

1 Introduction. Town and country in Europe, 1300–1800

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‘Town and country’ is among the most abiding metaphors of economic and social development in the past. Relations between town and country are central to several of the most significant ‘grand narratives’ in economic history, including the extension of markets, the rise of capitalism, and the growth of modern manufacture. The metaphor’s success is partly dependent on its deceptively simple dichotomy, which is apparent in the very etymology of the term ‘country’: originating in the late Latin *contrata*, meaning ‘that which lies opposite’, the term subsequently took on in opposition to ‘town’ the meaning of ‘those parts of a region distant from cities or courts’.¹ From its very origin, country came to signify what ‘townness’ was not – a residual meaning, so to speak, which raises the fundamental problem of defining what a town is.

The considerable geographical and historical variation between towns in terms of size, function (industrial, commercial, administrative and cultural), and political and institutional features, makes clear and unambiguous definitions hard to come by. Most historians have chosen either a demographic or a functional definition depending on the questions they wished to answer. The approach pioneered by E. A. Wrigley, Jan de Vries and Paul Bairoch defines urbanity in strictly demographic terms as centres with more than 5,000 or 10,000 inhabitants.² This method uses urban ratios (the proportion of the total population living in towns over a specified threshold) to estimate changes in agricultural productivity, in functional specialisation and in market integration across space and over long stretches of time. It is therefore particularly suited for comparative surveys and first-order generalisations; but what the method gains in consistency and comparability it loses in precision, because a very significant proportion of pre-

¹ See *Oxford English dictionary*, 1st edn, s.v. Town.

² E. A. Wrigley, ‘Urban growth and agricultural change: England and the Continent in the early modern period’, in E. A. Wrigley, *People, cities and wealth: the transformation of traditional society* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 157–93; J. de Vries, *European urbanisation 1500–1800* (London, 1984); P. Bairoch, J. Batou and P. Chèvre, *La Population des villes européennes 800–1850* (Geneva, 1988).

modern European towns fell below what are unavoidably arbitrary demographic thresholds.

‘The small town was a constant and quintessential feature of the European landscape’, it has been said, so much so that in pre-modern Europe ‘small towns’ accounted for five or more times as many settlements as all other urban centres put together.³ This was particularly true in the less urbanised European regions north of the Alps and the Pyrenees; but even in countries with more concentrated urban settlements like Castile, Italy and the Low Countries, a large proportion of the population lived in settlements too small to be caught in the mesh of mainstream urban studies. Moreover, far from disappearing after the mid-seventeenth-century crises, the economic and political significance of small towns increased, thanks to their greater adaptability and dynamism compared to larger, better established peers. As Paul Glennie reminds us below, no more than 100 of the 700 or so urban places in England exceeded 5,000 inhabitants as late as 1801. When the evolving character of town–country relations is being addressed, the small towns in closest contact with the rural world cannot therefore be ignored. For this reason, contributors to this volume reject strictly demographic definitions of urbanity and emphasise instead the commercial, manufacturing and administrative functions of settlements with regard to their hinterland and to regional and national urban hierarchies. Any loss in terms of precision – particularly at the lower end of the urban hierarchy where it is notoriously difficult to distinguish small towns from villages – is more than made up for by the number and variety of towns and by the breadth of institutional, political, cultural and economic factors such an approach is able to take into account.

The functional approach privileged in this volume has two further advantages. In the first place, it more accurately represents the extent of the medieval and early modern division of labour between rural and agricultural activities and the manufacturing and service sectors, which were mostly concentrated in towns. Several contributors to this volume deploy this fact to make a positive re-evaluation of the size and contribution of urban industries and services to European economy and society after the Black Death. Thus, the inclusion of functionally urban communities as small as a few hundred inhabitants in England (James Galloway), Switzerland (Martin Körner), and the Austrian–Czech lands (Markus Cerman and Herbert Knittler) raises the estimate of urban levels in these countries from less than 10 per cent to 15–20 per cent;

³ P. Clark (ed.), *Small towns in early modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 1. ‘Pre-modern’ is defined here somewhat arbitrarily as c.1300–1800; reasons for viewing the period in chronological unity are discussed below.

