vereeniging het Nederlandsch Economisch-Historisch Archief*, 1-8.

4 H. Roland Holst-van der Schalk, *Kapitaal en arbeid in Nederland* (Amsterdam 1902); a second part, dealing with the period 1902-1925, was published in 1932 under the same title, together

a social-democratic poet, was a socialist who was in particular inspired by Marx's predictions about the development of capitalism. The problem she addressed in her book was why the Dutch labour movement was so weak – much weaker than in all neighbouring countries (including, for example, Denmark, which had a similar economic structure). The specific social and economic history of the country was in her view the explanation for the slow emergence of a conscious and well-organized proletariat. The root cause lay in the problematic transition from the merchant capitalism of the eighteenth century to the industrial capitalism of the (late) nineteenth century, which resulted in mass poverty, unemployment and a general weakening of the labouring classes.<sup>5</sup> It was a classic Marxian answer to a real socialist problem – why were Dutch labourers not much more organised and/or radical?

After this prelude by an outsider, professional economic history writing started in earnest with the dissertation by Posthumus on the history of the Leiden textile industry, published in 1908. Rather confidently, he added the subtitle: *I. The Middle Ages*, to the book, implying that more was to follow (and indeed, in 1936 and 1939 respectively he published volumes II and III concerning the Early Modern Period).<sup>6</sup> The first volume made much use of German knowledge of medieval sources, in which German scholarship was unparalleled at the time, and was clearly inspired by the German Historical School (although the Belgian historian H. Pirenne also figures prominently in the footnotes). However, the more theoretical questions about the stages of economic development and the character of the medieval and early modern economy that were so significant for this school are absent from the book. Only rarely, in a few footnotes, did Posthumus discuss famous representatives of the Historical School such as Sombart or Schmoller,<sup>7</sup> but British or French scholarship on these issues is not mentioned at all.

Much more explicit in this respect is the dissertation dating from 1914 by J.W. van Dillen, another prominent economic historian. His study of the economic character of the medieval city explicitly set out to test K. Bücher's theory of the self-sufficient medieval town, to show that it was not consistent with the evidence from the Low Countries.<sup>8</sup> Such a critical approach to the ideas of German colleagues is not present in the third example of a

with a revised part I.

5 *Ibidem*, XXV.

6 N.W. Posthumus, *De geschiedenis van de Leidsche lakenindustrie*, III vols. ('s Gravenhage 1908, 1936-1939).

7 The best example is in Vol. I on page 360, footnote 2.

8 J.G. van Dillen, *Het economisch karakter der middeleeuwse stad* (Amsterdam 1914).

classic dissertation inspired by the Historical School: I.J. Brugmans' study, *The working class in the Netherlands in the nineteenth century* cites Sombart and other German economists frequently, but never enters into any discussion of them.<sup>9</sup> In particular, the synthesis of German economic historical writings, Sombarts' books on modern capitalism, supply the framework for Brugmans' research into the social-economic, technical-economic and economic-psychological dimensions of the process of industrialisation and its consequences for the working classes.<sup>10</sup> Brugmans also studied in Freiburg, and his orientation toward German literature was so total that when he referred to developments in England he also cited German sources.<sup>11</sup>

The influence of the German Historical School was strong in the 1910s and 1920s, but gradually waned. Marx's popularity among academic economic historians was on the decline even earlier. What remained of this in the research by Posthumus, Van Dillen, Brugmans and others was a preference for quantitative economic historical data. Posthumus published major works on the history of prices and wages (also as part of the work by the International Scientific Committee on Price History), Van Dillen's studies on the Amsterdam Exchange Bank had an equally quantitative focus, and Brugmans used the very rich nineteenth century statistical data for his many publications concerning the industrialisation process.<sup>12</sup> However, the grand themes developed by the German Historical School and the even grander ones by Marx, did not resonate anymore in the many books and articles that were published. The two major studies that would synthesise the research of this first generation of economic historians, Brugmans' *Paardenkracht en Mensenmacht* (*Horse Power and Human Might* is the literal translation, 1961), and Van Dillen's *Van Rijkdom en Regenten* (*Of Wealth and Regents*, 1970), were impressive summaries of the knowledge built up since the start of the century, but they did not link their findings to international debates or theoretical issues.<sup>13</sup>

9 I.J. Brugmans, *De arbeidende klasse in Nederland in de 19<sup>e</sup> eeuw (1813-1870)* (Den Haag 1925).

10 Werner Sombart, *Der moderne Kapitalismus: historisch-systematische Darstellung des gesamteuropäischen Wirtschaftslebens von seinen Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (Leipzig 1902).

