"GOUDEN EEUW" OR "ONGELUKSEEUW"? AN ECONOMIC SURVEY OF THE NORTHERN AND SOUTHERN NETHERLANDS IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

Peter Ford
University of Hull

TODAY'S INHABITANTS OF THE LOW COUNTRIES generally perceive the fortunes of the northern and southern Netherlands in the seventeenth century as being at opposite ends of the same scale. The seventeenth century Dutch Republic is usually portrayed as the embodiment of an economic, social, political and cultural "Golden Age." It epitomizes a period that the Dutch have glorified through the generations as the most important and praiseworthy era of their history. The fate of the southern Netherlands in the seventeenth century is seen as the very antithesis of the northern Dutch success. The southern towns of the Low Countries, which had represented the economic and cultural focus of Europe in the late middle ages, were superseded by the towns of Holland and Zeeland. In the literature, the seventeenth century is often dismissed as an ill-fated period for the southern Netherlands. The aim of this paper is to examine the respective economies and to ascertain whether the seventeenth century really was a "Gouden Eeuw" for the northern Netherlands and a disastrous "Ongelukseeuw" for their southern counterparts. Even with the exclusion of cultural matters, the terms "Gouden Eeuw" and "Ongelukseeuw" still present a difficult analytical problem. They are essentially subjective concepts and are therefore difficult to define and quantify. Nevertheless, a determination of the extent to which the seventeenth century economic fortunes of the North and South differed from the preceding century will offer a clear indication of the respective aptness of the two terms.

Although we are considering the seventeenth century, many eminent historians, including Kossmann, have based their explanations of the economic development of the northern Netherlands and the economic decline of the southern Netherlands on the fall of Antwerp in 1585. In that year, Antwerp and other Flemish towns were reconquered by Spanish troops and as a result the seaward entry to Antwerp via the Scheldt was closed by the northern provinces. This action signified the end of Antwerp as Europe's main trading center and paved the way for the rise of the town of Amsterdam. Whereas in the sixteenth century the northern Dutch ports had depended on the Antwerp market, the relationship had now turned around. Antwerp became dependent on the Amsterdam market and was used by the northern merchants as a port from which the southern Market could be saturated with their products.

The general validity of this argument is not questioned, but two points should be noted. Firstly, the fall of Antwerp cannot be perceived simply in terms of an absolute advantage to the northern provinces. Before 1585, this town and the South in general had bolstered the expansion of the North: "Voorzover de Noordelijke handel en scheepvaart zich

marktgebieden hadden veroverd, waar het Zuiden voornamelijk via hen toegang had, lijkt het evenmin mogelijk te spreken van een verschuiving van vraag of aanbod uit het buitenland ten gunste van het Noorden" (Klein 1979, 83).

Secondly, the loss of its pre-eminent position as Europe's most important market was not in itself a complete economic disaster. It is often assumed that the shifting focus of Europe's 'concrete' market northwards to Amsterdam must logically have led to economic catastrophe in Antwerp and the South. This is, however, a rather static supposition which can only be deemed logical if one accepts a host of *ceteris paribus* assumptions. Economic change is by definition dynamic, and it would be naive to assume that the South did not adapt, at least in part, to the new conditions set upon it.

