

HOUSEHOLDS AS AGENTS OF CHANGE?

Perspectives from the Low Countries,
eighteenth-twentieth centuries

Demographers as well as economic and social historians often study consumption, production and reproduction through separate lenses and with different research agendas. In reality, however, choices in each of these spheres were often closely intertwined and ultimately taken at the household level. At the N.W. Posthumus Institute Conference 2011,¹ scholars were invited to reflect upon the nature and practice of households as agents of change in social and economic history. While a strong case can be made in favour of the central role played by households in major historical transformations such as the *industrious revolution* and the *demographic transition*, at the same time household bargaining and decision makings, firmly rooted in complex social, cultural and institutional structures, contributed to continuity as well. One of the most obvious examples is the lasting impact of the larger family upon the choices and life courses of individuals – the growing importance of the neo-local nuclear family notwithstanding. The past Posthumus Conference specifically welcomed papers dealing with these issues, while considering the household as a social, economic and cultural *environment* where key decisions concerning the allocation of scarce resources were negotiated and taken, leading to the development of agency. This special issue of the *Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* presents a sample of high-quality papers that were presented and discussed at the Conference. While introducing the theme in its full historiographical, theoretical and historical scope would go beyond the possibilities of this introduction, we would like to briefly expand on the opportunities that arise when households are chosen as the principal category of analysis firstly, and highlight some of the contributions of the four papers to our understanding of households as agents of change in the past thereafter. Central to our inquiry is the assessment of households not only as being subjected to societal developments and challenges, but also as proper *agents of change*.

1. The Conference was hosted by Antwerp University, Belgium, on 12 and 13 May 2011. The full Conference program and the presented papers can be found at the conference website: <http://webhost.ua.ac.be/nwpc2011>.

Within the social sciences in general and historiography in particular households are too often studied as *recipients* of change. This is true for instance for the study of living standards describing changes in household consumer choices and constraints; for cultural and political studies explaining shifts in specific norms and values (on marriage or inheritance as well as labour input or religion) that in turn restrict or empower households and individuals; or for demographers analysing changing family formation and cohabitation patterns. That is not to say that households are considered passive performers always in the shadow behind the major structural and macro-level players. On the contrary, an impressive range of studies implicitly or explicitly connects with the concept of *household strategies*, a heavily debated and on many accounts rejected descriptive and analytical tool.² It would lead us too far to discuss or even adequately summarize the debates on the nature and composition of the household (versus the family, the kinship group, etc.), or on the relevance and usefulness of the concept of (household) strategies.³ For the purposes of this introduction the distinction between strategy and behaviour is actually not that important. What matters most to us is how household behaviour, intentionally strategic or not, may have affected social and economic change. Moreover, we are eager to find out how the individual ‘power balances’ within households contributed to the decisions that set these broader processes in motion. On a descriptive level, the origins of the choices that were made are irrelevant in understanding the extent to which households managed to bring about macro-level change, and thus alter the opportunities and constraints they and future generations faced. Analytically, of course, in order to *understand* the choices that were made and appreciate the relative weight of constraints, values, options and information in each behavioural outcome, we should pry open the black box of (intra-)household decision making and resource allocation.

2. See for example M. Anderson, F. Bechhofer and S. Kendrick, ‘Individual and household strategies’, in: M. Anderson, F. Bechhofer and J. Greshuny (eds.), *The social and political economy of the household* (Oxford 1994) 19-67; M. Baud and Th. Engelen, ‘Introduction: Structure or strategy? Essays on family, demography, and labor from the Dutch N.W. Posthumus Institute’, *The History of the Family* 2:4 (1997) 347-354; Th. Engelen et al., ‘Labor strategies of families: An introduction’, *The History of the Family* 9:2 (2004) 123-135; Th. Engelen, J. Kok and R. Paping, ‘The family strategies concept: An evaluation of four empirical case studies’, *The History of the Family* 9:2 (2004) 239-251; L. Fontaine and J. Schlumbohm, ‘Household strategies for survival: An introduction’, *International Review of Social History* 45:8 (2001) 1-17.

3. See the many contributions in R. Wall, J. Robin and P. Laslett (eds.), *Family forms in historic Europe* (Cambridge 1983); also J. Humphries, ‘Household economy’, in: *Cambridge economic history of Modern Britain. Volume 1: Industrialisation, 1700-1860* (Cambridge 2004) 238-267; J. Kok, ‘The challenge of strategy: A comment’, *International Review of Social History* 47:3 (2002) 465-485. Also consult the many references cited in the contribution to this volume by Jan Kok, Mattijs Vandezande and Kees Mandemakers.

