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Socio-institutional path dependency in the history of the medieval Low Countries. An introduction to Bas van Bavel's *Manors and markets*¹

Manors and markets, Bas van Bavel's provocative new synthesis of the social and economic history of the medieval Low Countries, offers a strong case for the existence of socio-institutional path dependency. In order to explain the remarkable regional diversity in economic development within the Low Countries, Van Bavel retraces the area's divergent histories of land reclamation that gave birth to regional-specific blends of social relations and institutions, with their long-standing impact on the development of each region. This introductory essay illustrates the explanatory force of Van Bavel's model and explores its possibilities and limitations for further research.

Introduction

Over the last decade a great number of historical overviews have been published about the long-term social and economic development of particular countries, of Europe or the world as a whole. Most of these studies primarily address economics in a *macro-economic* manner, comparing prices and wages, estimations of GDP, etc.² Moreover, the large majority concentrate on the Early Modern and Modern Period. In many respects, Bas van Bavel's recently published *Manors and markets. Economy and society in the Low Countries (500-1600)* is different. First, unlike most other such syntheses, it deals primarily with the 'medieval take-off' of economic development. Second, and more importantly, this impressive synthesis of the economic and social history of the medieval Low Countries opts for a more regional, more structural and more micro-economic approach to history. Van Bavel's chosen area of study is most appropriate for such an approach. On the one hand, in the medieval period the Low Countries as a whole were, together with Northern Italy, known as the economic 'Mecca' of Europe. Yet few studies have offered logical explanations for the early flourishing of the region. On the other

1. The present debate was initiated at a workshop at the University of Antwerp held on Friday, 10 December 2010. This workshop was made possible thanks to the greatly appreciated financial and organisational support of the Department of History, University of Antwerp, and the Vlaamse Werkgroep Mediëvistiek. The contributions in this debate benefited hugely from the vivid discussions and remarks at this workshop and afterward. For language correction, the authors are indebted to Jeremy Schreiber.

2. See e.g. the studies of Robert C. Allen, Kenneth Pomeranz, Jan Luiten van Zanden, Paolo Malanima and many others.

hand, the huge social and economic divergences within the relatively small territory of the Low Countries have puzzled generations of politicians and historians.³ In *Manors and markets* Van Bavel traces the roots of these divergences back to the early medieval period. According to him, some 20 to 25 economic regions can be detected in what is today Belgium, the Netherlands, and parts of northern France and northwestern Germany. These regions are distinguished from one another by soil and geographic conditions, and by how they were reclaimed in the Early and High Middle Ages. In many cases they were at least partially overlapping with the Carolingian administrative districts or *pagi*. According to Van Bavel, the specific set of social relations and institutions created during the medieval reclamation period conditioned the region's economic and social trajectory for the next millennium, until the Industrial Revolution and even beyond. In other words: 'The medieval history of the Low Countries is a clear demonstration of how great the degree of socio-institutional path dependency and long-term continuity in regional structures was'.⁴

To test his hypothesis, Van Bavel develops a broad encyclopedic overview of economic and social developments in the medieval Low Countries, discussing a wide variety of issues ranging from hydrological projects in the High Middle Ages to literacy in the sixteenth century. In doing so, he offers an international audience the first synthesis of the economic and social history of the Low Countries in forty years.⁵ The work is in a certain sense a prequel to De Vries and Van der Woude's *The first modern economy*, although that work addresses only the Northern Low Countries.⁶ The roots of *Manors and markets* extend to Van Bavel's own work on the Guelders river area, in which he first explored the notion of differential regional development based on different social distributions of property and power.⁷ Over the past decade he has systematically examined these divergences between different regions within the medieval Low Countries in an impressive number of comparative articles on land, labour and capital markets and on population, proto-industrial development and power relations, which have subsequently been placed in a European perspective through his contribution to the CORN (Comparative Rural

3. See the many references in C. Lis and H. Soly, 'Different paths of development. Capitalism in the Northern and Southern Netherlands during the Late Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period', *Review* 20 (1997) 211-242.