equally, a large proportion of the astonishing 40 per cent urban ratio of late medieval Holland includes the population of small towns at the lower end of the urban hierarchy (Peter Hoppenbrouwers). In chapters 12 and 14, Pablo Sánchez León and Brigitte Marin discuss the implications of similar revisions for regions traditionally viewed as under-urbanised and underdeveloped like Castile, the kingdom of Naples and Sicily where in fact, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, between 20 and 40 per cent of the population lived in centres with urban functions.⁴

These new estimates of average urban levels indicate that by the early fourteenth century the more peripheral European economies were far more commercialised and specialised than previously assumed, and therefore give support to recent, more optimistic assessments of pre-modern economic growth.⁵ However, the substantial increase in estimated *absolute* urban ratios in less urbanised regions does not significantly alter the latter's *relative* standing with respect to more urbanised regions; if one includes 'small towns' of a few hundred inhabitants in current urban estimates for Flanders and the more developed regions of Italy, France and southern Germany, their urban ratio rises from 30–40 per cent (estimated using 'traditional' urban thresholds of several thousand inhabitants) to 50–60 per cent or more.

The second advantage of a functional definition is that it raises important comparative questions of both substance and method. Most continental historians, represented in this volume by the chapters on Sweden, Holland, Poland, Austrian–Czech and German lands, Switzerland, Castile and north-central Italy, adopt a legal definition of towns as centres which were granted an official charter of rights and privileges. This appears to make the distinction between town and country (or village) very sharp. English historians instead tend to downplay the significance of legal rights for urban growth, and contrast the more liberal conditions applying in England with those of the rest of Europe. While there is undoubtedly some truth in this distinction, particularly as far as smaller towns are concerned, the contrast is also a consequence of different historiographical traditions. Thus, English historians downplay the fact that English towns continued to seek and defend urban corporate privilege far into the eighteenth century, while Italian historians, as noted by Brigitte Marin, have long neglected southern Italian towns because they lacked the political and institutional privileges of north Italian communes, which the national historiography identified as the

⁴ For Naples and Sicily, see S. R. Epstein, *Freedom and growth. The rise of states and markets in Europe 1300–1750* (London, 2000), ch. 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, chs. 1–2.

siue qua non of urbanity.⁶ Equally, while continental historians may have sometimes exaggerated the ability of more ‘coercive’ urban systems to enforce political privilege, an older English historiographical tradition also emphasised the intensity of governmental intervention and of corporate and institutional rent-seeking in and by towns up at least to the mid-seventeenth century.⁷ The interaction between coercive and market forces was evidently more complex and multi-layered than a simple institutional dichotomy between England and continental Europe implies.

Given these premises, contributors to the present volume were asked to consider in particular the nature of the institutionalised power of town over country and its regional differences. In doing so, they also address relations between towns and the state in a period when the states’ fiscal and political demands were increasing, their administrative reach was growing, and their regulatory pretensions were becoming more burdensome, while at the same time they were challenging ancient privileges and sources of rent-seeking. The focus throughout this volume is on the evolving structural constraints within pre-modern political economies, not only because that is where the greater part of past and current debates has been concentrated but also because it is where institutional differences between states were felt most keenly. Several contributions are explicitly comparative, and all adopt a long-term perspective, which frequently straddles the traditional chronological demarcation between medieval and early modern eras, and emphasises the similarities and structural continuities between the two. The purpose of this introduction is to facilitate such a comparative exercise by briefly retracing the historiographical background, spelling out the regional and national analogies and contrasts, and suggesting future avenues of research.

The division of labour between town and country

Ever since the mid-eighteenth century, when the French Physiocrats developed a model of growth centred on agricultural primacy, and

⁶ For England, see P. Clark, ‘Changes in the pattern of English small towns in the early modern period’, in A. Maçzak and C. Smout (eds.), *Gründung und Bedeutung kleinerer Städte in nördlichen Europa der frühen Neuzeit* (Wiesbaden, 1991), pp. 67–84; for a recent restatement of the north Italian viewpoint, see M. Berengo, *L’Europa delle città. Il volto della società urbana europea tra Medioevo ed età moderna* (Turin, 1999).