11 Brugmans, *De arbeidende klasse*, 33.

12 N.W. Posthumus, *Nederlandsche prijsgeschiedenis* (2 vols., Leiden 1943, 1964); J.G. van Dillen, *Mensen en achtergronden. Studies uitgegeven ter gelegenheid van de tachtigste verjaardag van de schrijver* (1964); I.J. Brugmans, *Statistieken van de Nederlandse nijverheid uit de eerste helft der 19<sup>e</sup> eeuw*, 2 vols. (Den Haag 1956).

13 I.J. Brugmans, *Paardenkracht en mensenmacht. Sociaal-economische geschiedenis van Nederland 1795-1940* (Den Haag 1961); J.G. van Dillen, *Van Rijkdom en regenten. Handboek tot de Economische en Sociale Geschiedenis van Nederland tijdens de Republiek* (Den Haag 1970).

## French influence 1945-1975

The international status of the German Historical School probably peaked in the 1900s and 1910s with major works by Sombart and Weber (although the latter was never popular among Dutch economic historians), but the synthesis of history, economics and social-democracy that they offered lost much of its popularity after 1920. For quite some time there was no intellectual alternative on offer and for obvious reasons, German scholarship lost most of its appeal after 1939. After about 1950, French scholarship developed to some extent as an alternative source of inspiration, but it was never as predominant as German scholarship had been before the war. Moreover, arguably the most innovative approach developed in this period, the Wageningen School of regional and structural studies of the Early Modern Period, was to a large extent an independent development, which ran parallel to the rise of the famous Annales School in France. Slicher van Bath's study of the countryside of Overijssel between 1500 and 1800, *A society under tension (Een samenleving onder spanning, 1957)*, had all the ingredients of a classic study within the Annales paradigm: a focus on the tension between demographic developments and economic opportunities, the intensive study of quantitative sources, the regional dimension and the contrast between structures and 'conjunctures'.<sup>14</sup> However, it was a model for regional historical research that was developed independently by Slicher van Bath himself, who considered his study an application of the tradition of 'sociography' to the past. This sociography was the study of social structures and practices of rural societies by sociologists that had emerged in the Netherlands in the 1930s, which had a clear anti-theoretical tendency (to get the facts straight first was the principal aim). Slicher van Bath applied the same method to the historical sources he found in the Overijssel archives, of which he was the chief archivist at the time<sup>15</sup>

After becoming Professor of Rural History at Wageningen University, Slicher van Bath managed to form a team of young scholars who began to apply roughly the same model to various other regions of the Netherlands. These studies, which began to appear in the early 1970s, focused on the period from 1500 to 1800, and on reconstructing the development of population, occupational structure and economic activity for each region. Friesland (J.A. Faber), North Holland (A.M. van der Woude) and Veluwe (H.K. Roessingh) were the first three dissertations, in due course followed by comparable studies on Drenthe (Jan Bieleman), Zeeland and

14 B.H. Slicher van Bath, *Een samenleving onder spanning* (Assen 1957).

15 See Chapter by Van Cruyningen for more details.

Groningen (both by Peter Priester).<sup>16</sup> The team of authors that Slicher van Bath assembled was interdisciplinary: historians worked together with agricultural scientists, a sociologist and an anthropologist – and at some point an economist also joined the group. Again, this may have been inspired by the Annales School, which had an interdisciplinary philosophy. The rural histories that came out of the *Afdeling Agrarische Geschiedenis* (the Department of Rural History) were published in the series set up by the Wageningen School, the *AAG Bijdragen*, which during much of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s was probably the most influential medium for the New Economic Historical research of the Netherlands. The influence of the Annales tradition became gradually more apparent: much of the research by Slicher van Bath and Van der Woude was consistent with ideas about the long cyclical or secular trends that dominated the late medieval and early modern economy. These ideas had already emerged in the 1930s (Wilhelm Abel), but were also taken up by Braudel to make a point about various layers of time in history – of which the secular trend was the ‘deepest’.<sup>17</sup> Slicher van Bath’s very influential synthesis of the agricultural history of Western Europe between 500 and 1850 (arguably the most important book written by a Dutch economic historian during the twentieth century), made good use of this idea to structure the story of demographic trends, agricultural fluctuations and developments in prices and wages.<sup>18</sup> The orientation of much of this literature was quite Malthusian: the tension between population growth and the supply of foodstuffs was a key theme, as was the idea of a more or less fixed productivity ceiling (already present in Slicher van Bath’s study on Overijssel). The French counterparts of this were studies by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie about the peasants of the Languedoc,

16 J.A. Faber, *Drie eeuwen Friesland*. 2 vols. *AAG Bijdragen* 17 (1972); A.M. van der Woude, *Het Noorderkwartier. Een regionaal historisch onderzoek in de demografische en economische geschiedenis van westelijk Nederland van de late middeleeuwen tot het begin van de negentiende eeuw*. 3 vols. *AAG Bijdragen* 16 (1972); H.K. Roessingh, *Inlandse tabak. Expansie en contractie van een handelsgewas in de 17e en 18e eeuw in Nederland* (Zutphen 1976); Jan Bieleman, *Boeren op het Drentse zand, 1500-1910. Een nieuwe visie op de ‘oude’ landbouw*. *AAG Bijdragen* 29 (1987); Peter Priester, *De economische ontwikkeling van de landbouw in Groningen 1800-1910: een kwalitatieve en kwantitatieve analyse*. *AAG Bijdragen* 31 (1991); Peter Priester, *Geschiedenis van de Zeeuwse landbouw 1600-1910*. *AAG Bijdragen* 37 (1998).