4. B. van Bavel, *Manors and markets. Economy and society in the Low Countries (500-1600)* (Oxford 2010) 396.

5. Namely since J.A. Van Houtte, *An economic history of the Low Countries, 800-1800* (London 1977), but originally published in Dutch in 1964.

6. J. de Vries and A.M. van der Woude, *The first modern economy: Success, failure, and perseverance of the Dutch economy, 1500-1815* (Cambridge 1997).

7. B. van Bavel, *Transitie en continuïteit: De bezitsverhoudingen en de plattelands-economie in het westelijke gedeelte van het Gelderse rivierengebied, ca. 1300-ca. 1570* (Hilversum 1999).

History of the North Sea Area) and COST A35 Progressore publication series.⁸ As such, *Manors and markets* is the provisional conclusion of a prestigious and comprehensive scientific enterprise, which Van Bavel undertook in close collaboration with fellow CORN members and colleagues like Erik Thoen, Peter Hoppenbrouwers, Jan Luiten van Zanden and Oscar Gelderblom.

Debating manors and markets

The importance of Van Bavel's book, both as a synthesis of social and economic development in the medieval Low Countries and as a provocative new model to explain this development, inspired Tim Soens and Peter Stabel to organise, in collaboration with the Vlaamse Werkgroep Mediëvistiek, a round table at the University of Antwerp on Friday, 10 December 2010. Experts from different domains covered in the book commented on Van Bavel's ideas and challenged the validity of his model. The contributions to the present volume reflect their respective criticisms, as well as Van Bavel's reply and the discussion that followed. It should be clear that *Manors and markets* is not a 'neutral' work: every contributor applauded the ambition of the book, the clarity of the proposed model and the author's impressive command of millenia of history in one of the most complicated regions of northwestern Europe, yet all of them profoundly dissented with elements of Van Bavel's interpretations. In our opinion, this does not indicate any weakness of the book but exactly the opposite: it demonstrates that *Manors and markets* will serve as an inevitable and inescapable point of reference for any future study in this field. In the present introductory essay, Tim Soens and Erik Thoen demonstrate the explanatory force of what might be called the 'Van Bavel model of regional economic development' and formulate some general remarks on its historiographical roots, possibilities and limitations. In the first contribution, Jord Hanus confronts Van Bavel's model with alternative theories of economic growth and living standards, questioning the role of 'socio-institutional constellations' as prime movers and arriving at a more optimistic view of the relation between instances of economic growth and standards of living. As regional divergences in occupation and reclamation in the early and high Middle Ages are central to Van Bavel's argument, Jean-Pierre Devroey and Alexis Wilkin provide an alternative state of the art of the available evidence on the topic, and demonstrate that other readings of this evidence are possible, notably with regard to the presence and significance of large landowner-

8. Most relevant in this perspective is his recent editorship of the four-volume CORN synthesis on Rural Economy and Society in North-Western Europe, the first volume of which was published in 2010: B. van Bavel and R.W. Hoyle (eds.), *Social relations: property and power* (Turnhout 2010).

ship and the development of 'manorialism'. The importance of the regional framework in Van Bavel's argument leads Petra van Dam to question the delimitation and boundaries of the different regions he adopts as more or less homogenous units of analysis. Van Dam uses the example of Holland to demonstrate that environmental and geographical conditions within a region could be both highly complex and highly variable over time. Finally, Peter Stabel answers the challenge posed by Van Bavel to bridge the historiographical gap between urban and rural economic history. Restating urban developments and urban demand in particular as independent variables, and questioning the institutional dichotomy between 'free' and 'coercive' trajectories of different regions, Stabel challenges the inevitable 'rise and fall' of regions as stated in *Manors and markets*. In his conclusion to the debate, Van Bavel replies to the challenges posed by the authors. Although incorporating some of the remarks and admitting existing historiographical gaps and uncertainties, he nevertheless powerfully restates his central line of reasoning.

