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## The 'Societal Turn' *Historicizing Future Society*\*

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### Abstract

As a group of young historians we are strongly convinced that the future of social and economic history will be a collective endeavour that crosses institutional and disciplinary boundaries. Only by means of continuous and intensive interaction (junior) researchers will be able to bring the societal turn to a decisive phase in the next ten years. This turn represents an upsurge of social and economic history that is deeply embedded in and engaged with public challenges and debates by means of conscious participation and dissemination of historical analyses. Particularly, the societal turn will involve research that brings to the forefront three interrelated research perspectives: inequality, ecology and connectivity. For these are the three lenses through which socio-economic historians of the coming decades will produce new scientific knowledge that is centred around ongoing societal processes. In the following essay, we collectively take up our responsibility in historicising future society.

## 1 Introduction

Writing our vision of the future of economic and social history collectively is a clear statement. Whether we call it inter-, trans- or intra-disciplinary, above all, we have to work within cooperative structures, cross-

\* Members of the research group Economies, Comparisons, Connections of Ghent University: <http://research.flw.ugent.be/en/ecc>. Esther Beeckaert, Pieter De Reu and Marjolein Schepers are also connected to the research groups CORE and HOST of Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB). The authors would like to thank the participants in the HOST seminar (VUB) of September 18th, 2017, and particularly the jury and the editors of TSEG for their useful comments.

ing institutional boundaries. To us as junior scholars, the collective endeavour leading to this essay was not only about adding up expertise and workforce. The ideas for this paper took shape while formulating a mission and vision text for the ECC research group (UGent). The call for essays on the future of social and economic history challenged us. We had to develop a common ground to position ourselves as young researchers within our research group, our discipline and the broader research environment through sustained interaction between multiple perspectives and experiences. Despite innovative online collaborative tools, streamlining our lengthy preparative discussions into a clear vision on the future of our *métier* remained a fairly challenging task. It stands out, however, that we will need various forms of cooperation and must advocate a conscious engagement with wider society.

The cultural and linguistic waves which have swept the humanities in the last decades have reached their peak.<sup>1</sup> Looking at the topics socio-economic historians debate since the turn of the century, some colleagues have identified a revival of (new) social history.<sup>2</sup> In the last decade, socio-economic historians have been incorporating ingredients from new political and cultural history, while analysing socio-historical processes and related practices as structure, agency and perception. Even more than has been the case during the last decades, social-economic historians need to investigate the concepts of the ‘economy’ and the ‘social’ in a broad sense, to include economies of status and affection, material cultures, social power relations and political ecology. Studying a wide variety of topics, our involvement with the great societal challenges of today lies in the investigation of the underlying historical processes. This societal commitment is embedded in the roots of our discipline. During the next ten years, the challenge for young researchers lies in taking what we define as the *societal* turn – a new wave of social and economic history that is deeply embedded in and engaged with public processes and debates – to a decisive phase.<sup>3</sup> This will be realized through the use of collaborative research environments and interaction with various societal questions on a local, regional and global scale.<sup>4</sup>

In this essay, we first analyse the rich historiographical tradition and

1 J. De Vries, ‘Changing the narrative. The new history that was and is to come’, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 48:3 (2018) 313-334.

2 J. Kocka, ‘Losses, gains and opportunities. Social history today’, *Journal of Social History* 37:1 (2003) 21-28; P. Joyce, ‘What is the social in social history?’, *Past & Present* 206:1 (2010) 213-248.

3 The authors wish to thank Aniek Smit for her suggestion on the use of concepts.

4 S. Handley, R. McWilliam and L. Noakes, *New directions in social and cultural history* (London 2018).

more recent trends in social and economic history. We argue that the discipline might have lost relevance due to internal and external frictions. However, social and economic historians certainly can reclaim the central position they had in the past. Secondly, we explain why inequality, ecology and connectivity will be the crucial research perspectives for the next decades. The mentioned perspectives are illustrated by several relevant research topics, studied both interregionally and across periods. These exemplary cases will show that the perspectives of inequality, ecology and connectivity are intricately linked. The fourth section about the societal turn goes to the core of our argument. We promote a more vibrant interaction between academia and diverse layers of civil society. The call for socio-economic historians in public debates should be answered by a conscious participation and dissemination of scientific research – not merely by a passive publication policy for a broad public. Our agenda for the consolidation of this societal turn nevertheless requires a discussion on the merits and challenges of the historian's craft in the twenty-first century. Therefore, section 4.2 is dedicated to methods, sources and data collection. Researchers in the field of socio-economic history should embrace the digital turn, yet constantly remain critical towards the origins of the source. In contrast to economists or sociologists, historians critically interrogate the context of its creation. This contextualization benefits more from a *longue durée* perspective than from a short-term view. The scope of contextualization must not only be broadened in terms of time but also in terms of space: researchers in social and economic history should connect societal questions both on a local, regional and global scale. In conclusion, we briefly sketch how young historians can bring the new societal turn into practise in the next ten years.