This line of reasoning brings to light our understanding of the concept of *agency*.⁴ We propose to draw inspiration from the influential writings of Amartya Sen in defining agency as the freedom of individuals (and households) to make real choices.⁵ This simple, some might say simplistic, definition captures what we believe to be at the core of human agency: the possibility to make choices that matter and that result in real, if often very limited, consequences. The latter then are defined in terms of *functionings* and *capabilities*, Sen's particular vocabulary to express personal choice, action and well-being.⁶ Within the limits of the concept of household agency, the main issues are whether or not households can and do affect social and economic change; the ways in which extended family, kin groups, or other institutions control or constrain household behaviour; and finally the intricate relationship between individual(s) and the household. Agency can and should be understood on many levels. The papers in this volume seek out fertile grounds to come to terms with the household structure-agency interconnection. Invariably they place the household within the broader layers surrounding and permeating its members. This brings to the fore the complex and frequently conflicting relationship between households and (local) social and political institutions and power groups, such as neighbourhoods, but also between households and the wider family. Within households relationships between competing and supporting individuals and/or generations stand forefront. These levels of analysis encompass different layers of constraints households had to deal with.

In order to highlight the usefulness of the concept *household agency* in theory and historiography, we will briefly discuss three exemplary notions in which household decisions did make a crucial difference: the (*West-*) *European marriage pattern*, the *industrious revolution*, the *demographic transition*. These notions all share at least partially economic theory on household preferences, resource allocation and demographic behaviour. Indeed, fundamental insights have come from the influential, if not uncontested, work of Gary Becker on *new household economics*, and more generally the renewed attention for the micro foundations of (macro)economic theory that goes beyond debates on adaptive, rational or rule-of-thumb expectations underpinning individual and household behaviour.⁷ Building upon the so-called

4. See for example C. B. Brettell, 'The individual/agent and culture/structure in the history of the social sciences', *Social Science History* 26:3 (2002) 429-445.

5. Classics include A.K. Sen, 'Well-being, agency and freedom', *The Journal of Philosophy* 42 (1985) 169-221; A. Sen, *Development as freedom* (Oxford 1999).

6. A concise introduction into Sen's 'capability approach' gives S. Alkire and S. Deneulin, 'The human development and capability approach', in: S. Deneulin and L. Shahani (eds.), *An introduction to the human development and capability approach. Freedom and agency* (Ottawa 2009) 22-48.

7. See G.S. Becker, *A treatise on the family* (Cambridge 1981); for the original 'Lucas critique' on the weak micro-level foundations of macroeconomics R.E. Jr. Lucas, 'Econometric

Lucas critique economists have come to appreciate that structural change not only transforms household constraints but also and in many ways more importantly alters their preferences. In short, economic policy should try to model the micro-economic changes that are engendered by macro-economic policy changes instead of focusing upon aggregate data alone. This inevitably results in a continuous re-modelling of micro-level behaviour and macroeconomic policy. By pointing towards the intimate relationships between micro-level decisions and macro-economic policies, this insight has profound implications for economic and social historians as well, in especially for their understanding of the relation between households and long-run patterns of continuity and change.

First consider, for example, the late medieval rise of the (*West-*)*European Marriage Pattern* (EMP) and the specific economic and demographic behaviour it brought along. It has been argued that the late age of marriage and child birth, increased labour input by women and investment in human capital associated with the (w)EMP had fundamental consequences for economic development.⁸ Choices made at the household and individual level had profound consequences through a variety of mechanisms: reduced fertility decreased population pressure and (following a basic Malthusian logic) resulted in higher wages, which in turn contributed to strengthening the position of women on the labour market with all positive consequences this entailed.⁹

A second example focuses on the transformative potential of ‘demand-side’ shifts induced by changing consumer preferences. Jan de Vries and others have described an *industrious revolution* in early modern Europe, especially the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century North Sea region.¹⁰ In a nutshell, this view links an in origin cultural rise in demand for market-supplied goods

policy evaluation: A critique’, in: K. Brunner and A. Meltzer (eds.), *The Phillips curve and labor markets* (New York 1976) 19-46; and more generally R.J. Barro, *Macroeconomics: A modern approach* (Mason 2008).

8. T. De Moor and J.L. van Zanden, ‘Girl power: The European marriage pattern and labour markets in the North Sea region in the late medieval and early modern period’, *Economic History Review* 63:1 (2010) 1-33.