A socio-institutional model for regional economic development

Central to Van Bavel's analysis is a combination of Robert Brenner's ideas about the determining role of social property relations (the distribution of property rights among social groups) and the emphasis in New Institutional Economics on institutional arrangements as explanatory elements of market development, economic growth or stagnation. The shift of Brenner's analytical framework from a 'national' to a more 'regional' level has enhanced its explanatory force, as demonstrated for the Low Countries.⁹ But whereas Brenner and his followers have by and large concentrated on *rural* economic development, Van Bavel also uses differences in social property relations to explain regional divergences in urbanisation and *urban* economic development, which is an absolute precondition for any study seeking to explain the economic development of an area where urbanisation was so powerful at such an early stage. By stressing the long-lasting regional continuity or stability of social property relations, Van Bavel questions the adaptability of institutions to market or political circumstances, which leads him to disagree with most neo-institutionalists: institutional differences in the land market, for instance, can largely be traced back to the reclamation period, which provided Holland with clear-cut private rights to land and almost no feudal or communal constraints on the land market. In contrast, in areas like Drenthe, the Campine Area or the Ardennes, communal rights to land often sur-

9. P.C.M. Hoppenbrouwers and J.L. van Zanden (eds.), *Peasants into farmers? The transformation of rural economy and society in the Low Countries (Middle Ages-19th century) in the light in the Brenner debate* (Turnhout 2001).

passed private ones, further restricting commercial land transactions.¹⁰ Furthermore, even if the institutional arrangements were similar, their impacts could be very different according to the social context in which they operated: for instance, partible inheritance in general fostered subdivision of holdings, but not in regions where most land was held on short-term lease, as was the case in coastal Flanders or the Guelders river area from the late medieval period onwards.

As a result, according to Van Bavel, the initial conditions of occupation and reclamation become highly important. From the onset – that is, the early and high medieval reclamation – each region was blessed, or sometimes damned, with a specific mix of ‘soil, social property relations and institutional organisation’,¹¹ and this conditioned further development. This might sound like economic predestination,¹² but Van Bavel immediately adds that a region’s economic fortune nevertheless remained unpredictable: looking back at the dawn of the second millennium AD, there was no reason to believe that Flanders would develop into the main locus of urbanisation and international trade in northwestern Europe, let alone that the swampy peat marshes of Holland would foster an economic world power in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Instead, Van Bavel argues that under certain political and economic conditions, some regional ‘sets’ of social property relations and institutions proved more effective than others.¹³ In this way, it becomes possible to explain how and why the economic heartland of the Low Countries gradually shifted from the Meuse and Rhine river areas in the early Middle Ages to Flanders from the tenth or eleventh century onwards, and finally to Holland at the close of the Middle Ages.¹⁴ Fertile and easily accessible regions like the Meuse Valley saw early occupation and strong development of large landownership in the early Middle Ages. In the chaotic political circumstances of the pre- and post-Carolingian periods, ‘manorialism’,¹⁵ with its strong degree of non-economic coercion, apparently offered the best conditions for safety in regional and interregional trade, capital investment in agriculture and economic development as a whole. In the high Middle Ages, the economic heartland of the Low Countries shifted to Flanders, where the strong position of the counts

10. Van Bavel, *Manors and markets*, 162-170.

11. Van Bavel, *Manors and markets*, 9.

12. See the contribution of Peter Stabel in this volume.

13. For a criticism of the precise content of these ‘sets’ of social relations and institutions, see the contribution by Hanus in this volume.

14. For a summary of this evolution, see Van Bavel, *Manors and markets*, 397-404.

15. Van Bavel uses the words manor and manorialism for all kinds of land exploitation at least partially based on non-economic coercion (Van Bavel, *Manors and markets*, 75-76). As a result, confusion may arise between bi-partite or other estate exploitation in the early Middle Ages and the rise of banal seigniories from the high Middle Ages onwards. See the contribution by Jean-Pierre Devroey and Alexis Wilkin in this volume.