⁷ See e.g. E. Lipson, *The economic history of England*, 3 vols. (London, 1945–8); recently H. Swanson, *Medieval British towns* (Houndmills and New York, 1999), chs. 3–4, has once again underlined the significance of political and institutional influences on urban economies; there is, however, still a dearth of modern studies of local and state intervention and regulation of trade (J. Chartres, *Internal trade in England 1500–1700* (London and Basingstoke, 1977), ch. 5).

Adam Smith developed the alternative view that towns were the major sources of institutional innovation in traditional societies, debates on town and country in the pre-modern economy have revolved around two questions. First, what were the ‘prime movers’ of economic growth? Second, what was the balance in the growth process between market competition and political coercion? The two questions can be summed up as one: could peasants generate markets autonomously, or did they need to be pushed, that is, coerced through asymmetrical power relations, or pulled into trade through price incentives? To this question historians have offered three answers, defined by Langton and Hoppe some years ago as the town-based model, the country-based model, and the specialisation model.⁸

The classical or town-based model which held sway until recent years identified towns and urban industry and commerce unequivocally with urbanity, civilisation and economic and social progress. It was adhered to by the fathers of modern social science and by many of the most influential economic historians of the past century. Thus, Adam Smith wrote how ‘the silent and insensible operation of foreign commerce and manufactures gradually’ effected the dissolution of feudal mores and institutions;⁹ Marx, while declaring robustly that ‘the foundation of every division of labour . . . is the separation of town from country’,¹⁰ went on to dismiss the peasantry as ‘a vast mass . . . almost self-sufficient . . . [which] directly produces the major part of its consumption and thus acquires its means of life more through exchange with nature than in intercourse with society . . . much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes’;¹¹ while Max Weber saw the medieval European city as ‘inseparably linked as one of the crucial factors’ to the rise of modern capitalism and the modern state.¹² Following in their footsteps, Henri Pirenne and Fernand Braudel elevated the figure of the urban-

⁸ J. Langton and G. Hoppe, *Town and country in the development of early modern western Europe* (Norwich, 1983).

⁹ A. Smith, *An inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations*, ed. E. Cannan (Chicago, 1976), p. 437. On Smith’s discussion of ‘town and country’, see M. Berg, ‘Political economy and the principles of manufacture 1700–1800’, in M. Berg, P. Hudson and M. Sonenscher (eds.), *Manufacture in town and country before the factory* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 33–60.

¹⁰ K. Marx, *Capital*, transl. B. Fowkes, 3 vols. (Harmondsworth, 1976–81), vol. I, pp. xii, 4; see also K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German ideology*, in *Collected works* (London, 1973), vol. V, pp. 19–20: ‘the greatest division of mental and material labour is the separation of town and country’.

¹¹ K. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, in *Collected works* (London, 1979), vol. XI, p. 187.

¹² M. Weber, *Economy and society*, ed. G. Roth and C. Wittich, 2 vols. (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1978), vol. II, p. 1323.

based, international merchant to the role of avatar and midwife of modern capitalism.¹³

The economic model underlying these descriptions is dualistic. Towns, which are generally identified with their commercial elites, are defined as the ‘advanced’ sector relaying capital, information, technological and institutional innovation to a ‘backward’ or ‘traditional’ countryside dominated by a quasi-natural peasant economy. The commercial influence of towns acts as a ‘solvent’ of rural self-sufficiency, idiocy and inertia. By destroying feudal property rights in the countryside, urban trade created the landless proletariat needed for urban manufacture, invigorated agricultural productivity and reduced the costs of food and raw materials; as M. M. Postan famously put it, medieval towns were ‘non-feudal islands in a feudal sea’.¹⁴ The 1950s debate on the ‘transition from feudalism to capitalism’ between Paul Sweezy and Maurice Dobb centred on Sweezy’s similar assumption – based upon Pirenne’s influential work – that towns and commerce were ‘external’ to the feudal economy and that they brought about its capitalist transformation.¹⁵ Braudel’s understanding of the role of towns was similarly coloured, although he also recognised that towns could sometimes act more ambiguously.¹⁶