9. The education and age of the mother comprise crucial positive development parameters in Sen’s thinking and present-day development theories as well, see for example J. Humphries, *Amartya Sen’s work and ideas. A gender perspective* (Oxford 2005); and various contributions in T. Addabbo et al. (eds.), *Gender inequalities, households and the production of well-being in modern Europe* (Aldershot 2010); also A. Janssens, ‘Were women present at the demographic transition? A question revisited’, *The History of the Family* 12:1 (2007) 43-49.

10. J. de Vries, *The industrious revolution: consumer behavior and the household economy, 1650 to the present* (Cambridge 2008); see also G. Clark and Y. Van der Werf, ‘Work in progress? The industrious revolution’, *Journal of Economic History* 58 (1998) 830-843; S. Ogilvie, ‘Consumption, social capital, and the ‘industrious revolution’ in early modern Germany’, *Journal of Economic History* 70:2 (2010) 287-325; R.C. Allen and J. Weisdorf, ‘Was there an ‘industri-

to an increased labour productivity and a growing allocation of household labour to market oriented activities. These in turn generated the means to acquire ever more goods on the market. This shift set in motion a marked rise in demand, thus fuelling the take-off and eventually sustained development of the industrialisation process. The phenomenon was halted temporarily in the nineteenth century when households preferred 'leisure time' and especially investments in a culture of domesticity instead of acquiring more money. In the second half of the twentieth century, however, the tide turned again in favour of the market. This time, however, even reproductive household functions were 'transferred' outside the household.

A third example will finally suffice, we hope, to clarify the dialectical interplay between the micro- and macro-level. In some respects adherents of *unified growth theory* have pushed this argument the furthest, as they describe the final shift from Malthusian stagnation to modern economic growth through a decisive change in the preferences of households vis-à-vis the number and schooling of their children (the *child quantity-quality trade-off*). Structural transformations in technology, medicine and schooling gradually increased the return to human capital formation. This induced nineteenth-century parents to invest their scarce resources in better education for a smaller number of children, ultimately giving rise to the demographic transition and modern economic growth.¹¹ In this case the agency of households, the autonomous nature and the massive societal impact of their decision making, is obviously paramount.

The examples of these theories clarify – even though they are not always uncontested – how in certain circumstances structural changes were affected by household behaviour through shifts in (revealed) preferences. For economist Robert Lucas changing household (and individual) attitudes indeed constitute the linchpin of economic development. Without *a million mutinies* in the way people imagine and socially construct their lives – as independent women claiming a place in the labour market or as households demanding new goods and adjusting their resource allocation accordingly – the fundamental transformation from traditional to modern society, from stagnation to growth, becomes literally unthinkable.¹² For economists and economic growth specialists, household behaviour increasingly constitutes the very heart of their research agenda. It should figure prominently in historical research as well.

ous revolution' before the Industrial Revolution? An empirical exercise for England, c.1300-1830', *Economic History Review* 64:3 (2011) 715-729.

11. O. Galor, *Unified growth theory* (Princeton 2011).

12. R.E. Jr. Lucas, *Lectures on economic growth* (Cambridge 2002); also J.L. van Zanden, *The long road to the Industrial Revolution: The European economy in a global perspective, 1000-1800* (Leiden 2009).



A la providence, a mercer household in twentieth-century Antwerp. © Private collection Janssens

The papers in this volume do not address the question of long-term economic and social change directly, although all of them harbour potentially important insights for such major debates. Rather, their interest lays in the position households take in society and economy as recipients and initiators of change, or – more likely – as a combination of the two. In all these cases the household structure-agency nexus applies with equal strength. As we will show below, most papers published here explicitly confront household behaviour with structural, institutional and cultural constraints and opportunities which were often thought to have had a determinative effect.

When it comes to intra-household competition, the contribution by Jan Kok, Mattijs Vandezande and Kees Mandemakers, clarifies the role and significance of access to resources in different household settings in the nineteenth-century Netherlands. By measuring the impact of varying household size and composition (roughly nuclear households versus stem families) on nineteenth-century Dutch infant mortality in normal and crisis situations, they squarely address the issue of power relations and resource allocation within the household and family. Their implicit call to study individuals, albeit firmly embedded in household and family relations, instead of typecast monolithic households closely resonates and follows up on the important and influential work of Amartya Sen, Partha Dasgupta and Martha Nussbaum

on well-being and human development,¹³ and the main inspiration of the recently concluded COST Action *Gender and well-being*.¹⁴ Kok, Vandezande and Mandemakers show the relevance of adopting a broad perspective on households and family, highlighting the importance of vertical (grandparents) as well as lateral kin (uncles and aunts) in defining life chances and well-being, especially child mortality. They give voice to intergenerational *altruism* (in the Netherlands 'elderly people did not compete with infants, in fact, their presence was very beneficial') as well as intra-generational competition between young children in a household. Without explicitly modelling the significance of birth order, Kok, Vandezande and Mandemakers do suggest a comparatively large effect of birth order on mortality.