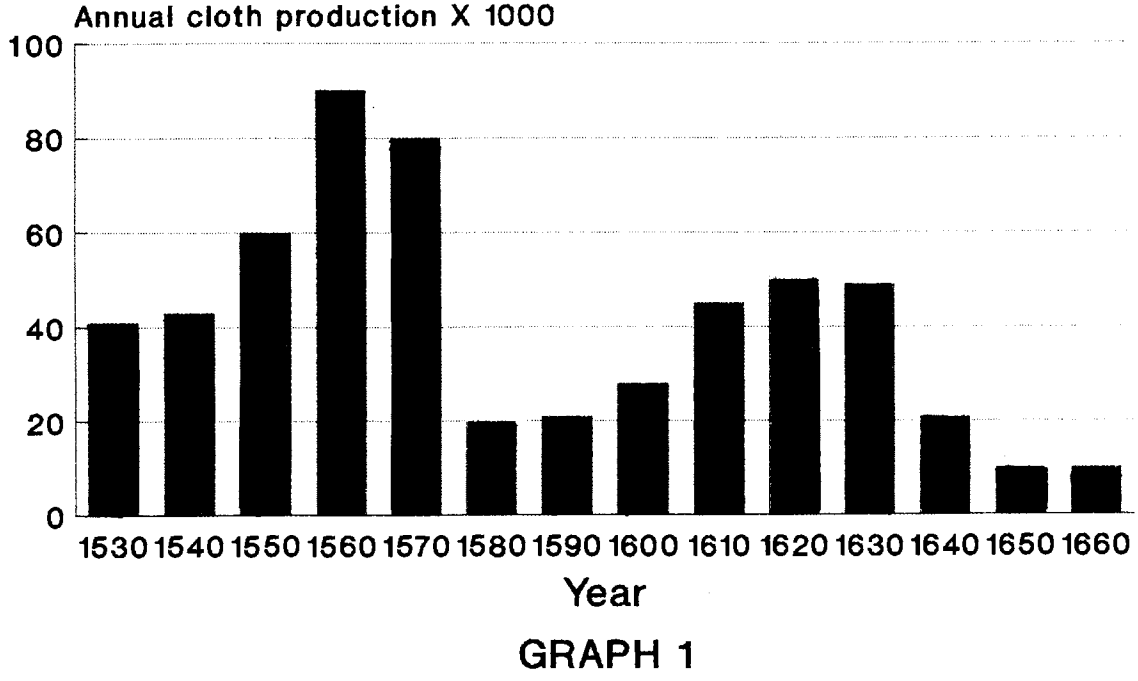
Fernand Braudel has highlighted a phenomenon which demonstrates that although the economic focus of Europe shifted to Amsterdam in the seventeenth century, Antwerp's financial apparatus remained intact and the city retained an importance as a financial center. The validity of this occurrence is supported by numerous examples of European towns (such as Bruges in the high middle ages) which, after enjoying and then losing economic advantages, became important financial centers. Many would argue that London exhibits these characteristics today. Antwerp's banking and finance activity, both on a national and international level was, therefore, an important and prosperous compensation for its compulsory abdication from the economic throne of Europe. Furthermore, and perhaps more pivotal to our general assessment of the seventeenth century South, was the presence of an efficient financial apparatus, which was able to support investment in the southern economy as a whole.

Klein points out that the elimination of Antwerp and the South as a trading competitor to the North may not have been as complete as is often thought. Merchants from Antwerp continued to trade with Spain and Italy and also took advantage of the Spanish and Portuguese colonial commerce. Large quantities of colonial goods such as silk and sugar flowed through Antwerp after 1589. Between 1598 and 1648 almost 600 southern merchants carried out trade with the Spanish and Portuguese empires (Parker 1990, 255). The extensive expenditure of the King of Spain on his army in the Netherlands also provided a stimulus to some bankers and military contractors.

After the signing of the Twelve Years Truce in 1609, the armed forces were reduced from 60,000 to 15,000 men, which reduced the tax burden on the southern population and allowed resources to be channelled into reconstruction. Industry began to recover. Graph 1 shows the recovery of the cloth industry of Hondschoote in the early decades of the seventeenth century. From 1610 onwards, production almost equalled the levels of the 1540s and 1550s. Much of this output was exported to Spain via the ports of Ostend and Dunkirk, which alleviated the blockade of Antwerp to some extent. Ghent also produced a large quantity and variety of textiles in the first half of the seventeenth century. In 1636, 29,000 linen cloths were produced, two-thirds of which were bound for Spain.

However, these successes should not be overstated. Cloth works in Diksmuide, Eecke, Meenen, Poperinge and other towns never recovered from the devastations of the 1580s. Although the resumption of hostilities with the North in 1621 proved less ruinous than in the last decades of the sixteenth century, it was not conducive to economic

NUMBER OF SERGE CLOTHS PRODUCED FOR EXPORT IN HONDSCHOOTE 1530-1660



GRAPH 1

Source: Parker (1990) page 256

expansion. After 1635, the South also became a principal battlefield in the war between France and Spain, and this spelled the end of the Hondschoote industry.