During the 1970s the dominant town-based dualism came under attack from two new ‘meta-theories’ of the capitalist transition, Robert Brenner’s theory of agrarian capitalism and Franklin Mendels’s theory of proto-industrialisation.¹⁷ Both harked back to the Physiocratic claim that the most salient economic development was to be found in the countryside, and depicted towns as parasitical consumers of ‘feudal

¹³ H. Pirenne, *Economic and social history of medieval Europe*, transl. I. E. Clegg (London, 1947); F. Braudel, *Civilisation and capitalism*, vol. II: *The wheels of commerce*, transl. S. Roberts (London, 1982).

¹⁴ M. M. Postan, *The medieval economy and society* (Harmondsworth, 1975), p. 212.

¹⁵ R. H. Hilton (ed.), *The transition from feudalism to capitalism* (London, 1976). The ‘centre-periphery’ metaphor at the heart of Immanuel Wallerstein’s world systems theory describes a similar ‘dual economy’ in which commercially and industrially advanced ‘towns’ control and exploit backward and agrarian ‘countries’ (I. M. Wallerstein, *The modern world-system*, vol. I: *Capitalist agriculture and the origins of the world-economy in the sixteenth century* (New York, 1974)).

¹⁶ F. Braudel, *Civilisation and capitalism*, vol. I: *The structures of everyday life: the limits of the possible*, transl. M. Kochan and S. Roberts (London, 1982), ch. 1.

¹⁷ R. Brenner, ‘Agrarian class structure and economic development in pre-industrial Europe’, *Past and Present* 70 (1976), 30–75, restated (with some change in emphasis) in R. Brenner, ‘The agrarian roots of European capitalism’, *Past and Present* 97 (1982), 16–113; F. Mendels, ‘Proto-industrialisation: the first phase of the industrialisation process?’, *Journal of Economic History* 32 (1972), 241–61. The 1970s witnessed a proliferation of theories of pre-modern growth, including Wallerstein’s ‘world system theory’ (see note 15) and Douglass North’s property rights approach (D. C. North and R. P. Thomas, *The rise of the western world* (Cambridge, 1973)).

surplus' which offered no positive stimulus, and as rent-seekers which protected their traditional industrial monopolies against unfettered rural competition. However, at this point Brenner and Mendels parted ways. Brenner, who followed the town-based model and argued that peasants were *not* the avatars of capitalism because peasant agricultural supply was inelastic, at the same time ignored the role of urban manufacture and rural proto-industry in tune with his dismissal of the industrial and service sector's contributions to pre-modern economic growth.¹⁸ Not surprisingly, Brenner's work concentrated on poorly urbanised countries like England, France and east-central Europe and had little to say about the economically more dynamic, highly urbanised regions of Holland, Flanders, southern Germany and north-central Italy.

The contribution of Mendels' and his successors' proto-industrial theory to town–country debates was more positive. First, the theory helped mitigate the singularly optimistic views of urban-centred models of development by focusing attention on the negative and coercive aspects of urban policy – particularly but not solely guild-inspired – towards upstart proto-industrial manufacture in the countryside. This had the further effect of highlighting the considerable institutional variation in town–country relations and opened the way for more rigorous cross-regional comparisons. The insight, derived from proto-industrial theory, that town–country relations were shaped differently between regions and over time is a central tenet of the present volume. Secondly, the strong emphasis on the regional dimensions of proto-industry contributed to a change in focus from the interaction between individual towns and their hinterland, to the broader context of regional and national urban systems. This change in focus constitutes one of the major methodological advances for the analysis of town–country relations over the past three decades, and underlies the increased use by social and economic historians of the tools of urban and historical geographers who focus by training on spatial interaction. Sensitive usage of concepts like central places, urban hierarchies and networks and von Thünen rings – the latter particularly in evidence in the chapters on England by Galloway and Glennie – reveals patterns in resource allocation for which more direct evidence is unavailable, and offers answers to several central questions raised by the present volume, about the overall impact of proto-industrial activities on the urban sector, about the

