

The Great Transition
A Local Study into the Modernization of Life
Woensel 1670-1920

This book is the result of an experiment. We have tried to study the modernization of life - a process which took place throughout Western Europe in the past centuries - at a local level. To that end we analyse the changes which the village of Woensel went through between 1670 and 1920. This form of micro-history has three advantages. From a thematic viewpoint it can be focused on everyday life, the normal routine which often passes unnoticed but has had great influence on history. In this respect our study is related to cultural anthropology. From a methodological viewpoint it enables us to study mechanisms and processes which would be hidden from view in a large-scale approach. In this respect local history is used as a microscope for more extensive processes. From a political viewpoint we do not want to regard the local population as the passive objects of a policy outlined by the elite, but as actors who agree with certain initiatives taken by the authorities, offer resistance against others and employ others at their own discretion. In this respect we have chosen an approach from below. This enables us to discuss the great questions of history by way of the fortunes of a small community.

Our choice of Woensel - a village situated close to Eindhoven in Eastern North Brabant - was partly motivated by the quality of the sources. After East Brabant had been definitively assimilated into the Northern Netherlands in 1648, records were formed on a regular basis. As a result the history of Woensel can be reconstructed well from the end of the seventeenth century. Secondly, in the course of the nineteenth century the village underwent substantial changes, which enables us to study the modernization of life in all its aspects. For centuries Woensel was an inconspicuous village with a population of some 2200 inhabitants. Around 1860, however, the population started to grow rapidly and the village was fully transformed by industrialization. Thirdly, Woensel is not an isolated instance, as large parts of the Netherlands underwent similar changes. A comparison with other regional and local studies shows that this particularly holds for the sandy soil region in the South-East of the country. This also presents a welcome correction to the current view on Dutch history, which is still dominated by the image of early-modernized Holland.

In a way the method used in this study can be seen as a form of total or 'integral' history. Yet we prefer to speak of 'differential' history. The latter term refers to the three procedures by which we have tried to establish the meaning of historical facts. The first procedure involves that for a certain context or period we have to determine the normal practice and also the way in which a certain event deviates from it. The second involves contrasting the *Ancien Régime* and the modern period in order to find out how and when the transition takes place and which aspects are involved. Thirdly, we have constantly made a distinction between the demographic-economic, the administrative-political and the mental-

cultural levels of history. We deliberately act as if we are dealing with three independent processes that can be reconstructed on the basis of separate sources. Only afterwards do we establish the sequence of the changes at these three levels and their interaction. Actually this means that the history of Woensel is not written once but three times, each time focusing on a different type of modernization. The main results of this approach amount to the following.

1. Economic-demographic processes.

Our understanding of the historical development departs from the insight that both the industrial and the agricultural sectors were based on a family economy. In the eighteenth century most peasants had three hectares of farmland and four head of cattle. Because the sandy soils of East Brabant are rather infertile, farming was extremely labour-intensive. The peasant, his wife and his children had to toil every day in order to provide the family with sufficient food. Larger farms employed a farm-hand or maid. The crop was primarily determined by the combined efforts of the workers, for technical or commercial innovations were almost unknown. The peasants' primary objective was not the maximization of profits but the survival of the family farm. They were largely self-sufficient - money played a limited role until late in the nineteenth century. Around 1850, however, the agricultural market began to develop. This led to a growing importance of dairy production and cattle-breeding. In addition, agricultural crops gave better and better yields. Whereas initially this was achieved by the intensification of labour, towards the end of the nineteenth century labour-saving and quality-improving innovations were increasingly introduced. As a result the productivity of the agricultural sector grew considerably and a large food surplus could be sold at the market. Peasants no longer aimed to be self-sufficient and various tasks (such as the production of dairy produce) were delegated to specialized industries. The establishment of co-operative societies gave peasants the opportunity to obtain credit, whilst also making the organization of purchases and sales more efficient.