17 W. Abel, *Agrarkrisen und Agrarkonjunktur in Mitteleuropa von 13. bis zum 19. Jahrhundert* (Berlin 1935); F. Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II* (Paris 1949).

18 B.H. Slicher van Bath, *The agrarian history of Western Europe, A.D. 500-1850* (London 1963).

synthesised in his article *L'histoire immobile*, and Pierre Goubert's study about the inhabitants of Beauvais.<sup>19</sup>

## New Economic History 1975-2014

Slicher van Bath was probably also the first Dutch economic historian to acknowledge that a third revolution in economic history was in the making, after the paradigms developed by the German Historical School and the Annales School: the New Economic History that emerged in the early 1960s in the US. He visited the country in 1968 to study the new ideas, such as the systematic application of economic theory, the explicit testing of hypotheses making use of statistical methods, and the strong quantitative orientation. He reported these ideas in an article published in 1969, but was unable to develop a new research program in that direction.<sup>20</sup> This time the innovators and inspiration came from abroad: in the mid-1970s, three ambitious Anglo-Saxon economic historians introduced these new ideas into the economic history of the Netherlands. In 1974, Jan de Vries published his dissertation on the role agriculture had played in the economic modernisation of the Netherlands during the Golden Age, a study based on modern economic theory (about the determinants and consequences of specialisation) and mainly quantitative archival research.<sup>21</sup> Even more inspired by the New Economic History was Joel Mokyr's book on the slow industrialisation of the Netherlands, compared with the rapid growth of modern industry in Belgium, during the first half of the nineteenth century. He developed a model to explain these divergent trends, which focused on the level of nominal wages as the main cause of the process and systematically compared wage levels between the Southern and the Northern Netherlands.<sup>22</sup> The third book, Richard Griffiths' detailed study of the same topic, *the Industrial Retardation of the Netherlands*, was published a few years later in 1979, and was perhaps less revolutionary, but in many ways comparable as

19 Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Les paysans de Languedoc* (Paris 1966); idem, 'L'histoire immobile', *Annales E.S.C.* 29 (1974) 673-692; P.M.J. Goubert, *Beauvais et le Beauvaisis de 1600 à 1730: contribution à l'histoire sociale de la France du XVIIe siècle* (Paris 1960).

20 B.H. Slicher van Bath, 'Nieuwe wegen in de Amerikaanse economische en sociale geschiedenis', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 82 (1969) 206-232.

21 J. de Vries, *The Dutch Rural Economy in the Golden Age, 1500-1700* (New Haven and London 1974).

22 J. Mokyr, *Industrialization in the Low Countries 1795-1850* (New Haven 1976).

it combined detailed quantitative research with clever economic reasoning to explain the problematic industrialisation of the Netherlands.<sup>23</sup>

It is perhaps not entirely fair to attribute the spread of the new techniques and ideas of the New Economic History to these scholars from abroad. Indigenous developments ran parallel, as the quantitative work on industrialisation, growth and living standards by J.A. de Jonge (1968) and J.M.M. de Meere (1982), and papers by R.W.J.M. Bos (1979) developed ideas very similar to those of Mokyr and Griffiths.<sup>24</sup> In addition, Roessingh's analysis of the development of tobacco growing in the Eastern Netherlands (1976) was in many ways as innovative as Jan de Vries' book on agriculture in the western part of the country.<sup>25</sup> However, the representatives of the New Economic History had a clear programme, which also internationally started to take over the central position that Braudel and his network had held in the 1950s and 1960s. Further, a new generation of economic and social historians – many of whom are now the authors of this special issue, looking back on the achievements of the past decades – gradually emerged, which rose to the international challenge and reoriented towards the Anglo-Saxon world. The clearest programmatic statement of this new generation was the pamphlet *De Nederlandse geschiedenis als afwijking van het algemeen menselijk patroon* (*Dutch history as deviation from the general pattern*) published in 1988 by Karel Davids, Jan Lucassen and Jan Luiten van Zanden.<sup>26</sup> It called for a study of the long-term trajectory of the Netherlands from an international comparative perspective, with a focus on the distinctive features of Dutch society. This resulted in some debate and a research group at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study (NIAS). The group produced the volume *A Miracle Mirrored. The Dutch Republic in European perspective*,<sup>27</sup> which developed some of the ideas formulated in the earlier pamphlet.