of Flanders led classic feudalism to disintegrate at an early stage, creating in its place a complex balance of power between the counts, the nobility, the peasants and the cities. The Flemish model combined institutional stability and protection (offered by a powerful but not hegemonic overlord) with room for the development of myriad horizontal associations ranging from urban communities to guilds and water boards. From the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries, the Flemish socio-institutional 'mix' proved optimal, resulting in three centuries of remarkable demographic and economic growth. Although specialisation occurred and even gained prominence in some sectors of the Flemish economy, the strong position of petty producers, both in agriculture and industry, obstructed economies of scale and higher rates of capital input. Urban merchants largely limited themselves to the economic and extra-economic (through staple rights) control of trade, not of production itself. In the long march of medieval history, the economic need for safety and respect for the rules of exchange gradually became less differentiating between regions: as the political hegemony of the state had become almost certain by the end of the Middle Ages, these basic preconditions were met almost everywhere, at least in the Burgundian-Habsburg Low Countries. At that moment, the region with the most open market, where land, labour, capital, and commodities could be freely exchanged, gained economic pre-eminence. According to Van Bavel these conditions existed in Holland, where social structures had been shaped during free settlers' reclamation of the huge peat bogs. This reclamation left no traces of extra-economic coercion and no restrictions on scale enlargement, thereby facilitating decisive intensification of capital in industry, trade and agriculture (more indirectly, as much land remained in the hands of peasants). Interestingly, he discerns another region where capital intensification occurred in the later Middle Ages: the Meuse region, with its stone blast furnaces, which had been introduced in iron production around the mid-fourteenth century. Former manorial lords were strongly involved in late medieval iron production (at least in the Liège region), which suggests a prudent link between early medieval social organisation and the Industrial Revolution.¹⁶

By focusing on socio-institutional differences between regions, Van Bavel is able to dismiss alternative models that aim to explain economic development without taking regional divergences into account.¹⁷ This is certainly the case for Neo-Malthusianism, which fails to explain the relatively light impact of the demographic crisis of the fourteenth century on the densely urbanised core regions of the Low Countries. Periods of sustained demographic growth were paralleled by the expansion of wage labour in Holland and by proto-industrial development in Flanders. And the end of manorialism in England

16. Van Bavel, *Manors and markets*, 353-355

17. Van Bavel, *Manors and markets*, 380-397.

is often linked to labour scarcity after the Black Death, yet in the Low Countries the dissolution of feudal constraints accelerated in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when population numbers were booming. Urbanisation or urban demand is also refuted as an instigator of regional divergences: after all, urban demand was felt everywhere in the Low Countries and was enhanced by excellent transport facilities. Medieval Flanders offers an excellent case for this: urbanisation was dense and occurred early in both the coastal and the inland parts of the county; nevertheless, a high urban demand and very intensive urban-rural market integration accompanied the subdivision of holdings and proto-industrialisation in inland Flanders and an early transition to capitalist leasehold farming in coastal Flanders.¹⁸ Van Bavel also dismisses models with an excessive emphasis on environmental and political conditions, as they were often similar in many parts of the Low Countries with significantly different economic trajectories. However, the picture is more nuanced here, as the environment did play a major role in the initial reclamation history of a region and thus in its further development. As for politics, the implicit role that Van Bavel attributes to political conditions might be larger than initially thought: looking for a *prime mover* that makes economic centers shift from one place to another, the general political conditions indeed played a major role. Chaotic circumstances in the early Middle Ages, the rise of territorial overlordship in the high Middle Ages, and predominance of state power in the later Middle Ages apparently explain which mix of socio-institutional settings functioned best. Underneath, however, lies the idea of a ‘socio-political balance’ that stimulated economic development or social change: Flanders came to the forefront at the time its feudal lords were being curtailed by the powerful counts; its peasants gained secure property rights over their holdings, and its merchants were granted control over trade.¹⁹ Likewise, in fifteenth-century Holland no social group held clear predominance over the others. Even in the early medieval Meuse Valley, the manorial system generated clear duties and rights, and thus may have been less socially unbalanced than the alternative system of arbitrary exactions. According to Van Bavel, a decline (perhaps inevitable) sets in at the moment the system becomes unbalanced: in late

18. T. Soens and E. Thoen, ‘The origins of leasehold in the former county of Flanders’, in B.J.P. van Bavel and P. Schofield (eds.), *The development of leasehold in northwestern Europe, c.1200–1600* (Turnhout 2008) 31-55; E. Thoen, ‘“Social agrosystems” as an economic concept to explain regional differences: An essay taking the former county of Flanders as an example’, in: B.J.P. van Bavel and P.C.M. Hoppenbrouwers (eds.), *Landholding and land transfer in the North Sea area (late Middle Ages–19th century)* (Turnhout 2004) 47-66.