Although industry, too, went through a strong process of commercialization, the outcome was entirely different. Until the middle of the nineteenth century the cottage industry was predominant in this sector. In Woensel and the surrounding area weaving was most important. Generally a linen merchant served as the intermediary between market and producer. He bought the raw materials and sold the woven fabrics. But the actual labour process took place in the home and remained tied to the family economy. Around 1860 manufactories began to develop. The number of factories grew considerably as did the numbers of workers. Steam power and mechanization gained ground. Moreover, the organization of the labour process changed drastically: factory workers were subjected to a strict discipline in which the start, the end and the rhythm of their activities were imposed by others. A considerable part of the labour surplus was absorbed in this way. In Woensel and the surrounding area labour-intensive branches of industry, such as the textile and tobacco industries, flourished in particular. The establishment of Philips' incandescent lamp company in Eindhoven in 1891 marked the final step towards a modern industry. From a technical and commercial viewpoint this factory was very advanced and it

produced for the world market. The social policy of Philips was liberal and politically the firm can be considered the driving force behind many innovations in the region.

Demographic changes took place in close connection to the economic history. Until the middle of the nineteenth century the population of Woensel did not increase appreciably as a result of the West European marriage pattern. People did not marry until they could provide for themselves. Therefore the average age at marriage was fairly high and the frequency of marriage relatively low. In this way the number of births could be controlled without contraceptive measures. Moreover, the high mortality rate and emigration also played a role. All this resulted in an almost constant population. In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, a number of striking changes took place. The average age at marriage for women - which had been 30 for a long time - began to decrease, which led to a growing number of children per family. This process was reinforced as breast-feeding was given up for bottle-feeding, so that the intervals between births became shorter. So the birth rate increased, whereas at the same time the mortality rate gradually decreased. The resulting population growth was enhanced by a considerable positive migration balance, as emigration was substituted by a substantial flow of immigrants at the end of the century. All these factors led to a true population explosion after 1900.

From a social viewpoint the most striking development was the process of proletarianization. During the eighteenth century Woensel had a number of poor inhabitants; this number fluctuated according to economic or climatic circumstances but seldom exceeded one third of the population. The majority of the households owned a piece of land by which they could provide themselves with their own food. But from 1860 onwards the situation began to deteriorate. The proportion of poor households rose to 60 per cent and remained at that level for a long time. The traditional balance between population size and means of subsistence seemed to be lost. This was due to the fact that the population continued to grow, whereas the available farm land hardly increased. The number of households without land expanded and a growing number of people became exclusively dependent on wage labour. These conditions only began to improve in the early twentieth century, partly because of a substantial increase in wages. But now other problems arose. The number of working-class families in Woensel had expanded so much that there was a large shortage of houses. This resulted in hygienic and social misery. Another problem was that in the event of misfortune (accident, disease, old age, unemployment, recession, et cetera) the working-class, numerous by now, was totally dependent on poor relief. In the end these problems became so overwhelming that Woensel had to give up its municipal autonomy. In 1920 the community (together with other villages in the area) was incorporated by Eindhoven.

2. Political-administrative processes.

Although Brabant was definitively incorporated into the Dutch Republic in 1648, it remained a marginal territory for a long time. Because of its geographic situation and nature the area mainly served as a military buffer zone against attacks from the South. This brought countless disadvantages for the inhabitants.

Rural areas, particularly, were frequently exposed to hostile acts. In times of peace the armies of the Dutch Republic and their allies had to be maintained. From a political viewpoint the fact that Brabant no longer had its own States Assembly was important. The district was directly governed from The Hague, the regional government being carried out by 'foreign' officials (which meant Protestants, mostly originating from the Western part of Holland). Only in 1796 did this semi-colonial situation come to an end and Brabant was recognized as a full part of the Batavian Republic. But even afterwards the political integration of the district into the Dutch state progressed slowly and not without difficulty. It was only around 1870 that 'national' issues began to penetrate into local politics. And not until 1900 that new strata of the population, such as peasants, workers and small businessmen, were incorporated into the administrative system by means of their social organizations.

In the same period fiscal relations changed considerably. In eighteenth-century Brabant complaints about taxes were abundant. Although in an absolute sense the region had less tax money to pay than Holland, the tax burden was in fact relatively high. Initially, the average amount of taxes and other financial burdens for households was equal to half of the annual consumption of rye. Moreover, the population received almost nothing in return, for investments in the region remained small. This began to change in the nineteenth century. On the one hand the tax burdens decreased, on the other hand the returns increased. Around 1870 the situation took a turn for the better and the municipal spending per household exceeded the taxes. The last decades of the nineteenth century saw the start of a considerable flow of money from the state to the local authorities, mainly consisting of subsidies for poor relief, education, public health and housing and other social spending. A growing part of the municipal budget was spent on these services. Financially, too, this led to a greater involvement of the population in the fortunes of the Dutch state.