23 R.T. Griffiths, *Industrial retardation in the Netherlands 1830-1850* ('s Gravenhage 1979).

24 J.A. de Jonge, *De industrialisatie in Nederland tussen 1850 en 1914* (Amsterdam 1968); J.M.M. de Meere, *Economische ontwikkeling en levensstandaard in Nederland gedurende de eerste helft van de negentiende eeuw* ('s Gravenhage 1982); R.W.J.M. Bos, 'Factorprijzen, technologie en marktstructuur: de groei van de Nederlandse volkshuishouding 1815-1914', *AAG Bijdragen* 22 (1979) 109-137.

25 Roessingh, *Inlandse tabak*.

26 Karel Davids, Jan Lucassen and Jan Luiten van Zanden, *De Nederlandse geschiedenis als afwijking van het algemeen menselijk patroon* (Amsterdam 1988). [http://depot.knaw.nl/2303/1/18603\\_291\\_zanden.pdf](http://depot.knaw.nl/2303/1/18603_291_zanden.pdf)

27 K. Davids and J. Lucassen (eds.), *A miracle mirrored: The Dutch Republic in European perspective* (Cambridge 1995).



A large research project in the vein of the New Economic History was the reconstruction of the national accounts for the period 1800-1940, a project led by Jan Luiten van Zanden and carried out at three universities from 1988 to 2000. This produced detailed information about economic development and structural change and helped to solve one of the biggest problems in Dutch economic historiography: the late industrialisation. The integral reconstruction of the national accounts of the nineteenth century brought an end to this great debate.<sup>28</sup> The project was followed by a reconstruction of the pre-industrial national accounts that, among other things, corrected existing views on the turning point in economic development around 1670 and on economic decline in the eighteenth century.<sup>29</sup>

Much has changed since the New Economic History first gained a foothold in the Netherlands around 1975. To start with, economic history continuously adapted new themes. Public finance is a good example. In 1985, the American historian J.D. Tracy published an innovative study on the finances of the province of Holland in the sixteenth century. The book with the title *A financial revolution in the Habsburg Netherlands* introduced a largely unexplored theme in Dutch historiography: the emergence and management of public debt.<sup>30</sup> It stirred a debate on the revolutionary character of the sixteenth century changes and in less than 20 years, a large body of knowledge was produced on the phenomenon of public debt at all levels of government (overall, provinces, cities and even villages). The large project on provincial public finances during the Republic (1572-1795), initiated and guided by W. Fritschy and carried out by a number of researchers all over the country between 1992 and 2009, deserves particular mention. It resulted in seven books and online publication of the voluminous quantitative data.<sup>31</sup> Around 1990, renewed interest arose in the classic subject of early modern international trade, on which Posthumus and Van Dillen had worked. In the 1990s and 2000s at least fifteen monographs, mostly PhD theses, and many other publications appeared concerning specific trade

28 See the synthesis of this project: Jan Luiten van Zanden and Arthur van Riel, *Nederland 1780-1914. Staat instituties en economische ontwikkeling* (Amsterdam 2000) and the Chapter by De Jong and Van Zanden.

29 B.J.P. van Bavel and J.L. van Zanden, 'The jump-start of the Holland economy during the late-medieval crisis, c. 1350-c. 1500', *The Economic History Review* 57 (2004) 503-532; J.L. van Zanden and B. van Leeuwen, 'Persistent but not Consistent: The Growth of National Income in Holland 1437-1807', *Explorations in Economic History* 49 (2) (2012) 119-130.

30 James D. Tracy, *A financial revolution in the Habsburg Netherlands: "Renten" and "Renteniers" in the county of Holland, 1515-1565* (Berkeley 1985).

31 The online data and digital versions of the books are to be found at: <http://www.historicini.nl/Onderzoek/Projecten/GewestelijkeFinancien>.

routes in Europe, merchant houses and related topics. An older debate about the character of the staple market was revived and led to an original interpretation of the Amsterdam market as a centre of information by Clé Lesger.<sup>32</sup> A major infrastructure project of the University of Groningen and Tresoar (Frisian Historical and Literary Centre at Leeuwarden), is nearing completion: the digital publication of the Sound Toll Registers 1497-1857, in which Dutch ships and shipmasters play a predominant role.<sup>33</sup> Other themes which emerged for the first time or were renewed during the last 40 years include the subjects of business history, entrepreneurial history, relationships between towns and the countryside, transport and infrastructure, the East and West India Companies, urban networks, technological innovation, insurance and risk, border studies and water management.