Enterprises producing luxury goods grew up in many towns, compensating for the decline of the old textile industries. In general the economic accent switched from quantity to quality. Activities such as silk finishings, lace, tapestries, glass-making, jewellery, diamond cutting and printing, which had a high profit to volume ration, offset the restriction of marine traffic through Antwerp. Even today, signs remain to show that the returns from these enterprises were significant. For example, Parker has pointed out the rich town houses of Antwerp, Brussels and Bruges which were constructed between 1600 and 1670. In the same period, 1260 houses were renovated or rebuilt in stone in the town of Ghent. This represented an eight of the total number of houses in the town and reflected relative prosperity. Further evidence of the favorable fortunes of the South can be seen in the seventeenth century investment in new churches, most of which are still standing today.

Southern agriculture, devastated in the years up to the Twelve Years Truce, recovered and underwent a remarkable development in the seventeenth century.[1] Notable improvements in farming techniques inspired Sir Richard Weston in 1644/45 to comment on the land between Bruges and Dunkirk: "I saw as rich a countrie as ever my eies beheld, stokt with goodly wheat and barlie, and excellent meadow and pasture" (Parker 1990, 257).

Therefore, in economic terms, the seventeenth century may not have been quite as disastrous for the South as often imagined. This view is also substantiated by demographic considerations.Population figures present an (albeit crude) indication of the general welfare of the South. The population of Antwerp increased from 42,000 in 1589, 57,000 in 1645 to 67,000 in 1699 (Kossmann, 15). It is improbable that a town in the total economic decline described by many historians would be able to sustain an increase in population of approximately 35%. The following data for the increase in baptisms in a number of towns exhibit a striking upward trend in the seventeenth century.

Town	**Decade**	**Baptisms**	**Decade**	**Baptisms**
Ghent	1606-1615	11185	1686-1695	19729
Mechelen	1596-1605	5050	1676-1685	9176
Leuven	1586-1595	2785	1666-1675	5427
Lier	1586-1595	1761	1666-1675	3473

Source: Parker, 255.

Although the figures refer only to the towns, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the growing numbers of townspeople must have been supported to a large extent by the production of the home agricultural sector.

Much importance has been attached to the closure of the Scheldt and the ensuing migration of many southern Dutch Calvinists as the main factor in the prosperity of the North.The capital and knowledge brought by many of the migrants was undoubtedly a stimulus to the northern production capacity and their activities in trade, shipping and industry intensified demand for investment goods. An overcited example of southern influence is the fact that 38% of the share capital of the Amsterdam chamber of the VOC was raised by migrants from the South. In spite of this, the Scheldt closure and the ensuing migration should not be seen as a fundamental reason for northern success, just as it should not be regarded simply as a main determinant of southern economic ruin. As Klein rightly points out, the southern migrants' capital was far from crucial to the founding of the VOC because the venture was heavily oversubscribed (84). The importance of the Southerners' input should not therefore be inflated.

J. Price stresses the importance of the migration of workers from the Hondschoote cloth industry to the Leiden textile industry at the beginning of the seventeenth century (45). These workers were of course important to Leiden, because they brought with them new techniques, which opened up new markets in the manufacture of light cloths. Price does not, however, quantify the number of migrants, and one should not conclude that the negative effect on the Hondschoote industry was enormous. After all, it only takes one person to convey a new idea, and the early seventeenth century production levels of Hondschoote industry in graph 1 show clearly that the effects were far from devastating. Indeed, there is much speculation as to the actual number of migrants that came to the Republic. Earlier estimates of half a million have been drastically reduced to the region of eighty thousand in the years up to 1630.

Historians describing the economic fortunes of the Dutch Republic's Golden Century are often accustomed to using words such as "bloei," groei," "vooruitgang," or "ontplooing." This gives the impression that the seventeenth century Republic was characterized by a period of steady and balanced economic growth. Such emotive language is rather misleading, because in the words of Klein, "instabiliteit en wisselvalligheid kenmerken ... in de regel zowel de opgang als de neergang van het economisch leven in prae-industriele samenlevingen" (80). That is not to say that the North did not enjoy economic growth, but it was slight in modern terms. Using per capita income based on contemporary accounts as an indicator of growth, Klein estimates that the average rate of increase over the seventeenth century would have been no more than 0.25% per annum in the North. The average annual growth of per capita income in Western Europe over the last hundred years has been approximately 1.5%. Thus, the position of the Dutch Republic as one of the wealthiest European states during the seventeenth century was achieved with a comparatively sluggish economic growth which would not constitute a golden age by present day Dutch standards.