## 2 A 'new' turn in historiography?

The question of history's place and impact in twenty-first-century societal debates has become an inevitable one.<sup>5</sup> The manifest invitation to engage with the 'outside(the-ivory-tower) world' concerns social and economic historians in particular. The third section will illustrate that

5 P. Ramon Pinto and B. Taithe, *The impact of history? Histories at the beginning of the 21st century* (London 2015); J. Tosh, *The pursuit of history. Aims, methods and new directions in the study of modern history* (London 2015 6th ed.).

society is in need of contextualized and long-term knowledge on the pressing challenges that inequality, ecology and connectivity pose. Social and economic historians are in the best position to fulfil these urgent needs. Over the following decade, social and economic historians should pick up with current problems more intensely and steer the characteristics of future debates more actively. The combined pressures from within (history) and from the outside (society) lead to what we identify as history's 'societal turn'. Before delving into the concepts and practicalities of the societal turn, we will shortly position it within the directions that social and economic history took over the past couple of decades.

This current turn in tackling social and economic history is by no means new in the sense that the societal turn builds on an existing historiographical tradition. Scholars have largely abandoned the debate about the purpose and answering big socio-economic issues. Although the days of the *Methodenstreit* are far behind us, discussions on which methods should be used when studying social sciences still prevail over questions on the usefulness and relevance of socio-economic history in the public debate.<sup>6</sup> Socio-economic history has lost creative power due to this lack of introspection, especially since the 'linguistic turn' and the 'cultural turn' have transformed the humanities in the past decades.<sup>7</sup> Due to the further development and popularization of other social sciences, the dynamics of social and economic history were pushed to the background. Its usefulness was not questioned as such, but the historiographic discipline had to compete increasingly with these other social sciences for attention. Most socio-economic historians understandably refrained from formulating clear and universal theories, while public debate increasingly demanded simple solutions. Hence, being a truly dynamic field since its inception, the craft of social and economic history lost some of its attraction at the end of the previous century.<sup>8</sup> Short-termism became a general issue during the last quarter of the twentieth century and has slipped into academia as well. This coincided with a retreat of historians from the public sphere. The public debate was taken over by scholars whose approaches to the past were determined less by a socio-historical perspective and more by abstract and inherent a-historical models.<sup>9</sup>

6 M. Louzek, 'The battle of methods in economics. The classical Methodenstreit. Menger vs. Schmoller', *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 70:2 (2011) 439-463.

7 De Vries, 'Changing the narrative', 313-334.

8 F. Boldizzoni, *The poverty of Clío. Resurrecting economic history* (Princeton 2011) 168-171.

9 J. Guldi and D. Armitage, *The history manifesto* (Cambridge 2014); H. Klein, 'The 'historical turn' in the social sciences', *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 48:3 (2018) 295-312.

As such, the discipline of social and economic history has gone some way from its heydays in the 1960s-1970s. Back then, it related especially to a societal focus, such as proclaimed by the *Gesellschaftsgeschichte* of the highly influential Bielefeld School<sup>10</sup> or by the second generation of the – at that time – leading journal *Annales. Economies, sociétés, civilisations* (which changed its name into *Histoire. Sciences sociales* as part of the 'crisis' in social and economic history during that 1990s). This strong societal focus was linked to the post-war democratization of higher education, which made that also middle and working class students became historians (as students, researchers and university professors). We clearly plea for a revitalization of these roots of social and economic history, thus going beyond the linguistic and cultural turns that dominated the previous decades. This return to the origins of our discipline will help us forward, because young historians have new questions and possess new data methods to answer or reassess older questions. Finally, socio-economic historians in the new millennium should respond to demands for renewed interactions within the social sciences (e.g. the *Rethinking Economics* initiative).<sup>11</sup> Many of the ongoing discussions among scholars will remain imperative in the following years. In our vision of the future of social and economic history, we promote the thematic clustering of the different topics in collaborative research environments. We aim to study them through intricately linked research perspectives. These aspects are at the heart of today's international politics and society's challenges and will become even more pressing in the following years.