Equally or perhaps even more important was the expansion and thematic diversification of social history. The professionalisation into a separate discipline was manifest from a new journal that started to appear in 1975, the *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis* (*Journal of Social History*). The history of labour and labour relations was initially dominant, but new themes emerged such as migration (with the classic study by Jan Lucassen of migration systems in the North Sea region) and material culture (with the much-cited study of Delft by Thera Wijssenbeek-Olthuis).<sup>34</sup> During the last 40 years an impressive number of publications appeared on these and a great variety of other subjects, such as elite studies, revolts, living standards, poverty and poor relief, women and gender, the maritime labour market, guilds, life courses and consumption. Similar to economic historians, social historians often took their inspiration from the Anglo-Saxon world. Tony Wrigley, Peter Laslett and other members of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure left their mark on many Dutch studies such as Dirk Jaap Noordam's book on the village of Maasland in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century.<sup>35</sup> American scholars including Charles Tilly, Joan Scott and Robert Putnam were, and still are, a source of inspiration for Dutch researchers.

32 C.M. Lesger, *The rise of the Amsterdam market and information exchange: merchants, commercial expansion and change in the spatial economy of the Low Countries, c. 1550-1630* (Aldershot 2005; first published in Dutch in 2001).

33 <http://www.soundtoll.nl/index.php/en/welkom>.

34 Jan Lucassen, *Naar de kusten van de Noordzee: trekarbeid in Europees perspectief, 1600-1900* (Gouda 1984); Thera Wijssenbeek-Olthuis, *Achter de gevels van Delft: bezit en bestaan van rijk en arm in een periode van achteruitgang 1700-1800* (Hilversum 1987).

35 D.J. Noordam, *Leven in Maasland. Een hoogontwikkelde plattelandssamenleving in de achttiende en het begin van de negentiende eeuw* (Hilversum 1986).

An important phenomenon was the ‘institutional turn’ that economic history took in the 1990s, again inspired by American developments. Douglass C. North was a figurehead of the American New Institutional Economics, but he was certainly not the only one putting ‘the rules of the game’ to the fore: the laws, rules, customs and norms and their great impact on welfare and economic growth.<sup>36</sup> This interest in the design and efficiency of institutions was perhaps not only appreciated for its own merits, but also because it was a welcome addition to the field of economic history, which risked becoming exclusively focused on quantification. Among the Dutch publications with an outspoken institutional approach, we mention the programmatic inaugural lecture of Karel Davids on the relationship between economic development and changes in the institutional context in the Netherlands in the long term.<sup>37</sup> The study of guilds, institutions for poor relief and other public services also profited from renewed attention from institutional history.<sup>38</sup> A recent fine example of institutional economic history is the book by Oscar Gelderblom on institutional change in European commerce, explaining the successive rise of Bruges, Antwerp and Amsterdam as commercial centres.<sup>39</sup>

One of the most recent developments is the introduction of global history. Around 2000, this new theme was put on the agenda of Dutch social and economic historians, most of all stimulated by the very influential book by the American historian Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*.<sup>40</sup> This concept of ‘great divergence’ proved extremely inspiring for debates about industrialisation and, more generally, for comparisons of long-term changes in the economy of different parts of the world. In the Netherlands, the first systematic global comparisons started to appear recently and a great deal of ongoing research concerns global economic history, global labour history or global migration history. Dutch historians now study not only the economic history of Indonesia, but also that of China and Africa. This brings us to the subjects of the twelve thematic chapters in this special issue.

36 Just to name one of his most cited publications, D.C. North, *Institutions, institutional change and economic performance* (Cambridge UP 1990).

37 C.A. Davids, *De macht der gewoonte? Economische ontwikkeling en institutionele context in Nederland op de lange termijn* (Amsterdam 1995).

38 For example Manon van der Heijden, *Civic duty. Public services in the early modern Low Countries* (Newcastle 2012).

39 Oscar Gelderblom, *Cities of commerce. The institutional foundations of international trade in the Low Countries 1250-1650* (Princeton UP 2013).

40 Kenneth Pomeranz, *The great divergence: China, Europa, and the making of the modern world economy* (Princeton UP 2000).

## The chapters in this special issue

The aim of the present volume is to show how economic history in the Netherlands emerged as an academic discipline, how and why it changed in the course of 100 years and where it stands now. The selection of themes depended on the richness of the historiography. Every subject that has generated a substantial body of literature over longer timespans was considered. Although we did not succeed in covering every aspect of economic and social history (omissions remain regarding financial history, the history of trade and shipping, and of poverty and poor relief) we found a host of distinguished researchers prepared to contribute a historiographical paper on their field of research. They were asked to analyse the development of their field of research, to identify the most relevant results as well as the important debates and trends, and to show how these debates and trends were (or were not) related to the international development of economic history. They were also asked to look to the future and formulate important research questions that are still unanswered. Although the volume is about the (Northern) Netherlands, they were free to include the Southern Netherlands and Belgium. The authors were furthermore free to decide if a chronological or thematic structure was best suited to their specific case. Most of them preferred a chronological approach. We decided that this issue should be published in English rather than Dutch, in order to reach an international audience. It will hopefully help non-Dutch speakers to gain an overview of a historiography that has been largely written in Dutch. This decision was all the more logical, as English has recently become the preferred publication language of Dutch social and economic historians.

