

## **Cities as centers of creative activity. An interview with Jan de Vries<sup>1</sup>**

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Although his name is as Dutch as a name can be, and he is a native of Duivendrecht, Jan de Vries was raised in the United States of America, where he was trained as an historian at Columbia and Yale. From 1973 he has been Professor of Economics and History at the University of California at Berkeley. Jan de Vries is one of the world's leading specialists in the field of early modern economic history. Often classified as a neo-Smithian, De Vries himself is more cautious about his historical-ideological affiliations. 'If what makes me a neo-Smithian is regarding the growth of trade and the development of markets as a major force in economic history', he told us, 'I have no objections, as long as it will be clear that I equally recognize two other forces: technological change and political developments.' De Vries' main mission as an economic historian evidently is to disclose the early modern roots of modern-industrial economic growth. Not surprisingly, therefore, he has always been puzzled by the economy of the Dutch Republic. On the one hand, it showed so many signs of early capitalist development, on the other hand this early 'modernity' did not generate any move towards industrialisation.

Jan de Vries' major books are *The Dutch Rural Economy in the Golden Age 1500-1700* (New Haven and London 1974), *The Economy of Europe in an Age of Crisis, 1600-1750* (Cambridge 1976), *Barges and Capitalism. Passenger Transportation in the Dutch Economy, 1632-1839* (Utrecht 1981; orig. 1978), *European Urbanization, 1500-1800* (Cambridge, Mass. 1984), and, co-authored by Ad van der Woude, *Nederland 1500-1815. De eerste ronde van moderne economische groei* (Amsterdam 1995) (published in English as *The First Modern Economy: Success, Failure, and Perseverance of the Dutch Economy, 1500-1815* (Cambridge [etc.] 1997).

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<sup>1</sup> The interview was conducted on 17 March 2000.

**Professor De Vries, you gained fame, especially in The Netherlands, as an agrarian historian, or, rather, as an historian of rural society. How did it happen that you somewhere after the mid seventies, quite suddenly, moved from rural to urban history?**

As a specialist in agrarian history – although this might sound a bit like bragging – I always tried to see agrarian history in the broadest possible light. I wasn't only concerned with the techniques of agriculture, or with the character of rural society or of the relationship of landowners to tenants, or issues of that kind. I was looking at the development of the agricultural economy as a whole. Since this economy was obviously related to markets, urban markets are an important part of the story. So you might say that as an agricultural historian I was always looking at the city from the perspective of the countryside via the markets. Well, at some point I felt that a natural extension of that interest was to study cities more directly, not in terms of urban biography, of course, but cities as parts of an economic sector, as functional units in the economic life. I suppose I see the movement from working in agrarian history to working in urban history not as turning one's back to one subject and becoming specialised in just another one, but rather as moving naturally from one aspect of the study of early modern society to another. I have since then returned to some issues in agrarian history. It is not like I have no interest any more. I don't see this as an either-or.

**But what then is the main underlying theme of your work? Is it the big question of how early modern economic growth developed?**

Yes. Obviously I have been fascinated throughout my professional career with questions of long-term economic change, with how do societies develop. And agrarian and urban history are two aspects of it. They don't exhaust the subject either, but these are two dimensions that I felt the need to explore.

**In your long-term view you tend to start around 1500. Do you think this is a sensible dividing line in economic history?**

No, I don't think one can defend the year 1500 - or the beginning of the sixteenth century for that matter - as a beginning point. My first work – *The*

*Dutch Rural Economy in the Golden Age* - began with 1500 really for two simple reasons; one almost accidental, and the other simply reflecting the conventions of historical scholarship, and how history as a discipline reproduces itself. The accidental factor was that the earliest accessible sources available to me dated from the beginning of the sixteenth century – the *Enqueste* and the *Informacie* in Holland, the *Registers vanden Aenbrenng* in Friesland.<sup>2</sup> But they were the earliest accessible to me because I wasn't trained as a mediaevalist! I was trained as an Early Modernist, so I couldn't read Latin sources, and I had been exposed to historiography that said the Modern world begins with the Reformation and with the Renaissance, and hence the medieval period is something else. Through my own self-education and through ideas forced on me by historians of your generation I have recognized that the second of these issues – the boundaries that are conventionally used in historiography - have serious problems. So I am trying to overcome them through my reading; but I am still limited in my training to not being able to make fundamental research-based contributions to the scholarship of the history of earlier periods.