### 3 Research Perspectives: Inequality – Ecology – Connectivity

Inequality, ecology and connectivity are the three crucial research perspectives of the next decade. Their centrality results from reciprocal interactions between current societal challenges and innovations in historical and historiographical debates. On the one hand, civil society is discussing the impact of inequality, the consequences of global interconnectedness and our future ability to live in a sustainable relationship

10 See the interpretation of Bielefeld scholar Hans-Ulrich Wehler in: H.-U. Wehler, 'Historiography in Germany today', in: J. Habermas (ed.), *Observations on 'The spiritual situation of the age'* (Cambridge 1984) 243-244.

11 J. Arnold, M. Hilton and J. Rüger, *History after Hobsbawm. Writing the past for the twenty-first century* (Oxford 2017) Introduction.

with nature. We argue that addressing these challenges requires historical insight. On the other hand, the use of the three perspectives should also innovate our current history writing. Too often, inequality, ecology and connectivity have been studied separately as research topics on their own. Instead, historians should use them as an angle (or perspective) from which to consider social processes in the past. We insist on adopting this triad as analytical tools that inform the questions we ask rather than define the subjects of our research. They are the three lenses through which socio-economic historians of the coming decades will produce new scientific knowledge. While enabling us to look at a large variety of research topics from different angles, the three presented perspectives are intrinsically entwined with each other.

Studying the past through the perspective of inequality goes beyond determining levels of inequality. We are rather interested in the impact of inequality on the agency of individuals or groups involved and in the power balances that underlie the (un)even distributions of wealth. Such power relations play a role in studying the past from an ecological perspective too. This endeavour entails the introduction of the landscape and the climate as both factors and agents in history. However, ecology cannot simply be understood as a relationship between people and their environment but rather as the interconnectedness between elements, and their operation within (un)equal societal structures. A systemic perspective is key in the analysis of the past. This closely ties into the third perspective of connectivity. This research perspective urges historians to acknowledge that their subjects are always embedded in a wide network of influences, of which the nodes can be geographically dispersed. The web of actors is not neutral, for connections are determined by power relations, making some connections stronger than others. We thus propose to analyse the past as a complexity of multi-layered interactive and interdependent systems, including local, regional and global processes. To a large extent this also defines the methods historians will use, as we discuss in the following sections.

The perspectives are not bound to specific subjects, they should rather encourage to broaden the views of ongoing research. In this paragraph, a non-exhaustive selection of multifaceted research topics illustrates that the perspectives are not mutually exclusive. We discuss some remarkable attempts to adopt at least one of them. For instance, one of the central topics in social and economic history is the study of property rights in land.<sup>12</sup> With respect to environmental impact, historians have

12 E.g. in the works of P. Warde, *Ecology, economy and state formation in early modern Germany* (Cam-

stressed the role of unequally distributed property rights over land to for example explain the impact of natural disasters on these lands. In the specific case of floods, such analyses are key in public debates over the payments of damages and the responsibilities for environmental disasters.<sup>13</sup>

Another example is business history, which has for a long time neglected the social, environmental and political effects of the process of increasing connectivity. We therefore fully agree with a recent essay calling for the incorporation of environmental issues in business history research.<sup>14</sup> An analysis of Coca Cola's use of the global environment could set the trend here. The author explains the company's success by looking at the way this network-type firm externalized the environmental costs to its suppliers.<sup>15</sup>

Migration studies – which increasingly investigates different modes of mobility and their impact on migrants, host and origin society<sup>16</sup> - will also benefit from the incorporation of the perspectives of inequality, ecology and connectivity in order to grasp the complexity of the phenomenon. The impact of the Little Ice Age on changing mobility patterns, for example, deserves attention, especially with regards to the impact of ecological problems on communities and individuals.<sup>17</sup> Another relevant debate concerns the societal and academic discussion on the entitlement and access of migrants to welfare, culminating in the concepts of 'welfare chauvinism', 'welfare portability' and 'welfare tourism'.<sup>18</sup> It is the task of historians to strip the public migration debates from its paradigm of 'unseen immigration levels' while increasing the understanding

bridge 2006); R. Congost and R. Santos, *Contexts of property in Europe. The social embeddedness of property rights in land in historical perspective* (Turnhout 2010); J. Scott, *Against the grain. A deep history of the earliest states* (New Haven/London 2017).