¹⁸ The influential proto-industrial theory of Peter Kriedte, Hans Medick and Jürgen Schlumbohm similarly stated that peasants took up proto-industrial activities only if they owned insufficient land to achieve self-sufficiency (P. Kriedte, H. Medick and J. Schlumbohm, *Industrialisation before industrialisation: rural industry in the genesis of capitalism*, transl. B. Schempp, with contributions from H. Kisch and F. L. Mendels (Cambridge, 1981)).

development of markets and market integration, and about the distributional consequences of the rise of capital cities.

Despite their differences, both the older town-based approach and proto-industrial theory presented models of unbalanced growth in which the advanced urban or rural sector develops at a disproportionate rate to pull the more backward sector to a higher growth path. Both approaches focused on towns as the main source of dynamism or inertia, but stressed only one term of the antinomy and ignored the positive, dynamic aspects of the division of labour between town and country. Both took the existence, character and co-ordination of pre-modern markets for granted, and did not question how markets emerged in the first place or how different institutional constellations might lead to different economic outcomes. Both models also assumed that peasants had to be coerced into regular production for the market, despite considerable evidence that commercial farming and rural manufacture were standard peasant activities since at least the later middle ages (as discussed by this volume's contributions on England, Holland, Germany and the Austro-Czech lands).

Dissatisfaction with models that could not easily explain urban-rural interaction led, during the 1980s, to a new emphasis on towns as co-ordinating centres for rural trade and as concentrated sources of demand that stimulated agrarian specialisation.¹⁹ The shift in focus was first apparent in England, where economic historians grappling with the first industrial transition have often been more sensitive to developmental and dynamic models, and where the influence of historical geography has been felt more keenly. The new interest in towns as centres of demand and commercial distribution within a regional or national framework, foreshadowed by work on proto-industrialisation, also reflected a broader historiographical shift away from the neo-Ricardian and neo-Malthusian, pessimistic interpretations of the pre-modern economy that had dominated post-war historiography, towards models of Smithian growth which placed more emphasis on slow, incremental change through functional specialisation and the division of labour within growing markets. Thus, in an influential essay, E. A. Wrigley argued that the huge growth of early modern London created a source of concentrated demand for rural produce that was 'probably the most important single factor in engendering agricultural improvement' before the Industrial Revolution and which stimulated the rise of an integrated national market.²⁰

¹⁹ Langton and Hoppe, *Town and country*, p. 36.

²⁰ E. A. Wrigley, 'A simple model of London's importance in changing English society and economy, 1650-1750', in Wrigley, *People, cities and wealth*, pp. 133-55.

Elsewhere, Wrigley noted that in a closed market with insignificant agricultural imports, both the level and the rate of change of urban populations depend on the size of the agricultural surplus available to the non-agrarian sector, and proceeded to use this insight to estimate agricultural and industrial productivity over time and across countries.²¹ Wrigley recognised that urban levels did not precisely reflect the division of labour between town and country because of the presence of proto-industrial and service activities in the countryside; however, his model of town–country specialisation assumed that the size of the urban population reflected the level of agricultural productivity, and that it would respond quite smoothly to changes in agrarian output. However, this use of pre-industrial rates of urbanisation to infer the technological capacity to feed urban populations has recently been questioned. Drawing on research on ancien regime France, George Grantham has suggested that the technology available to peasants was capable of producing a large enough surplus to carry an urban ratio of about 60 per cent, twice to three times the levels actually achieved in eighteenth-century France. Since the agricultural technology available at that time did not differ significantly from that documented for several European regions during the thirteenth century, Grantham concludes that low agricultural productivity could not be held responsible for the low rates of urbanisation in Europe between 1300 and the Industrial Revolution.²²

An explanation of European patterns of urbanisation and of the division of labour between town and country before the Industrial Revolution must be set against the available evidence summarised in Table 1.1, which lists urban ratios above an urban threshold of 5,000 in the period from 1500 to 1750 according to modern national boundaries. Although national aggregates disguise significant regional differences and must therefore be treated with caution, they nevertheless offer a credible long-run measure of *relative* national performance (as noted previously, the exclusion of small towns only affects absolute measures of urbanisation).