19. Comparable but slightly different ‘political’ analyses to explain the shift of the economic center towards Flanders were developed earlier in E. Thoen, ‘The count, the countryside and the economic development of the towns in Flanders from the eleventh to the thirteenth century. Some provisional remarks and hypotheses’, in E. Aerts c.s. (eds.), *Studia Historica Oeconomica. Liber amicorum Herman van der Wee* (Leuven 1993) 259-278.

medieval Flanders and seventeenth-century Holland, this occurred when the merchant elites took up a de facto hegemonic economic and political position, often turning to rent-seeking and exploitative behaviour and creating social, institutional and environmental disturbances.²⁰ Interestingly, this is also true for the capitalist rural production system introduced in regions like the Guelders river area or coastal Flanders: efforts to enhance labour productivity in agriculture through economies of scale and specialisation, typically associated with the transition towards capitalist leasehold farming and the competition between farmers, were mainly realised in the transition period itself. Afterwards landowners and farmers often became more interested in establishing long-term relationships of trust and mutual interdependence than in boosting productivity through fierce competition for leases.

Questions and issues for further research

Van Bavel's identification of the socio-political balance as a 'prime mover' of economic fortunes will certainly be contested. Interestingly, only months after the publication of *Manors and markets*, Wim Blockmans published (provisionally in Dutch) his synthesis of the medieval history of the Low Countries. Blockmans sees in the major economic shifts within the Low Countries – from the Meuse Valley, southern Flanders and Artois (the importance of which he emphasises more than Van Bavel does) to Flanders and Holland – a more Smithian quest for organisational efficiency, scale enlargement, capital intensification and market integration, the dynamics of which are largely attributed to capitalist urban merchants active within international European markets.²¹ As such, the political historian Blockmans emphasises economic forces, whereas the economic historian Van Bavel privileges (socio-)political forces.

Even apart from the identification of prime movers in the social and economic development of the medieval Low Countries, *Manors and markets* raises myriad fundamental questions which will undoubtedly stimulate further research. First, there is the methodological problem of the region as the preferred unit of analysis. The 20 to 25 economic regions that Van Bavel discerns are principally delimited by soil and landscape, which through their occupation history are connected to social structure and institutional arrangements.²² He prefers not to make explicit use of the concept of 'social agrosystems', defined by Thoen as regional production systems based on

20. Van Bavel, *Manors and markets*, 407-408.

21. W. Blockmans, *Metropolen aan de Noordzee. De geschiedenis van Nederland, 1100-1560* (Amsterdam 2010) 651-655.

22. Van Bavel, *Manors and markets*, 25-26 and table 2.1.

the region-specific social relations involved in the economic reproduction of a given geographical area,²³ probably because the concept has been developed mainly for the analysis of agrarian economies. For regional distinction, Thoen concentrates more on the social division of property and power and the income strategies of the different social groups in a given region than on differences in soil and landscape. Consequently, in Thoen's view, regional social agrosystems were much less liable to develop dependency and sometimes underwent profound changes over time. As such, a fertile river clay area or a poor sand district could each produce a wide variety of social structures, which is less the case in Van Bavel's concept of a region. In taking the emphasis on soil and geographical conditions too strictly, one could even question to what extent medieval Holland was indeed an economic region: apart from the central Holland-Utrecht peatlands, the reclamation of which is so central to the region's history and identity, Holland also consisted of a wide barrier of dune lands and areas with riverine or marine clay soils. The differences in social structures and economic trajectories between the three parts could be puzzling.²⁴ In each concept of economic regions, more detailed historical research may complicate the general picture as the regional analysis effaces substantial subregional differences. Thus, there exists neither 'the Campine village' nor 'the Flemish city'.²⁵