13 T. Soens, *De spade in de dijk? Waterbeheer en rurale samenleving in de Vlaamse kustvlakte (1280-1580)* (Ghent 2009). T. Soens, 'Resilient societies, vulnerable people. Coping with North Sea Floods before 1800', *Past & Present* (2018) 1-36, in press; M. De Keyzer, *Inclusive commons and the sustainability of peasant communities in the Medieval Low Countries* (London 2018).

14 A. Smith and K. Greer, 'Uniting business history and global environmental history', *Business History* 59:7 (2017) 987-1009.

15 B. Elmore, *Citizen coke. The making of Coca Cola capitalism* (New York 2014).

16 C. Pooley, *Mobility, migration and transport. Historical perspectives* (London 2017); L. de Ligt and L. Tacoma, *Migration and mobility in the early Roman Empire* (Leiden 2016); A. Walke, J. Musekamp and N. Svobodny, *Migration and mobility in the Modern Age. Refugees, travelers and traffickers in Europe and Eurasia* (Bloomington 2017).

17 See for instance: K. Hastrup, 'Dehumanizing the uprooted. Lessons from Iceland in the Little Ice Age', in: K. Hastrup and K.F. Olwig, *Climate change and human mobility. Global challenges to the social sciences* (Cambridge 2012) 58-80.

18 E.g. discussed in a special issue by R. Bauböck and P. Scholten (eds.), 'Commentary series. Solidarity in diverse societies. Beyond neoliberal multiculturalism and welfare chauvinism', *Journal of Comparative Migration Studies* 3:4 (2016).



of comparable processes in the past, notwithstanding the recognition of the unique aspects of every wave of migration.

The connected perspective is well-suited to renew two other established research topics: urban history and rural history. Instead of singling out the city as many used to do with the history of the nation-state, we should view the city in connection with its hinterland, the countryside, and vice versa.<sup>19</sup> The challenge for the following decade will be to link those two fields. Historical processes in cities or villages do not operate in a vacuum, but are rather interlinked on a regional and, increasingly, on a global scale. Of course, we should be aware of the often unequal relations between the urban and the rural, albeit without essentializing them.

The presented interlinked perspectives allow us to get a grasp on the 'social' and the 'economy', whilst contributing to the public sphere. The historical study of social and economic topics from any perspective ought to meet with a methodology that connects the local, regional and global scales. The following paragraphs will discuss the programme of the societal turn and the methodology required for implementation.

## 4 A societal turn

As we have clarified, the societal turn we aim for is not an invention based on the latest trends. The societal focus actually relates to fundamental historiographic ambitions and explicitly takes an essential dimension of the historian's craft to the centre stage: the conscious engagement with key societal challenges. The need for a more deliberate interaction between academia and wider society goes both directions and plays out in different fields including education, media, business or policy making. Tensions do however rise between the political and the analytical use of history. A conscious engagement with civil society should not force historians in the position of 'solution providers' where-

19 This can go from a basal study into the functioning of the surrounding rural landscape as food supplier for the cities: M. Limberger, 'Feeding sixteenth-century Antwerp. Food imports, local supply and the agrarian structure of the town's rural surroundings', in: P. van Cruyningen and E. Thoen (eds.), *Food supply, demand and trade. Aspects of the economic relationship between town and countryside (Middle Ages-19th century)* (Turnhout 2012) 31-47. In addition, the connectivity and ecological perspectives can be used to examine the transportation connection within the countryside, within the urban world, and between the cities one another: B. Blondé, 'At the cradle of the transport revolution? Paved roads, traffic flows and economic development in eighteenth-century Brabant', *Journal of Transport History* 31 (2010) 89-111.

by they perform the role of policy makers or activist groups. The societal turn is driven by the need for historical interpretation that is made accessible to and interferes with civil society in all its diversity. In the following, we design a programmatic 'roadmap' for the consolidation of the societal turn, including methodological and valorisation guidelines.