The chapter by Jacques van Gerwen and Co Seegers has a different character and is devoted to the NEHA itself, the organisation founded in 1914. They describe how the NEHA began as an association of people from different societal backgrounds, inspired by the German example of the *Wirtschaftsarchiv* (*Business Archives Repository*). They felt an urgent need to collect, safeguard and inventory business archives as they realised the outstanding relevance of these documents, which ran a great risk of being lost. Later, the activities of the NEHA were extended to include the formation of a library, stimulating source publications and historical research. While the original task became less important as the government assumed responsibility for private archives, the NEHA collections, thanks to steady acquisition, now belong among the most important of their kind in the world.

The following two contributions (by Keetie Sluyterman and Jan Lucassen) examine research fields that existed from the beginning of the relevant period, but completely changed in the course of the twentieth century. Keetie Sluyterman analyses the relationship between economic history and business history. She shows that when economic history emerged in the beginning of the twentieth century, business history was at its heart. During the middle decades of the twentieth century, relative isolation set in. Business history became more and more confined to studies commissioned by firms and lost contact with developments in the rest of the field, which gradually came under the influence of the New Economic History. Business history had to reinvent itself and it did so in the 1980s, when it emerged as an academic discipline, increasingly applying concepts, models and theories. Sluyterman illustrates the changing trends using inaugural lectures and similar programmatic texts. Jan Lucassen shows how the history of work and labour, similar to business history, was considered a normal topic for the first generation of Dutch economic historians. Before the Second World War, a number of good studies were published. Partly inspired by foreign examples, from the 1970s onwards an intensive revival of labour history took place, marked by professionalisation, heated debates, a broadening of topics and finally, from the 1990s, remarkably strong internationalisation. Global labour history, with its broad chronological and geographical scope and its comparative approach, is now firmly established in the Netherlands.

Chapters by Herman de Jong/Jan Luiten van Zanden and Karel Davids illustrate best the great influence of the New Economic History in the Netherlands. Herman de Jong and Jan Luiten van Zanden deal with the many debates that have raged on Dutch economic growth, a central theme in the historiography since the 1950s and fundamentally influenced by the adoption of the theoretical approach and quantitative methods developed in the US. The authors show how the traditional perception of Dutch economic growth and development underwent major corrections for all periods including the late Middle Ages, concerning not only the pace and timing of economic growth, but also its causes and character. Landmark projects concerned the reconstruction of the national accounts for the nineteenth century and for the Pre-Industrial Period. Karel Davids discusses the changing relationship between economic history and the history of technology. Innovations in this field in the US decisively influenced Dutch historians. From the late 1970s, inspired by American pioneers, the Dutch turned their attention to the wider context of technological change and the question of why technological innovation occurs. The history of technology in the Netherlands became a lively and exciting discipline, continuously adopting

new concepts such as large technological systems, contested modernisation or technological leadership.

The subjects of Chapters by Piet van Cruyningen, Ulbe Bosma and Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk are popular nowadays among Dutch economic historians, but this used to be different. Piet van Cruyningen covers the surprising changes in rural history, a research field that was all but ignored by the first generation of economic historians, such as Posthumus, Van Dillen and Brugmans. It was only during the second stage, the French 'interlude', that rural history became of consequence. It witnessed a first burst of creativity connected to the aforementioned Wageningen School, which produced a whole series of innovative, broad regional studies. A more recent and equally fruitful twist is the adoption of neo-Marxist ideas with their great emphasis on the role of social property relations, following the example set by American historian R.P. Brenner. It took even longer before the Dutch overseas past began seriously to interest economic historians, as Ulbe Bosma shows. Study of the history of the Dutch East India Company and of colonial Indonesia was barely practiced before the 1970s. The West Indies was neglected even up to the 1980s. From his overview, Bosma concludes that the East and West Indies have always been studied separately until now. Historians are now beginning to make comparisons and a fruitful new approach would be to study the economic history of the Dutch overseas empire as a whole. Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk analyses the relationship between economic history and the history of women and gender. She makes crystal clear that the fields have remained largely separate, although this is not the result of stagnation in either of the disciplines. Stimulated by innovative studies by American scholars, research into the history of women and gender strongly expanded from the 1960s onwards, but the questions and topics that aroused interest were mainly cultural and political. Economic historians in their turn were late in recognizing the relevance of gender in their work. This changed only recently and now household formation, gender inequality, marriage patterns and women's agency are increasingly seen as highly relevant for economic development.

