Why Did Capitalism Not Arise in the Netherlands?

This collection of essays is the result of a conference on the social and economic history of the Low Countries (the contemporary Netherlands and Belgium) in the medieval and early-modern period, organised in 1994 at the University of Utrecht, ‘in light of the Brenner debate’, the well known discussion of the transition from feudalism to capitalism following Brenner’s 1976 article ‘Agrarian Class-Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe’,¹ in which a relation was sought between ‘social-property relations’ specific to different regions and the growth of an ‘agrarian capitalism’ producing for markets. A number of specialists of primarily the economic history of the countryside in the Southern and Northern Netherlands discussed this issue from different angles. Robert Brenner’s rejoinder includes a new summary of his general points of view on the social basis of economic development and a reply to specific critics concerning the economic trajectory of The Netherlands. Some of the papers in this book had not been delivered at the 1994 conference but were added later, such as the article by Jan de Vries, a leading scholar in the economic history of the Dutch Republic and early-modern Europe in general. Brenner carefully reconsidered and rewrote his original contribution considering new research results and criticisms of his approach. This must have been one of the reasons why the publication of this volume took so long. It is edited by Peter Hoppenbrouwers, professor of medieval history at the University of Amsterdam, and Jan Luiten van Zanden, professor of economic history at the University of Utrecht and author of The Rise and Decline of Holland’s Economy: Merchant Capitalism and the Labour Market.²

The CORN-publication series in which this volume is published makes up a new set of scholarly contributions to European rural history. ‘CORN’ is a somewhat artificial abbreviation for ‘Comparative Rural History of the North Sea Area’. This research

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¹ Brenner 1985.
² Zanden 1993.
network was founded in 1995 on the initiative of the University of Ghent, under the general direction of Erik Thoen and financed by the Flemish National Science Foundation. It is composed of different research units that primarily want to study long-term developments of rural society from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century. It focuses on the ‘North Sea Area’ (especially Belgium, The Netherlands, Britain and Northern France) from a comparative and interdisciplinary point of view. Hitherto, volumes on land productivity and agro-systems in the North Sea area, on marriage and rural economy in Western Europe and on labour and labour markets between town and countryside have appeared. Volumes on the state of research in rural history and on the management of common land are expected. For a group that wants to stimulate international comparative research, the so-called ‘Brenner debate’ is an interesting topic par excellence.

What is at stake in the Brenner debate is presumably common knowledge for most readers of Historical Materialism. It is a scientific discussion about explaining the differences in growth-patterns of north-western and eastern-European countries in the course of the transition from feudalism to capitalism and detecting the origins of modern capitalism in the countryside and not in the medieval cities or the growth of international trade. Brenner started with a critique of the generally received opinions on the economic development of this part of Europe: the so called ‘commercialisation model’, neo-Malthusian demographic theory, and what he labelled ‘neo-Smithian Marxism’ – the analysis of, among others, Paul Sweezy and Immanuel Wallerstein. In the course of this debate and later on, Brenner earned a reputation as one of the most innovative historians working from a Marxist perspective.

The editors give a rough sketch of the ‘historiographical fate’ of the Brenner thesis. It appears from a bibliometrical search that the Brenner debate has become a classic in handbooks and encyclopaedias of historiography and is often cited in theoretical, sociological or anthropological journals. This is however much less the case in historical journals in the more limited sense. Among most historians, the Brenner debate ‘was silently considered to have run its course’. Certainly, the discrediting of Marxism since the late 1980s has (temporarily?) contributed to this standstill in the debate. Social scientists use Brenner’s conclusion to enlighten contemporary debates, but they seldom add new relevant historical data to it. Social and economic historians have the last decade been on the defensive or sometimes seem to have lost interest in ‘grand theory’, ‘big structures’ and ‘large processes’, such as the discussion on the origin of the capitalist system. But perhaps the tide may be turning.

At any rate, if this volume on Dutch economic development provides an incentive to the pursuit of this important scientific debate, it is because a whole range of new empirical material is added which was up to now unavailable in international languages or only in a very scattered manner. Future case studies, explicitly confronting new findings with Brenner’s fundamental assumptions, might still prove very stimulating.