The success of the societal turn rests on the strength and forms of cooperation that can connect different perspectives on common societal challenges. Collaboration and open discussion are key for the socio-economic historian during the next ten years. With the high pace by which newspapers and books are currently being published, academics can specialize only in a selected amount of topics. If we wish to add to larger questions, we will have to combine several topics and subfields of socio-economic history to formulate clear answers that cover most of the aspects of an issue. In this way a refined and balanced answer can be formulated. More precisely, the interconnected implementation of the three proposed research perspectives (inequality, ecology and connectivity) can only be realized successfully by relying on colleagues with different backgrounds and expertise. Equally, the new methods and techniques of the digital (r)evolution within the social sciences will force historians to work together. The benefits of collaborating as people with different perspectives are large. More inclusive and complete answers are formulated when discussion takes place, helping the socio-economic historian to avoid pitfalls and mistakes he would otherwise not be aware of. Moreover, discussion and collaboration will help the socio-economic historian to become a better historian, as this collaboration will help him to contemplate, analyse and question his own knowledge, methods and perspectives. These considerations have already materialized in the group effort that underpins this essay, for which the process of discussion and collaboration has been as important as the final result.

### *Programming the societal turn*

When historians enter public debates this has to be done making use of a firm historiographical knowledge. Historians have to supply public debates with historical reasoning, but history should not be dictated to society. For this would be contrary to the definition of what the future socio-economic historian is, i.e. an independent academic who is aware of the opportunities to add to the public debate. In this regard, researchers in social and economic history have to be especially careful as to how

deep they get involved into politics. Political usage should never be the ultimate goal of writing on a certain topic. Doing so would deny the analytical relevance, and even cast doubt on the existence of history as an independent academic field.

Both the call upon historians as well as their responses are not free from ambiguities. This creates tensions between the academic freedom and the impact, usefulness or utility of the historian's work. Historians might struggle to adopt a middle course between the aversion or fear to engage with non-historians on the one hand and to commodify history into a digestible and attractive product on the other hand. Due to the currently limited presence of historians in pressing societal debates, we are all too often confronted with a-historical concepts, narratives and theories. This is true for debates on inequality, ecology and connectivity as well. They tend to be guided by statements using no historical perspective at all or using historical facts without any contextualization. On first notice it is tempting to prefer grand science-based meta-narratives to gain insight into problems of inequality, ecology and connectivity. They quickly speak to the imagination of a large public. Yet, on second notice, it is clear that historians are of crucial importance in making these theories more concrete by providing them with a socio-historical context and by ascribing them to human agency. Social and economic historians actively seek to challenge debates on inequality by investigating the 'freedom' of the market,<sup>20</sup> deepen the debate on increasing ecological pressure by questioning its historical foundations<sup>21</sup> and give texture to the vivid debate on migration.<sup>22</sup> Society needs historical 'skills' not only to concretise concepts, but also to read sources critically. Then, historians become even more relevant.<sup>23</sup>

How, then, to go beyond forms of historical research that fail to exceed familiar circles without subjecting creative knowledge production to the

20 J. Norman, 'Lessons from Burke on the origins of our present discontent', *Financial Times* 23 June 2017; B. van Bavel, 'Europa moet zijn wankel fundament herzien. Op de lange termijn is de markteconomie niet te verenigen met vrijheid en sociale welvaart', *Financieel Dagblad* 26 July 2016.

21 E. Thoen and T. Soens, 'Kerncentrales bij ons. Hoe (on)veilig zijn ze, gezien vanuit historisch perspectief?', *Knack* 18 April 2011; L. Vervaet, 'Vlaanderen. Veel bomen, weinig bossen', *De Standaard* 30 May 2017.

22 S. Hofhuis, 'Oppassen voor een gefotoshopt beeld van ons migratieverleden', *de Volkskrant* 25 June 2016; L. Lucassen, 'De meeste migranten komen werken', *NRC Handelsblad* 29 June 2018; F. Caestecker, 'De les van de vluchtende Joden', *De Standaard* 9 September 2015.