**Would you be prepared to extend your denial of 1500 as a meaningless dividing line in economic history to the conventional end of the Early Modern Period? After all, you wrote a book with Van der Woude about the 'First Modern Economy', implying that the 'early modern' world had long ended before 1800.**

Yes. I might mention an article that I have written and that is coming out in a volume edited by Maarten Prak - called Early Modern Capitalism or something like that. In it I present a critique of modern growth theory and at the same time a critique of what I would call the reigning model of the preindustrial economy that is essentially Malthusian and is based on some notion of the cyclical

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<sup>2</sup> The former two are fiscal surveys of all towns and villages of Holland, the latter is a village-by-village list of landholdings and their use, extant for the larger part of Oostergo and for the so-called Five Parts [sc. of the sea dikes] as well as the rural district of Wijmbritseradeel in Westergo. Editions of the *Enqueste* of 1494 and the *Informacie* (of 1514) have been published by R. Fruin in 1876 and 1866 respectively, editions of the extant *Aenbrenng* registers by I. Telting and J.C. Tjessinga in 1879 and 1943-1953 respectively.

processes governed by population and limited technological change. I am suggesting that both the modernism of the concept of modern economic growth as developed by Kuznets and extended by other economists, and the sort of Annales School model of the preindustrial economy, are flawed. And that we need a single approach, in which Schumpeterian, Smithian, and institutionalist factors all play a role, in which there can be 'waves' and 'rounds' of economic growth. That only such a single but broad model can be applicable to both the Early Modern and the Modern period. What that suggests is a critique of the basic periodisation that we work with. If I am no longer enamoured of the notion of 1500 as a beginning date, I am also no longer enamoured of the end of the eighteenth - beginning of the nineteenth century as a turning point between a preindustrial and an industrial, or an early modern and a modern, or a traditional and a modern society – all these terminologies are used. What impresses me now as an interesting turning-point in West-European history, and not only economic history, is the second half of the seventeenth century. I now see that the eighteenth and much of the nineteenth century form a unity in ways that we as professional historians have never been able to acknowledge since the work that defined the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution as the two sentries at the gateway into the modern world. I also am prepared to fully recognise that the Reformation and the Renaissance did not change as much as has always been thought. In the end I think that neither of the long-standing notions just mentioned cover economic-historical developments that were as dramatic as those that occurred in the course of the second half of the seventeenth century.

**Is there a special place in all this for the town, that is to say the early modern town?**

Yes, I think there is. In my work on the history of European urbanisation I attempted to show how the towns that had existed since the Middle Ages came to be organised, that is how they came to relate to each other in new ways in the course of the Early Modern Period. This development was perhaps most intense in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. That new form of organisation was something different than the growth of the urban percentage of the total population. In fact, urbanisation did not rise spectacularly in this period, which might be the first sign that in a superficial analysis we might look for as

indicating a new role of the city in society. But the existing cities were organised differently. They formed more of a hierarchy, more of a network in relationship to each other and to their hinterlands. I believe that this organisation of space and these new functional roles of the cities made possible types of economic development that were either impossible or could not be developed as fully or as extensively across space in earlier periods. It means that before there was the factory and the new industrial technologies of the nineteenth century - which gave rise to new urban developments of their own - the cities of Europe had been organised in a way to make possible an intensified commercial life and a greater access to markets. This is a kind of Smithian development and it was an important stage to long-term growth.

**While rereading your book of 1984, one of the things that struck us was that when you would have written it now, you probably would have put more ‘institutionalism’ into it. You would have paid more attention to markets, to market integration, probably also to transaction costs, and to what such factors did to what you have called the ‘urban archipelago’s’. Is this correct?**

Yes. I think it is. When I sat out to write the book to which you refer, *European Urbanization*, I had something less ambitious in mind than I actually produced. I thought: this will be more of a technical work, an aid to scholars. Here are the population figures, here is a basic, quantitative overview of what has happened. As I got into it further, I wrote more and more about the networks, about the demographic phenomena underlying urbanisation processes. But there is much that I did not do; in part because I did not have it on my agenda at the time and the book had a limited objective. But in part also because at the time I was not as familiar as I think I have become in the years since of new developments in economics, in particular the institutional school of economics and also the new growth theory that, allowed for a more subtle analysis of aspects of urbanisation that stand between the very large sort of mega-historical processes that I was describing in the book and the micro-level processes of how cities reproduced themselves, how they replenished themselves demographically, how they achieved functional specialisation, etcetera. It is now possible to do much more than I was able to do in my book of 1984.