Kok, Vandezande and Mandemakers study human well-being through the perspective of child mortality, and focus on the impact of crisis situations associated with the untimely death of one or both parents within a household/family. In measuring agency in the face of substantial distress, they unveil patterns that remained probably invisible to the contemporary actors themselves. In contrast, the other papers deal with phenomena more obviously related to the *active* agency of households and individuals, an agency that to a certain extent was also related to household *strategies*. Similar to the first paper, by pointing at the key importance of the larger family even in the context of the nuclear family, the papers by Hilde Bras, Heidi Deneweth, and Richard Paping and Erwin Karel give a welcome counterweight to unwarranted modernization paradigms. These paradigms, often closely intertwined with notions of shifting household agency in favour of the *modern* nuclear family at the expense of the larger family and kinship, are indeed often implicitly or explicitly present in a wide range of research fields.

This is possibly most obvious in the contribution by Paping and Karel. In brief, the authors unveil the reality of *rural succession* in the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century northern Netherlands. Households were much less caught up between demography and the rule of customary law than was previously thought of. Or rather, the choice sets of parents and offspring were broader and more sophisticated than inheritance law and common intuition make us

13. Seminal works include A. Sen and M.C. Nussbaum (eds.), *The quality of life* (Oxford 1993); P. Dasgupta, *An inquiry into well-being and destitution* (Oxford 1993); A. Sen, *Development as freedom*; M. Nussbaum, *Women and human development: The capabilities approach* (Cambridge 2001).

14. See the volumes published in the wake of a series of conferences, including M. Durães et al. (eds.), *The transmission of well-being. Marriage strategies and inheritance systems in Europe (17th – 20th centuries)* (Bern 2009); B. Harris, L. Gálvez and H. Machado (eds.), *Gender and well-being in Europe. Historical and contemporary perspectives* (Aldershot 2009); T. Addabbo et al., *Gender inequalities*; E. Addis et al. (eds.), *Gender and well-being. The role of institutions* (Aldershot 2011); also see <http://www.ub.edu/tig/GWBNET>.

FIGURE 1 *Map of Belgium and the Netherlands, indicating the regions and cities under study in this issue*



believe. Paping and Karel show that in rural Groningen and Drenthe only a small fraction of all farms were passed directly to one of the children. Social, economic and demographic practices clearly mitigated or simply overturned institutional (judicial) rules. In particular the timing mismatch between the life cycles of parents and offspring compelled children to look for land and job opportunities on the market. On the other hand it also forced parents and heirs to transfer farms to outsiders. Indeed, as parents' and children's life expectancies rose, resulting in a smaller number of *niches* for a growing number of prospective children, the chronology and balance from one

generation to the next shifted, forcing households and families to reconsider their options and constraints. However, a challenging question left largely untouched by Paping and Karel is whether the situation they encounter in the late eighteenth-century northern Netherlands was one typical for the region, or typical for the time frame of their study. If the former, we should look for a set of social, economic and/or institutional factors that were perhaps unique to the (northern) Netherlands (or should that be the North Sea area?) to account for the remarkably and comparatively high levels of agency for these rural households. Did, for example, the efficiency of the Dutch capital market contribute to a growing agency of youngsters eager to settle a household before the death of their parent(s) offered them prospects of inter-generational wealth transfers? If the Netherlands were not unique, however, demographic change, both increasing life expectancy and strong population growth, may constitute a more promising starting point. In any case, the comparison between Groningen and Drenthe, and especially the resulting similarities despite the dissimilar points of departure, already highlights a number of fascinating insights into the extent and limits of household and individual agency in a rural context. By incorporating social, demographic, economic and institutional detail, Paping and Karel can indeed *rationalize* the behaviour of the rural households under study as often optimal compared to the *common-sense* logic of the rural succession myth. In this respect one should not confuse *rational* behaviour with positive agency: in many cases selling the farm was precisely the result of a lack of agency engendered by 'impoverishment, childlessness, or the lack of capital of the inheriting children'. Conversely, however, the *open* character of the market might have enabled people to acquire household settlement opportunities at a younger age and offered prospects for outsiders.