23 S. Sörlin and P. Warde, 'The problem of the problem of environmental history', *Environmental History* 12:1 (2007) 122: 'The middle range historical synthesis could provide insights that are better related to human agency and therefore to policy.'

demands of impact standards and consumption preferences? First and foremost, social and economic historians should emphasize the complexity of society itself. Historians need to provide insight in the multiplicity of actors (as individuals or as a group) with different interests and power resources underlying society as a whole; at the local, at the regional and at the global level. Rendering account of this multi-layered and multi-levelled society is crucial. In practice, the kind of societal involvement we want to promote and shape goes further than a passive application or comparison of research results that were obtained 'in isolation' from society. On the contrary, we believe two-way interaction is essential. On the one hand, social and economic historians and their work become more accessible to the wider public by entering in societal debates through consultation or active participation. Think of 'crowd-sourcing' which is used to generate large-scale data collections. Volunteer projects as *Demogen Visu*, a demographic tool designed by the Belgian national archives, or the initiative of *Culturele Spoorzoekers*, which trains volunteers to create a community archive of historical photos and oral histories, already benefited from publicly collected historical study material.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, historians themselves must also integrate the societal debates more in their research. The research platform 'Institutions for Collective Actions' has made enormous progress in this regard.<sup>25</sup> It connects with contemporary debates on the commons by bringing in a long-time historical perspective and it tries to involve citizens by means of 'citizens science' in the various stages of research projects. The independent Belgian think tank Minerva actively tries to engage young academics to promote a progressive voice in societal debates concerning inter alia social security and the labour market. The Belgian institute Itinera also engages young historians and young academics to cooperate in formulating policy improvements. Other possible societal partners of historians cover a broad range of sectors, including policy-makers, activists and business communities.

Enlarged collaboration with non-academic arenas, however, does not necessarily compromise the academic quality and thoroughness of the research results. Yet, even more than is true for interdisciplinary research, young historians need both more guidance on their options to

24 M. Ernst and H. Verbeek, 'Migrantenerfgoed in Nederland en Frankrijk. Op zoek naar sporen van migranten', *Brood en Rozen* 3 (2012) 121-130; Centrum voor de Geschiedenis van Migranten, Culturele Spoorzoekers <http://www.vijfeeuwenmigratie.nl/cgm/culturele-spoorzoekers>; On the project Demogen Visu: [http://demogen.arch.be/info\\_demogen.php](http://demogen.arch.be/info_demogen.php).

25 <http://www.collective-action.info/>.

engage with non-academic actors and extra time to gain expertise. Besides, these less-straightforward research experiences and output deserve greater publicity and valorisation in our field. If social and economic historians need and want to be heard properly in prominent academic and public debates, they bear the responsibility of making it happen. Realizing the societal turn compels social and economic historians to work within cooperative structures, crossing institutional and societal boundaries.

Not just our historical analyses justify our relevance, but the ways in which the analyses are performed, the topics they deal with and the frameworks in which they are realized decide upon the societal value of social and economic history. As inequality, ecology and connectivity will become ever more pressing perspectives, societal debates call for historicised contextual perspectives. The time has come to strengthen and multiply the initiatives for intensified collaboration that already took shape in the last couple of years. It is time we push the societal turn forward.

#### *Methods, sources and data collection*

Increasingly, the global is shaped by the local and vice versa. With this premise we do not only want to demonstrate the crucial role of local actors for understanding larger societal processes. Global processes link what or whom may seem disconnected and therefore are also important in studying local issues.<sup>26</sup> Socio-economic historians have to deal with varying scales of time and space. We believe that local agency, in particular, will be central in socio-economic history research in the next decade. Local agency not only tells the story behind big data, it also enables historians to connect different and often interacting scales of time and space. The increasing economic integration over the past 500 years serves as an example. As diverse zones have become increasingly interconnected, the concrete actions of the incorporated populations (individual and communal) have always resulted in context-specific synergies with the incorporating powers. Hence, the outlook of processes of incorporation differs over time and space.<sup>27</sup> Explaining local differences in global socio-economic processes requires intensive compari-

26 E. Vanhaute, *World history. An introduction* (London 2013) Chapter 10 'A fragmented world. Unity and fragmentation'; Ph. Minard, 'Globale, connectée ou transnationale. Les échelles de l'histoire', *Esprit* 400 (2013) 'Comment faire l'histoire du monde?', 20-32.