The data plausibly indicate four broad conclusions. First, the only country ever to come close to achieving its full urban potential of 60 per

²¹ Wrigley, 'Urban growth'; E. A. Wrigley, 'Parasite or stimulus: the town in a pre-industrial economy', in P. Abrams and E. A. Wrigley (eds.), *Towns in societies. Essays in economic history and historical sociology* (Cambridge, 1978), pp. 295–309.

²² G. W. Grantham, 'Divisions of labour: agricultural productivity and occupational specialisation in pre-industrial France', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 46 (1993), 478–502; G. W. Grantham, 'Espaces privilégiés. Productivité agraire et zones d'approvisionnement des villes dans l'Europe préindustrielle', *Annales HSS* 52 (1997), 695–725; G. W. Grantham, 'Contra Ricardo: on the macroeconomics of pre-industrial economies', *European Review of Economic History* 3 (1999), 199–232.

Table 1.1. *Rates of urbanisation in Western Europe, 1500–1750 (percentages)*

	1500	1600	1700	1750
Austria–Hungary–Czechoslovakia	4.8	4.9	4.9	7.3
Belgium	28.0	29.3	22.2	22.2
England and Wales	7.9	10.8	16.9	27.7
France	8.8	10.8	12.3	12.7
Germany	8.2	8.5	7.7	8.8
Italy	22.1	22.6	22.6	22.5
Netherlands	29.5	34.7	38.9	36.3
Portugal	15.0	16.7	18.5	17.5
Scandinavia (other)	1.5	6.9	6.5	8.6
Scotland	7.4	7.9	7.1	10.2
Spain	18.4	21.3	20.3	21.4
Sweden	1.7	1.2	3.8	4.6
Switzerland	6.8	5.5	5.9	7.7
Mean	12.3	14.6	15.1	16.2
Coefficient of variation (%)	76.7	73.4	70.0	59.6

Source: Bairoch, Batou and Chèvre, *Population*.

cent as defined by Grantham was the Dutch Republic; even England was still seriously under-urbanised in 1750, despite its remarkable spurt of growth after 1600. Second, between 1500 and 1750 only Sweden, France, and England and Wales experienced uninterrupted urban growth, while elsewhere towns either stagnated, as in Portugal, Spain, Italy, Switzerland and Germany, or declined, as in the southern Low Countries (modern Belgium). Third, cross-country rankings and absolute levels of urbanisation were extremely stable over time and the rate of dispersion around the mean remained a high 73–76 per cent until 1700, suggesting that there was little pressure for international convergence. Although urbanisation began to converge quite rapidly after 1700, the rate of dispersion in 1750 was still close to 60 per cent and the only significant change was England's rise to the top rankings.²³ The evidence therefore appears to contradict the common hypothesis that more urbanised societies will grow faster thanks to economies of scale and higher concentrations of human capital,²⁴ however, barring the important

²³ If the United Kingdom is excluded, the coefficient of variation of urban ratios was 0.64, 0.65, 0.65 and 0.56 respectively in 1500, 1600, 1700 and 1750. The process of convergence between 1700 and 1750 was thus broadly European.

²⁴ See W. C. Wheaton and H. Shishido, 'Urban concentration, agglomeration economies, and the level of economic development', *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 30 (1981–2), 1, 17–30; P. Krugman, *Geography and trade* (Cambridge, MA, 1991); E. L. Glaeser, H. D. Kallal, J. A. Scheinkman and A. Shleifer, 'Growth in cities', *Journal of Political Economy* 100 (1992), 6, 1126–52; J. Mokyr, 'Urbanization, technological progress, and economic history', in H. Giersch (ed.), *Urban agglomeration and economic growth* (Berlin and New York, 1995), pp. 3–34.