It is a constant bone of contention whether the economic growth in the North reached a ceiling in about 1650 and remained more or less constant until a decline in the eighteenth

century. It is likely, however, that the second half of the seventeenth century was not as successful as the first, and may have signified the beginnings of a decline. After 1650 the Republic was involved in maritime wars with England (1652-1654, 1665-1667 and 1672-1674). They were not devastating to the Dutch economy and were not of great advantage to England either. Nonetheless, trade and shipping were restricted during these periods and they should be considered negative economic factors, "die ... door hun frequentie hebben bijgedragen tot het verslechteren van het economische resultaat in de tweede helft van de 17e eeuw" (Klein, 15).

The second half of the century was also characterized by the rise of the protectionist policies of mercantilism. France, England, Denmark, Sweden and the southern Netherlands all adopted trading policies which were designed to loosen the Republic's grip on trade. The English Navigation Acts and the import duties imposed by Colbert in France in 1667 are prime examples of the conscious restrictions imposed on the Republic after 1650. The economies of its competitors also began to catch up. Aided by protectionist policies, England's textile industry became a serious competitor to Leiden and Haarlem, and brought about a relative decline in the latter after 1665. English and French shipping also began to loosen the Dutch stranglehold on the carrying trade and reduced the Republic's share. The population of the Republic did not rise above the 1650 level of 1.9 million inhabitants for almost a century (Kossmann, 15). This data tends to support the notion that the second half of the 'Golden Century' was not quite as golden as has always been perceived.

The economic achievements of the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century are perceived as national accomplishments. It is usually assumed that the same degree of success was enjoyed across all the provinces. In reality, however, the province of Holland and the town of Amsterdam in particular were the center of the North's affluence and the hub of the European economy. Amsterdam undoubtedly experienced considerable prosperity throughout the seventeenth century. It had become the staple market of Europe, with exclusive middleman control of trade between northern and southern as well as Eastern and Western Europe. Furthermore, it had gained virtual control of the trade in exotic goods from Asia and America.

The bulk of foreign trade was not only controlled by Holland merchants, but the goods were actually transported in Dutch ships. The "moeder negocie" was the trade in grain from the Baltic. Much of this grain was exported to Spain and other southern European countries, because for much of the seventeenth century they suffered food shortages. Until 1650, over half the ships passing through the Sound on their way to the Baltic ports were Dutch (thereafter the percentage decreased). The port of Rotterdam played a leading role in the trade in French wine and salt, and Dutch shippers had almost exclusive control of the export of coal from England. In 1616, of 686 coal ships leaving the port of Newcastle, over 500 were Dutch. The shipbuilding center of Europe was situated in Holland in the town of Zaandam. The province was also home to the important fishing fleet of over 2,000 "haringbuizen."

The dominant position of the northern trade also facilitated the rise of so-called "trafieken." These were industries which processed imported raw materials for export to

the rest of Europe. For example, sugar refining and tobacco provided many Holland towns with substantial income. The towns of Haarlem and Leiden took over from the southern Netherlands as textile centers. Between 1584 and 1664 the Leiden industry production grew from 27,000 pieces to 144,000 pieces of cloth.

From the above economic sketch of the northern economy it is apparent that the foundations of its prosperity lay in an exclusive and very lucrative hold on European and world trade. This prosperity was also very firmly based geographically. In Price's words, "De handelshegemonie over Europa werd inderdaad niet zozeer door de Republiek als wel door Holland uitgeoefend" (47). One could take this argument one step further and assert that much of Holland's wealth could be attributed to the town of Amsterdam. Amsterdam's trade in the third quarter of the seventeenth century was five times as great as that of Rotterdam. It dwarfed its 'rivals' outside the province of Holland. The money value of trade in Middelburg was only a seventh of that in Amsterdam, and in Vlissingen the estimate is one tenth.[2] In terms of industry Holland reigned supreme over the rest of the provinces. There were a few textile factories in Twente and Tilburg, but they were insignificant compared to those of Leiden and Haarlem, which enjoyed a virtual monopoly on the production of wool, linen and silk. Due to their reliance on the great trading towns, the 'trafieken' industries were also confined to Holland.