Just as regional boundaries are open to discussion, so too are chronological boundaries, or more precisely, the central emphasis on long-term socio-institutional continuity in *Manors or markets*. According to Van Bavel, inland Flanders, where manorial lords lost landed property to the peasant population in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, is an exception to a rule of general continuity in the social distribution of landed property.²⁶ However, in coastal Flanders, there were also major transfers in the social division of land: in the former region, the oldest settlements consisted mainly of free property – *allods* – held by free landowners. Subsequently, from the ninth to the twelfth centuries, the count of Flanders hugely expanded his estates in this region, thanks to his claim to wasteland, at the expense of a 'marginal' population who had previously used these lands extensively. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the count sublet most of his coastal estates in some form of customary tenure, which allowed for a steep rise in peasant property. At the end of the thirteenth century, the Flemish coastal plain had largely become a peasant society, not dissimilar to inland Flanders.²⁷ In the subsequent centuries, however, a new transfer occurred, one with progressive

23. Thoen, "Social agrosystems", 47.

24. See also the contribution of Petra Van Dam in this volume.

25. See the contribution of Peter Stabel in this volume.

26. Van Bavel, *Manors and markets*, 92.

27. This intermediary stage is largely omitted in Van Bavel, *Manors and markets*, 85.

expropriation of peasants and a transition to capitalist agriculture.²⁸ There are certainly socio-institutional continuities in the history of coastal Flanders (for instance, the high degree of personal freedom enjoyed by the peasant population and the importance of the overlord in the regional social structure), but important discontinuities must be taken into account. Likewise, for other regions the link between manorialism, large landownership, the introduction of lease holding and transition into capitalist property relations is probably less straightforward than Van Bavel suggests.²⁹ Further examples of structural change in the regional economic system might be found in other regions of the Low Countries, such as in parts of the former county of Hainaut (e.g. the Thiérache region) or the Pays de Herve.³⁰

Important discontinuities are also revealed in urban economic development and in the relationships between town and countryside. In the Flemish textile industry, production in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries evolved toward capital intensification and scale enlargement, but following the social and political turmoil at the dawn of the fourteenth century, small-scale corporative production again gained importance. As such, corporative commodity production was a secondary evolution,³¹ and the quest for socio-institutional continuity may be more complex than initially thought. Within a region, the relationship between town and country can also be subject to change over time. During the initial phase of urban development, the surrounding countryside had to create the basic preconditions for urban growth, such as provisioning of food and basic necessities like fuel, supplying manpower via migrations, and through the consumption of town-made commodities. However, in a second period, the mature urban economies often appear to have developed more independently of their regional hinterland, with production increasingly oriented towards international markets, and food supplies similarly depending on long-distance trade. By the late thirteenth century the Flemish city of Ghent was importing large quantities of grain from Northern France and later from the Baltic area.³² Seventeenth-century Amsterdam

28. T. Soens, *De spade in de dijk? Waterbeheer en rurale samenleving in de Vlaamse kustvlakte (1280-1580)* (Ghent 2009) 73-105 and D. Tys, *Een middeleeuws landschap als materiële cultuur: de interactie tussen macht en ruimte in het kustgebied en de wording van een laatmiddeleeuws tot vroegmodern landschap. Kamerlingsambacht, 500-1200/1600* (Unpublished PhD dissertation, Free University of Brussels 2003).

29. This seems to be the case for the poorly investigated Haspengouw region: see the contribution of Alexis Wilkin and Jean-Pierre Devroey in this volume.

30. G. Sivery, *Structures agraires et vie rurale dans le Hainaut à la fin du Moyen Age* (Lille 1977-1980); J. Ruwet, *L'agriculture et les classes rurales au Pays de Herve sous l'Ancien Régime* (Liège-Paris 1943).