The reader subsequently finds contributions on migration by Marlou Schrover and demography by Jan Kok. These belong to the New Social History that emerged in the 1960s and put the lives of ordinary people on the agenda. Marlou Schrover addresses the impressive volume of work by Dutch migration historians. The list of subjects ranges from transnationalism in twentieth century Moroccan migration to the Netherlands, to the change of social relationships in seventeenth century Amsterdam as a consequence of the mass arrival of poor immigrants. Migration history has

become a blossoming field, especially since the 1980s, and has benefited from an interdisciplinary approach by applying concepts such as migration systems developed by social scientists and geographers. Nevertheless, as Schrover shows, the research agenda has always been heavily influenced by actual migration flows and political debates. For the future, she suggests making more use of theories and setting up a greater number of comparative studies. Jan Kok examines the demographic history of the Netherlands and Belgium from 1850 to the present. He concentrates on three themes, all of them hotly debated and far from nearing a conclusion. The debate on the First Demographic Transition, for example, started with the formulation of the classical transition theory in the 1950s and 1960s and all of its elements are now contested: how this transition took place and why it happened. Even the notion of a transition itself is being questioned. The massive collection of micro-level data and the construction of large digital databases to reconstruct life courses during the last decades make it possible to ask a whole new set of questions, but this confronts historians with the challenge of explaining the enormous ranges of variations found. A new and promising direction in historical demography is interdisciplinary research, for example studying the role of DNA in the intergenerational transmission of demographic behaviour.

In the last two contributions by Marjolein 't Hart and Maarten Prak the attention shifts to society at large. Marjolein 't Hart takes a long-term view of the economic effects of wars, by studying not only the Eighty Years War but also the Napoleonic Wars and the Second World War. Generally, older historiography concentrated on the negative consequences of war for the Dutch economy. Recent literature provided major corrections and nuanced the general picture. The author shows that the change was brought about by the use of new sources, the application of rigorous quantitative methods and a new approach to the role of institutions in economic development. Taxes, for example, are now interpreted as economic factors able to stimulate innovation and the improvement of public finances during times of war. This chapter also shows that new, nuanced visions were not always easily accepted: innovative studies on food shortage and economic hardship during the Second World War first met with scepticism and disbelief. Maarten Prak focuses on the relationship between the state and its citizens by reviewing literature on corporatism. This word can refer to three phenomena: first, simply guilds; second, the organisation of labour relations, in particular labour unions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; and third, a particular type of society. From a historiographical perspective, the three relevant strands of research have suffered different fates. The guilds in the

Netherlands, especially those of the Southern Low Countries, are among the best studied in the world, and ideas about guilds (as opposed to innovation) incompatible with economic growth and prosperity, have by and large been proven wrong. Nineteenth and twentieth century corporatism has received less attention from historians, while studies on corporatism as a type of society, finally, remain rare. They have been written mostly by political and social scientists and not by historians. Prak proposes studying corporatism in the long term by integrating the results of the three strands of research.

In addition to the contributions above, the editors decided to pay attention to the rich collections of the NEHA. These collections include not only rare books, periodicals, reports and documentation, but also manuscripts and archival material. From these unique collections, sixteen highlights have been selected and brought together in a special quire.

## To conclude

At the end of this introduction, we have the opportunity to enquire into the results of a centenary of professional economic-historical research. The knowledge of our economic past has increased tremendously, in particular in the past 30 years or so when research has expanded at an unprecedented scale, becoming increasingly international and more professional. For the Netherlands we now have reasonable estimates of the development of the total population (including by region), of the growth of cities and the changing structure of the economy, and we can now trace the development of real income and real wages from the present back to the fourteenth century. Thanks to the application of economic theories and ideas, we have gained a much deeper understanding of the drivers of change and the causes of stagnation. Our knowledge of public finances, of guilds and of the structure and organisation of international trade has made enormous advances, while impressive steps forward have also been taken on the themes of migration, rural society, business history and entrepreneurial history.

The internationalisation of the discipline is one of the striking changes in the recent past. During most of the past century, economic and social historians published their books and articles in Dutch, but this has become increasingly rare. In the 1980s there were four journals dedicated to economic and social history and they all exclusively published articles in Dutch. In a number of steps they have merged into the current *The Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* (*Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis*, TSEG), which since 2010 has also published



papers in English.<sup>41</sup> Of the publications listed in the annual report of 2012 by the research school for economic and social history, the N.W. Posthumus Institute, those written by scholars linked to Dutch universities about two-thirds were in a foreign language, predominantly English, and one third in Dutch.<sup>42</sup> In the 1980s, it was extremely rare that a ‘top-journal’ in our field published a paper written by a Dutch economic historian; nowadays, this happens regularly. Dutch scholars have appeared on the editorial boards of leading international journals. This internationalisation has been encouraged and organised by various institutions: from the early 1990s, the Posthumus Institute (founded in 1988) increasingly focused on this and exposed its PhD students to international conferences and workshops. The International Institute for Social History (IISH) has played a leading role in the internationalisation process, for example by organising the bi-annual European Social Science History Conference from 1996 onwards. Dutch scholars are active in various other organisations, such as the International Economic History Association (which held its fifteenth world congress in Utrecht in 2009) and the European Business History Association (which will hold its 2014 congress in the same location). Finally, the intensive and fruitful co-operation with Flemish colleagues deserves special mention. From 2004, the Posthumus Institute has both Dutch and Flemish participants and in the same year *TSEG* started to appear as a Dutch-Flemish journal.

