

Essays on Land and Credit Markets. The Southern Low Countries 1400-1900.

Nicolas De Vijlder

Capital (tangible and intangible), through its development, ownership, and transmission, is of structural importance for the development of societies. In the pre and first industrial era, land and credit were, in combination with labor, the dominant factors of production. Consequently, the way in which land was exchanged and transactions were financed, had a profound impact on society. Farmers needed to interact with the land market to cope with expected changes in demand, whereas for urban inhabitants, the development of their city's hinterland created investment opportunities. Likewise, rural credit markets were a function of the evolving needs of the local community, such as financing the acquisition of a plot of land by a household or, as we've shown for nineteenth century Flanders, bankroll a new professional venture. Not only private individuals and companies were in need for credit. Institutions and governments, from modest villages over towns to kings and republics issued debt to finance a range of activities such as improving local amenities, purchasing tolls, debt servicing, etc. This dissertation analyzed the exchange of two specific forms of capital, credit, and land, within the Southern Low Countries between 1400 and 1900, by looking at market exchanges of land and credit within urban and rural settings, both through detailed case-studies as well as aggregated macro analysis.

This dissertation aimed to contribute to the academic debate on economic development of the Low Countries in several ways. First, by demonstrating the high degree of commercialization of the countryside, as proven by the widespread occurrence of active land and credit markets in inland Flanders and Brabant as of the late fifteenth century (chapters two and six). Second, by analyzing the ever-deeper intertwinement between town and countryside in the functioning of the credit and land markets (chapters two, five, six and seven). This development was by no means a constant evolution of ever-increasing capital flows from the city to the countryside but rather a process marked by fluctuations, whereby waves of rapid increase alternated with periods of limited change. Third, by demonstrating the long-run impact of land and credit market activity on a variety of socio-economic settings. Chapters two, five and six investigate how active land and credit markets, rural population growth and urban investors contributed to the pauperization and growing inequality on the Flemish countryside between the fifteenth and eighteenth century. Chapters three and four analyze the interplay between Antwerp's public debt, investor preferences and changing tax policy during the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Finally, chapter seven explores the interaction between financial development, the availability of collateral and industrial and commercial activity in the early twentieth century. Finally, this collection of essays has shown the feasibility and relevance of applying quantitative and econometric research methods to study a wide range of socio-economic historic topics. Applying the systematic quantitative analysis as well as econometric research methods that are popular in the field of Economics to the rich data sources and well-contextualized case-studies that characterize History as a discipline, has provided a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the processes underpinning capital exchange and long-run economic development in the Southern Low Countries.