31. See the contribution of Peter Stabel in this volume.

32. M. J. Tits-Dieuaide, *La formation des prix céréalières en Brabant et en Flandre au xve siècle* (Brussels 1975).

imported almost 100 percent of its grain supplies from abroad.³³ On the other hand, part of this disconnection between rural and urban economies can be explained by the socio-institutional characteristics of the rural economy. In inland Flanders, for instance, the declining export of rural grain to cities was largely caused by an evolution towards a survival economy with a majority of small holdings, which were incapable of and uninterested in bringing large quantities of cereals to the markets; this evolution was in itself the consequence of the socio-political evolution towards free property rights for the peasants in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The supply of labour to the cities was declining as well, since the well-functioning peasant economy kept many peasants in the countryside in contrast to areas with large numbers of pure wage labourers. In late medieval and early modern inland Flanders, the main economic link between town and country would hence have been created through proto-industrial development in the country. Proto-industry helps to explain certain production strategies in the cities, but on its own remains insufficient to explain the orientation and development of Flemish urban economies. As such, the question Van Bavel raises as to how urban development is linked to the development of the rural region in which the city is situated certainly needs further research and investigation.

Manors and markets is also a synthesis of the social and economic history of the medieval Low Countries, and as such it aims to offer readers 'the big picture' of important developments, interpreted within the framework of regional socio-institutional path dependency. For this purpose Van Bavel does not hesitate to use estimates when data are lacking. Population numbers, for example, are given from the early medieval period onwards, though the first reliable figures date only from the fourteenth or even fifteenth centuries. Even more provocative are Van Bavel's thoughts on the relation between economic development and standards of living. We previously mentioned the eventual disruption of the social balance which seems to accompany each instance of pronounced economic growth discerned by Van Bavel. For the long term, he contends that there was a decline in living conditions for a substantial part of the population throughout the medieval and early modern periods, characterised by the fifteenth-century Holland journeyman enjoying a worse diet than the peasant in thirteenth-century Flanders, whose diet had in fact been surpassed by that of a free peasant in the sixth-century Campine Area, notwithstanding immeasurable but very probable growth in GDP per capita in the interim.³⁴ The issue is highly complex, as the only reliable quantifications of income levels begin only in the fourteenth or even fifteenth century for most

33. M. Van Tielhof, *The "Mother of All Trades". The Baltic Grain trade in Amsterdam from the Late 16th Century to the Early 19th Century* (Leiden 2002).

34. Van Bavel, *Manors and markets*, 394; see also the contribution of Jord Hanus in this volume.

regions of the Low Countries. And these quantifications of real income are restricted to households fully dependent on wage labour, households which in most medieval economies were exceptions rather than the rule. For most urban and rural economies we still ignore which part of the population actually enjoyed the temporary amelioration of real income in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries – the alleged golden age of wage labour – and the steep decline afterwards. Opponents of Van Bavel's negative appreciation of medieval economic development would certainly advance a Kuznets-like development predicting a general amelioration of social conditions after an initial period of increased inequality and social problems. In comparing welfare levels in rural regions that witnessed 'capitalist' economic development, like the Guelders river area or the Flemish coastal plain, it is clear that the transition to capitalism brought higher incomes and better living conditions for a population that consisted mainly of large tenant farmers and their households; at the same time, however, the social cost was often externalised, e.g. as restrictive poor relief or reliance on seasonal labour from poorer, peasant regions. The same is true for environmental risk, which was increasingly externalised, for instance by the spatial concentration of the poorest parts of the population in high-risk areas.³⁵

To conclude, Van Bavel presents a provocative, pioneering study. In respect of both content and method, it opens many new horizons for future research. It merits a great response in scholarly circles. What will certainly contribute to its success is that, despite the sometimes difficult subjects it addresses, this *magnum opus* reads as a novel and offers a powerful central argument that is carefully developed throughout the book.

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35. T. Soens, 'The social distribution of land and flood risk along the North Sea Coast: Flanders, Holland and Romney Marsh compared (c. 1200-1750)', in: B.J.P. van Bavel and E. Thoen (eds.), *Property rights, society, and sustainable use of land in fragile and marginal environments (late Middle Ages–20th century)* (Turnhout forthcoming). The restriction of poor relief in coastal Flanders is currently being investigated by Dr. Thijs Lambrecht (University of Ghent, Belgium).