Hilde Bras tackles another myth: that of the nineteenth-century European transition to a 'kinship-hot' society.¹⁵ Thanks to a large-scale scrutiny of the choices of witnesses present at marriage conclusions, Hilde Bras is able to map a growing involvement of family kin at this crucial moment of life in the nineteenth-century Netherlands. Though the extent to which a changing culture of wedding feasts themselves interferes with her analysis remains still unclear, the growing involvement of horizontal and family kin-based witnesses can only be explained if changing cultural and emotional attitudes towards the wedding, the household and the family are fully taken into account. Indeed, the phenomenon is recorded, not only among higher social classes where in principle the reinforcement of family ties can be explained sufficiently from a purely economic angle, especially the need to guarantee supply of capital. It also applied – albeit later and to a lesser

15. See the many references in the contribution by Hilde Bras to this volume.

extent – to lower social layers. It gained popularity, also among working class people, who had less to gain from revitalising family ties. The article is exemplary in counterbalancing a one-dimensional rhetoric that tends to view the rise of the ‘modern household’ at the detriment of the larger family as the logical outcome of a centuries-long process. Paradoxically, the growing importance of ‘domesticity’ and ‘nuclear household’-related values may have reinforced longer-term bonds between family-members stemming from the former household, hence the central importance of male siblings as marriage witnesses.

The intricate web of household finance weaved by Heidi Deneweth, finally, catches glimmers of agency, strategy as well as structure. By their very nature the sources Deneweth has studied, such as marriage contracts, testamentary wills and probate inventories, resulted from and reflected strategic behaviour of individuals, households and families. Deneweth connects the rich density of this material to the important social and economic transformations that characterised seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Antwerp. Her analysis brings to the fore significant structural and constraining factors, changes in social structures, labour markets and monetization, and the potential responses by households and individual agents in terms of marriage and post-mortem arrangements. Even though her heuristics would lead one to assume a key role for agency in her story, in the end a large emphasis is placed on those elements that seem to curb choice such as processes of monetization, social polarization and proletarianization, the latter de-powering lower income groups, the socially biased effects of the scarcity of money, or restrictive marriage policies to protect family estates (in some ways with considerations very similar to the rural succession myth). Obviously, Deneweth also identifies strong power continuity at the family level. Though this research still needs verification through the processing of larger datasets of probate inventories, marriage contracts and testaments, it seems safe to say that late eighteenth-century elite families weighed heavily upon the marriage chances of their individual members. Here as well it would be entirely false to discard the power still exerted at the level of the family. It remains unclear whether or not and to what extent reduced rates of infant and child mortality interfered in this development. This lack of clarity also holds true for the changing attitudes and power balances among the different members within the household. However, in this respect as well, the research of Deneweth is highly indicative. Clearly, late eighteenth-century couples were more inclined to safeguard the position of the surviving spouse, and they did so through marriage contracts or testaments that acted as postponed marriage contracts. All this happened at the detriment of claims by members of the extended family but also at the expense of claims laid by children. In earlier works Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly already pointed to increasing tensions between members of the household in late eighteenth-

century Antwerp, a process that was affecting rich and poor – albeit for different reasons.¹⁶

This final point ties in with observations made by the other authors on the often surprisingly large impact of birth order on a variety of life chances and dimensions of well-being. Kok, Vandezande and Mandemakers found a real impact on a very basic life chance (survival). Paping and Karel suggest, even in the context of downsized family succession, substantial differences between older and other sons (and daughters). And Deneweth points at possibly forced celibacy for a part of the children in households and families keen on preserving their estate. These findings place the question of household agency squarely *within* the often narrow confines of the household demesne, and assigns great significance to the luck of the demographic dice in determining (or at least constraining) individual agency and freedom. Yet, while little is known about the real agency of individual members of the family, a notion gender historians are very familiar with, the tension between the individual agency and the household context clearly needs further mapping. Epistemological as well as methodological obstacles render such an exploration hazardous, as individuals in previous centuries often almost completely identified themselves with the household they were part of. Moreover individuals derived a considerable amount of power and prestige, hence individual agency, through the institution of marriage itself. The individualisation that marked the second industrious revolution in post-war western societies underlines the contingent nature of such intra-household relationships and the way they were perceived and represented, hence the urgent need to study and contextualise them more closely in future research projects.

To conclude, we would like to expand on this notion by bringing more positive forms of intra-household agency into the picture. From the thoughts forwarded above, as well as through the exploration of the fine set of papers in the following pages, it becomes clear that such a scrutiny always urges for a comprehensive view upon consumptive, reproductive and productive household functions, while taking into account the diverse interacting demographic, economic, cultural, institutional and social opportunities and constraints that shaped the changing life chances of individuals within the framework of households.

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16. C. Lis and H. Soly, *Te gek om los te lopen? Collocatie in de 18de eeuw* (Turnhout 1990).

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