Another major change has been the rise of teamwork and large research programmes. Until the 1980s, economic historians wrote their articles and books alone, and only rarely collaborated with others. The Wageningen School had already demonstrated the potential of teamwork, but only a few collective papers resulted from the project.<sup>43</sup> After the 1980s this became much more normal, encouraged again by the Posthumus Institute, which set up national research programmes, and by funding agencies such as the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), which sought to introduce this model of project-based research into the humanities and social sciences. The Dutch research infrastructure easily adapted to the idea: distances between universities are small and networks between scholars dense. From the 1990s onward, the number of large projects flourished – to

41 See the contribution by Van Gerwen and Seegers in this volume.

42 Publications by Dutch scholars: 186 out of 270 in foreign language (69 percent); by Flemish scholars: 77 out of 154 (50 percent), Flemish scholars also published in French, source Annual Report Posthumus Institute 2012. [www.hum.leiden.edu/posthumus/about/annual-reports.html](http://www.hum.leiden.edu/posthumus/about/annual-reports.html).

43 Most famously: J.A. Faber, H.K. Roessingh, B.H. Slicher van Bath, A.M. van der Woude and X.J. van Xanten, ‘Population changes and economic developments in the Netherlands: a historical survey’, *AAG Bijdragen* 12 (1965) 47-113.

name only a few: TIN 19 and TIN 20 (Technology in the Netherlands in the Nineteenth and respectively Twentieth Century); National Accounts of the Nineteenth Century; HSN (The Historical Sample of the Netherlands); Provincial Finances 1572-1795; BINT (Dutch Business in the Twentieth Century); Women's Work in the Early Modern Period; the Sound Toll Registers Online; and Clio Infra.<sup>44</sup> This ability to work together was also exploited internationally and various research groups, including the IISH in Amsterdam, the Groningen Maddison group, and the Centre for Global Economic History in Utrecht, began to co-ordinate large international projects in the field. This further enhanced the reputation of Dutch economic history internationally. In sum, whereas in the 1970s the field was, by international standards, underexploited – and it required foreign experts such as De Vries, Mokyr and Griffiths to link Dutch debates to the international arena – in the 2000s, the Netherlands has become a dynamic international force in the discipline.

However, as always the question can be asked about the price paid for this transformation. With its increased focus on the international arena, which was accompanied by a professionalisation of the discipline, the links with Dutch society and with the rest of the history profession may have become less tight. In the 1970s and 1980s, economic and social history was considered to be the avant-garde of the history profession, and there was intense interest in new findings in the field from the historical discipline at large. This audience was partly lost, in addition because writings on economic history became more technical and less accessible and mainstream history went in the opposite direction by taking a 'cultural turn'. Although the number of Chairs and PhD students is high (the former increased from one in 1913 to around 30 now), the number of undergraduates interested in economic history decreased.<sup>45</sup> What has also changed, is that perhaps the discipline was originally more rooted in Dutch society at large. The NEHA, for example, had many hundreds of members, many of them not professional historians but business people, politicians and school teachers with an interest in the field. The board of the NEHA reflected this – it also consisted of representatives from business and politics who sometimes helped to finance its activities or commissioned projects. The transformation of the NEHA from a voluntary association (*vereniging*) to a foundation

44 See for more information about TIN 19 and TIN 20 the chapter by Davids; about National Accounts of the Nineteenth Century and about Clio Infra the chapter by De Jong and Van Zanden; about HSN the chapter by Kok; about BINT the chapter by Sluyterman; and about Women's Work in the Early Modern Period the chapter by Van Nederveen Meerkerk.

45 The annual reports of the Posthumus Institute give information on PhD students, completed dissertations and list the holders of chairs among the fellows of the Institute. See footnote 42.

(*stichting*) in 2004 symbolised this change; it meant cutting the ties with those societal groups. This change should however not be exaggerated: various groups working on business history, for example, developed good contacts with captains of industry as can be seen from the flourishing of commissioned research in recent years; the TIN19, TIN20 and BINT projects in particular were well rooted in Dutch society. These developments also reflect the changing role economic historical research plays in Dutch society. It is beyond the scope of this introduction to discuss this in detail, but we hope, and do believe, that it has contributed and continues to contribute to critical reflection on the development path of the Netherlands and the world economy. Economic and social historians have struggled for more than a century now with some of the big questions of the social sciences – about welfare, inequality, social mobility, and crisis – and hopefully will go on doing this in the century ahead of us.

## About the authors

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