**What strikes mediaevalists and ancient historians about your book is that as a starting point you chose the wrong ‘measure’, that is you defined cities as places with more than 10,000 inhabitants. Even around 1600, an agglomeration of 10,000 people was a big place. Didn’t you leave most settlements – maybe as much as 90% - that historians would functionally call towns out of your story?**

This is a criticism that was levelled against the book from the very first day it came out. Already the first reviewers said: ‘oh, he is only looking at the tip of an iceberg’. In my own defence I must say that the book has a chapter called ‘The tip of the iceberg’ that is about how to estimate what was underneath the waterline. So this was not a matter that I was oblivious of. In fact I attempted to estimate the average size of the urban populations of smaller places, down to 5,000 inhabitants. And I also introduced quite a bit of material to suggest how many cities there were, without being able to be very specific about their exact size. Neither has this larger ‘sub-waterline’ urban world been ignored in my later analyses. It remains true however that I thought, and I think one can still defend, the notion that this world of 300-400 cities of 10,000 and above allows us, maybe not to examine every aspect of urban life, but many that are still very important. In particular the higher economic functions that have a tendency to change over a span of a century or more I think can be adequately understood by looking at the way these larger cities, which are in the middle and at the top of the hierarchy, gradually come to be rearranged. It is not true for every small city, but for the majority of small cities their role is closer to the ground. They are more at the interface between the rural society and the urban, market towns with their service functions. And these tend to be much more stable. As a consequence I think that, while I miss something by not examining them in detail, I gain something by being able to look at an international Western- and Central-European scale at the cities on the top.

**Another point of critique on *European Urbanization* could be that you neglected the role of the state. Is the difference between the medieval and early modern period not exactly in the rise of the ‘modern’ state? From then on all the big decisions and all the big functions started to become ‘nationalised’.**

I think that given my own interests and my own assessment of my talents I probably would never have written a book that would have focused primarily on the relationship between the city and the state. But I do think that it is an important topic. Since the time of the book’s publication I have had occasion to speculate on these matters. But I don’t think I am the person to do more than speculate. However, what impresses me in my examination of the subject thus far is the highly ambivalent relationship between the state as a territorial entity and the city as a more potentially dynamic factor – but grounded geographically as well. The city has needs – economic needs, political needs – that come variously depending on its position in the urban hierarchy. These needs are often connected to changes in economic life and technology, that cause cities to, as it were, strain against the larger political system that they are in. I find that a fascinating subject.

**But isn’t that a subject that applies more to, for instance, early modern Amsterdam and to some extent London, but less to, say, Paris? Did the moving space cities had in early modern states not depend on their being at the apex of the political structure or not? It is a question that relates to an interesting distinction that you have made, that is between economic space and state territories. These two did not necessarily coincide; they did so far less for international gateways such as Amsterdam than for land-locked cities like Paris.**

I would go further. The dynamism of modern capitalism depends on their *not* coinciding. There must be cities with a reach that extends beyond the state – which even today is the case. Here we are of course talking about cities at the apex of the system. But there is also a sense in which cities just below the top level have created new roles for themselves. This is something that can be easily observed in post-war Europe, so far as the construction of the European

Community has changed the relationship between cities, regions, and national states. One can identify a number of cities that are not at the apex - that are not a Paris, or a Madrid or a Rome – that have been able to escape to some extent from the national political system; Barcelona is an excellent example, Munich is another. It brings me to a newspaper article I read in 1992, shortly after the European market had been formally integrated. Some leading figures of the city administration of Milan were interviewed, and they said: ‘we look with great optimism at the new situation; we think our city and its economic interests will be greatly benefited.’ When asked why, they could not give a better answer without being too critical of their own national government than ‘we prefer to deal with a distant Brussels than with a nearby Rome.’ The new supranational situation just gave them more space! This was no different than when in the fifteenth century the city fathers of Hamburg made a big show of their loyalty to the Emperor so that they could justify not being under the thumb of the king of Denmark who was a lot closer and could give them a lot more trouble. The Emperor was far away and had little effective leverage.

**But this would create a strange paradox! What you are saying now almost excludes the idea that the national state would win, but the national state did win in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Whatever you say about economic networks, the nationalisation of economies took place – of course not completely, but definitely far more than had ever happened before. Fifty percent of the Gross Domestic Product of modern western states consists of taxes. It is almost against the logic of capitalism that states would become so powerful. So what is the driving force behind state building if the existence of capital and big cities would historically oppose it?**