A third aspect of political modernization was participation. This marks a great difference with the situation under the *Ancien Régime*, when the regions governed by the States General had no influence whatsoever. After the administrative centralization, enforced by The Hague at the end of the seventeenth century, local governors had only little freedom of action. A form of political participation by means of voting was introduced only in the Batavian Republic. Later the right to vote was maintained, restricted though it was to the upper classes. However, people took their rights seriously, as appeared, for instance, when in 1829 a controversial affair concerning electoral fraud took place in Woensel. From 1848 onwards the opportunities for participation were gradually extended and in 1917 universal male suffrage was introduced. This did not mean that the local political culture also changed. At the turn of the century the administration in Woensel was still in the hands of a few prominent families. It took a long time before the working-classes were represented in the local council.

Against this background it is not surprising that loyalty to the national cause developed only slowly. One of the main causes was the policy which the States General had pursued towards Catholicism since 1648. For a few decades they tried to impose the Reformed religion on the land of the Generality. Catholic priests were banished and their churches were closed. The administration was largely Calvinized. From 1730 onwards this policy was relaxed and the Catholic religion was tolerated. But in the meantime the population had developed deep

resentments against the Republic. The government was still seen as a foreign and even hostile authority. The growing political tensions in the last decades of the eighteenth century led to an outburst in Woensel. The Protestant minority was faced with desecration of graves and ritual violence. Even in the first decades of the nineteenth century rural Brabant showed little patriotism. Church and state clashed and the Catholic clergy stimulated the opposition against King Willem I. Around 1830 there was a tendency of separatism in the region and inhabitants of Woensel campaigned for joining Belgium. When this began to change around 1870, religion again played a leading role. Following the Protestant example, Catholic politicians began to mobilize their supporters. The antithesis of religious and non-religious parties at the national level manifested itself strongly in Eindhoven and the surrounding area. Around 1900 clericals and anti-clericals were political adversaries in all fields. What was new, however, was the fact that the clericals were now most loyal to the state.

3. Mental-cultural processes.

One of the principal cultural developments is the gradual decrease of violent behaviour. The measures which the government had taken to stop the numerous killings and fights in rural Brabant from 1648 onwards remained unsuccessful for almost two centuries. The offenders managed to get away, witnesses refused to testify or sabotaged the investigations. In fact the population shielded themselves against interference from outsiders. Consequently, the state monopoly on violence remained a purely formal affair. This changed during and after the Batavian Period as the judicial system was reorganized. Criminal investigations became more effective and a growing number of persons had to face an accusation. Around 1840 firmer action was taken against disturbances of the peace. Criminal laws enforced discipline in many fields. In the last decades of the nineteenth century the disciplinary effects of criminal law were extended enormously. An increasing number of persons had to appear in cantonal court on account of petty offenses. A civilization offensive unfolded. The rules of conduct in traffic, the closing time for inns, the use of proper weights and measures, the excessive consumption of liquor, petty thefts, et cetera were made subject to police supervision and small, but noticeable sanctions. In this way the government combined repression with education.

This process was closely linked to the struggle against illiteracy. Popular culture in rural Brabant was long dominated by ritual. All major events in life, such as marriage, birth and death, were celebrated ritually. In the event of deviations from the collective norm charivaris and other forms of symbolic violence were usual. The ritual fight for honour remained popular, too. In a community like Woensel only the parish priest, the notary and a few administrators were part of a literate culture. In the middle of the eighteenth century they only formed a small minority, as two thirds of the population could not even write their own names. Around 1850 school attendance became more regular and illiteracy slowly disappeared. Schools also improved in quality, expressed in a growing emphasis on the three R's. Towards the end of the century modernization of primary education was completed. The intellectual horizons of most inhabitants broadened and moral or religious education was widely popular.

Some residents of Woensel even made a name as authors of non-specialist scientific works.