In general, the other provinces were not a part of Holland's golden age. Naturally, 'filter down' effects of Holland's affluence must have had some positive influence on the rest of the Republic. Nevertheless, these effects were not significant to warrant the period being termed a golden century for the Republic as a whole. Towns in the provinces of Friesland, Overijssel, Gelderland and even Zeeland were hardly any more prosperous at the close of the seventeenth century than in 1600. The Eastern provinces still displayed the same characteristics as they had in the late Middle Ages. Their economies were based on subsistence agriculture, and as in the southern Netherlands, they suffered by being the battlefield in the war with Spain. Gelderland was not brought totally under the Republic's control until the Siege of Groenlo in 1627, and it was only a year earlier that the Spanish had fully relinquished the province of Overijssel. After this time, they enjoyed a period of relative stability, but they were in no position to take part in the economic success of Holland.

The growth of the towns in Holland provided a stimulus for its agriculture, which was crucial to its success. It became more and more commercially orientated, and growing wheat for one's own consumption gave way to cash crops and market gardening. Imported grain from Amsterdam's staple market was readily available to feed Holland's population. New methods of crop rotation and more intensive manuring of the land increased productivity; impolderization provided the land for the development of the dairy industry, whose produce was also exported to England as well as feeding its own urban masses. There was some agricultural development in the other provinces. In Drenthe, Friesland and Groningen the peat industry was important, and some land reclamation took place. These operations were on a small scale compared to the developments in Holland, and many were funded by merchants from Amsterdam looking for a fast return. Amsterdam investment did not stretch as far as ridding the other provinces of subsistence agriculture.

The demographic development of the northern Netherlands in the seventeenth century clearly emphasizes the disparity between Holland and the other provinces. The economic importance of Holland is reflected in the fact that in 1650 about 48% of the northern population inhabited the province, compared with 29% in 1500. Its population in 1514 numbered 275,000 people, and by 1680 this had increased to approximately 887,000.There is no evidence of such a population explosion in the other provinces (except perhaps in Zeeland). In Overijssel, in 1475, there were 53,000 inhabitants, but by 1675 this figure had only increased to 71,000. Between 1511 and 1689 the population of Friesland grew from about 80,000 to 129,000.[3] In so far as population growth can be considered a good indication of economic progress, this seems to have been concentrated in Holland. The other provinces exhibit a steady but relatively modest population growth, which tends to confirm that the extraordinary economic success was restricted to Holland.

It is beyond question that in the seventeenth century the South did not constitute the economic focus of Europe as it had done in the sixteenth century. Nevertheless, this period was not as catastrophic as is often suggested. The South did, it is true, suffer a state of semi-permanent warfare on its territory, which proved devastating to the majority of its textile industries. Commerce through its major port was also restricted, but an economic adaptation of trade from quantity to quality goods allowed the South to compensate for the shift in the European market. The economic lot of the northern Netherlands in the seventeenth century should be considered from two angles. Firstly, the 50% or so of the population who inhabited the province of Holland enjoyed a golden period. Like King Midas, every project the merchants, shippers or farmers of Holland touched in the first half of the century seemed to turn into gold, but this monopoly on economic success became increasingly more difficult to retain after 1650. Secondly, Holland's prosperity did not extend in a comparable manner to the other provinces of the Republic. Their positions remained relatively unchanged from that of the preceding century, and they did not share in Holland's economic success.

The terms "Ongelukseeuw" and "Gouden Eeuw" are representative of the general opinions on the northern and southern Netherlands in the seventeenth century held by the average present-day inhabitant of the Low Countries. As a reflection of the reality they are at best lacking, and at worst extremely misleading. The economic fortunes of the South were not disastrous, and certainly no more "ongelukkig" than the majority of the provinces of the northern Netherlands. Only the economy of Holland experienced golden years in the seventeenth century, but these were confined to the first five decades. These two terms form an important part of the cultural heritage of the Low Countries, but should not be afforded any weight as a basis for a factual account of seventeenth century Dutch economic history.

NOTES

[1] For an indication of the extent of this devastation, refer to Parker 1990, 254.

[2] This assertion is taken from Price 1987, 46. However, he admits that this is an inaccurate indicator.

[3] Population figures taken from Price 1987, 49-50.

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