Obviously these things are very complicated. Things that cities oppose, that they are unwilling to pay for or to have their freedom restricted for – state building, the growth of military power, state regulation of economic life – these are also things that at least certain elements or interests in a city would benefit from. So it’s one of these things that always work in two directions; always certain economic interests want freedom, whereas others find great benefit from the redistributive power of the state. I don’t think that that is going to change. But the relative weights over time do change. I don’t want to make big claims for a



future world in which the nation state withers – I don't think that is going to happen – but I do think that the life of the factory based economy that emerged from the Industrial Revolution is now shrinking relative to other types of economic activity – services and information, in particular. From its beginning the factory based economy has by definition been rooted in physical capital, fixed in space. This essential limitation made possible many of the characteristic features of the national state as we understand it today. Economic life could be nationalised, not in the socialist sense but in the sense of state regulation, because the economy was some place; it could not be moved. The more we have an economy in which economic life is footloose, the less those kinds of state policies can function.

**The present-day United States are a prime example of such a postindustrial, footloose economy?**

Well, the United States are certainly not the only one. And the US government will be one of the last to feel these effects, simply because the US are so large. Small states feel them immediately. But I think it affects all industrial societies.

**From what we have understood from your latest publications, you tend to pay increasing attention to the psychological and cultural sides of urbanisation, to the coming into being of a sort of urban mindset or urban values, or whatever you would call it. Which place would you assign to this 'factor' in the field of urban history?**

Well, you exaggerate a bit my interest in psychological factors but I did try to develop the notion, that I also introduced in my work of 1984, that urbanisation not only had a demographic dimension as well as a functional-structural dimension, but also a behavioural dimension. Now, behaviour is not only psychology but we might also think of it as cultural style or as cultural forms that are specific to town dwellers. Also related to this is the notion of cities as areas that are particularly propitious for creative activity – technological change, but also creative activities in non-economic sectors. Is there something about urban life that forms human personalities and shapes their cultural values, that is supportive of creative acts? That is a big question. I don't pretend to have the

academic and the mental training to say a great deal about it, but it is a question that no specialist in urban history can avoid. The problem here is determining the direction of the causal arrow between creative activity and people. Do people become (more) creative when they live in cities or do creative people find themselves drawn to cities? This is a simple way of making a distinction that obviously has more dimensions. It is a basic question, and I would love to hear what other people have to say about it.

**We brought it up because the whole question arose in your latest contribution to the discussion about the backwardness or progressiveness of the Dutch economy in the beginning of nineteenth century. In the explanations so far the mentality of the Dutch bourgeois elite takes a big part.**

Now you accuse me of invoking the ‘Jan Salie geest’?

**On the contrary; I would say an ‘anti-Jan Salie geest’, but even so a ‘geest’.**

This will be an indirect response to your question. I am impressed by how urban life for very practical reasons that relate to how people’s behaviour is constrained within urban society, sets two quite contrary forces at work. One supports creative activity. This is the city as an information-rich environment with face-to-face contact with people of different background and from different places, and hence the possibility of creative interaction. On the other hand, we have the city as a hotbed of creation and elaboration of distributional coalitions, rent seeking behaviour, protective behaviour, the city as a place also where people can organise themselves because they are near each other or because they have access to political structures that can enforce their self-organisation, their protective, monopolistic behaviour. Cities as a whole can play this latter role as well, by being protective of the urban community, by preventing outsiders from establishing themselves in the city, or, and this is more at hand in the Early Modern and Modern Periods, by enforcing laws that regulate the behaviour that can make it difficult for new businesses to control urban land that is scarce, or that regulate the keeping out of competitors of existing interests. The list is almost endless. It is one thing to say that these two contradictory forces are

always at work, and that they are related to each other in time, linked by some kind of cultural-political process that is common to most societies. But for historians it is interesting to know how there are specific times and places when the one seems to get the upper hand, but then leads inevitably, almost as though it is turning the coin over, to the other side. When does that happen, under what conditions, and when does it turn again? These are the kinds of things that interest me particularly as an economic historian, and in the case of the history of the Dutch Republic I see that change of the second half of the seventeenth century as such a period of flipping the coin over. But by using that image I want to reject the notion that the economic growth that had occurred was a peculiar, extraordinary historical phenomenon that then ends, but rather to say that it naturally, inevitably, gave way to something else, which was its logical extension.

**And then you would argue that in the coastal areas of the Netherlands from the end of the seventeenth century, after the ‘coin had flipped over’, there was a change to a more closed economic mentality?**

I would say the mentality followed; I wouldn't say that it all begins with mentality. It all starts with trying to find responses to practical problems that make sense in that time. They are not irrational. But these responses – let me probe another term - in a path-dependent process lead to an ossification of economic relations. People want to hold on to them because they are still valuable. But at the same time they do stand in the way of new development.