This development can be attributed partly, but by no means exclusively, to government initiatives. In two ways the contribution of the Catholic Church was very important. Firstly, it started a process of moralization. This originated in the strict morality propagated by the Council of Trent. Woensel had a parish priest who actively supported the internalization of religious life. He advocated the practice of confession and insisted on frequent prayers and spiritual exercise. Believers had to avert their eyes from this world to fully concentrate on God and the next world. In the middle of the nineteenth century a certain shift took place. The Vincentians, in particular, showed a new sensibility towards the poor. By means of charitable works they tried to support their poor neighbours materially as well as spiritually and practised Christian charity in a more worldly way. Around 1900 this developed into fully-fledged political commitment. The 'social issue' stirred many priests to social activity. They pleaded for greater social justice with the government and employers. They also played a crucial role in the organization of peasants, workers, small businessmen and other groups. At the same time they fought against socialism, which had won some hesitant support in Woensel and the surrounding area. The clergy came out of this fight as the winners. Partly because of this social life was fully dominated by Catholic morality.

Secondly, the Church gained more power and prestige. During the *Ancien Régime* its influence was actually rather marginal, while it had a poor hierarchic structure. This is evident, for instance, from a long and rather sordid conflict between two parish priests in Woensel at the beginning of the eighteenth century. After the period of French rule the situation gradually changed. The clergy took the offensive, turning themselves against the worldly lifestyle and liberal attitudes of the Eindhoven middle classes. Politically they contributed much to the opposition against King Willem I. Moreover North Brabant saw the start of massive religious campaigning and the establishment of numerous religious brotherhoods. Around 1840 religious life entered a new phase, characterized by great commitment among the believers, a militant and well-disciplined clergy and a centralized ecclesiastical organization. By the end of the nineteenth century the Church had gained a far-reaching influence. In the twentieth century the Catholic 'pillar' was developed. The clergy did not only carry out church functions, but also played an active role in education, poor relief, social organizations and politics.

4. Conclusion.

It is no coincidence that this division into three historical levels is reminiscent of the work of Braudel. But we deviate from the methodology suggested by him insofar as we apply the distinction between short, medium and long durations to each of these three levels. We are primarily interested in qualitative changes over the long-term. Although the nature of these changes is undeniable, we do not believe that they point in one particular direction. Neither do we think that these three histories are necessarily synchronic. Instead we observe a form of 'polychrony', which means that the historical process develops at various tempi

and in diverse directions. This implies that we not only give up the old idea of historical 'progress', but also the idea that there is only *one* process of modernization. In fact we observe several forms of modernization, each characterized by its own dynamics, the rhythm and coherence of which can only be discovered in a concrete situation. It is for this reason that we focus on the phenomenon of the actual transition. For each historical process of change we determine a. in what respect there is a change between the classical and modern period; b. when this change started or was completed and so also the duration of the transition; c. the magnitude or intensity of the relevant change.

When we look again at the economic, political and cultural history of Woensel in this way, we find that the current view is totally refuted. Many authors suppose that in the last instance political and cultural changes are determined by 'hard' processes in the fields of demography and economy. In this light issues such as the expansion of the market economy, industrialization or demographic transition are seen as decisive. Our study shows that this is an inversion of the historical development. In Woensel and the surrounding area a modernization of political relations starts *first*, followed *secondly* by a mental and cultural modernization and only *thirdly* by a change of the demographic and economic reality. The latter realities were the *final products* rather than the motors of historical development. Moreover, these three processes not only begin at different moments in time, but also continue over various periods. Political modernization, for instance, is a process which extends over 90 years, whereas cultural modernization takes 60 years and economic innovation is completed in a relatively short period of 30 years. On the basis of this the political modernization can be considered of primary importance.

However, this primacy is not only a matter of chronology. Our study shows that modern economic life is based on a number of tacit assumptions, without which it would probably never have flourished. For the most part these assumptions refer to mental and cultural fields. The market economy presupposes a typical habitus and rationality, totally different from the traditional peasant economy. A factory can only produce on a regular basis, on a large scale and with a constant quality if in addition to certain physical virtues (such as health and discipline) workers show certain mental qualities, such as diligence, reliability and responsibility. In addition a certain degree of education and social consciousness is needed. Well, these matters had to be brought about by the combined efforts of the Church, government and educational system. But this cultural and mental revolution itself, which started around 1830, turned out to be possible only under certain political conditions. In East Brabant at least the legal system, education and church life only developed after the political innovations in the first decades of the nineteenth century. In a later period, too, political innovation remained a necessary condition for economic and cultural changes. In this respect the primacy of politics has to be understood in a causal sense too.

Finally there is another point. The national government embodies such great power that each decision it takes - and each mistake it makes - has far-reaching consequences for the organization and quality of our lives. Therefore the primacy of politics does not only make sense from a chronological and analytical viewpoint but also from a moral point of view.

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