27 N. Kardulias, 'Negotiation and incorporation on the margins of world-systems. Examples from Cyprus and North America', *Journal of World-systems Research* 13-1 (2007).

son between local case studies, thereby avoiding the danger of lapsing into essentialism.<sup>28</sup> Hence, within the multi-layered analysis of the local, regional and global, we believe that case studies of local, long-term processes are the only way forward. Global processes do not occur in a vacuum but are co-created by processes 'on the ground', which inter alia involve local actors, local traditions and local ecosystems.

We do embrace the digital turn in this layered (local-regional-global) and cooperative way of doing historical research.<sup>29</sup> Digital humanities offer many benefits; including the processing of a large amount of data derived from different scales of analysis and historical contexts, the realization of comparisons and the digital preservation of databases for future generations.<sup>30</sup> Geovisualization databases have, for example, benefited the spatial turn in historiography and offer new perspectives to make research results accessible to a large audience. Yet, digitization poses important challenges. We particularly want to caution for the a-historiographical tendency to wield digitized 'big data' projects as replacements for critical heuristic methods and source contextualization.<sup>31</sup> Large databases such as the Google Library Project offer major treasure houses for the Low Countries historian, but they easily contain the germs of laidback methodology. Moreover, these mines of information can hinder historians in selecting the relevant sources to answer their particular research question. Therefore, the use of large databases needs to be accompanied by purposeful methods (whether qualitative or quantitative) to efficiently select, interpret and analyse data. Another and related challenge of designing and using large-scale digitized information is to neglect the contextualization of source material. Histori-

28 Global commodity research proves how local case studies help to understand world-wide processes such as imperialism, industrialization and staggering inequality, e.g. the cotton story: S. Beckert, *Empire of cotton. A new history of global capitalism* (New York 2015).

29 C. Verbruggen, R. Delafontaine, F. Danniau and S. Chambers. 'Bedenkingen bij *The history manifesto*. Van coöperatie naar collaboratie', *Journal of Belgian History-Revue Belge d'Histoire Contemporaine-Belgisch Tijdschrift Voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis-Journal of Belgian History* 47: 2-3 (2017) 202-212.

30 Prime examples are DARIAH and large-scale research projects as 'Coordinating for life. Success and failure of Western European societies in coping with rural hazards and disasters, 1300-1800' (lead by Bas van Bavel, Utrecht University). On DARIAH, see: S. Chambers and G. Kraft, 'DARIAH. Networking for the European research area', *ITB Infoservice* 9 (2015) 27-31, issue title *Berichterstattung zur Forschungs-, Bildungs-, Technologie- und Innovationspolitik weltweit. Forschungszentrum Europa? Die EU-Erweiterungen seit 2004*.

31 In the nonetheless influential D. Acemoglu and J. Robinson, *Economic origins of dictatorship and democracy* (New York 2006), the authors admitted in fairness that some of their major regression analyses could not prove causal relations between inequality and democracy, and no conclusive answer could be found in 'empirical literature'.

ans need to take into account the historical context in which the sources came into being and were used originally. The mining of data does not do justice to historical developments and, therefore, can never be a substitute for historical interpretations. Sources simply cannot be used instrumentally. We need to make sure that source criticism takes centre stage in future digital developments. The historian's toolbox cannot be discarded, just for the sake of big data modernization. In this manner, the socio-economic historian will keep an advantage over other social sciences like economics or sociology, who increasingly make use of these type of sources as mere instruments.

These concerns aside, crossing local, regional and global scales necessitates collaborative research projects. In the coming decades, these will be increasingly facilitated through the digitization of information. Working collectively is the only way to get grip on a mass of information collected on local, regional and global levels of analysis. Many hands indeed make light work. 'Big data' allows us to go beyond 'ego projects', especially since their development is often connected to exchange networks between different research units. An excellent example is the joint UGent and VUB project STREAM that digitizes early modern Flemish and Brabantine statistics, including eighteenth- and nineteenth-century population censuses.<sup>32</sup> Historians involved in large-scale projects of data collection will be confronted with new organizational challenges. Digitization increasingly offers tools to work collectively, by collaborating on the writing and editing of documents online (such as this essay) or by using comparable databases and methods in order to compare results. Such exchanges of ideas and collaborations are the future of socio-economic history.

## 5 Conclusion: Social and economic history in the next decade

There is a clearcut challenge awaiting young historians in social and economic history, whose task cannot simply limit itself to presenting context to public debates. More valuable than ever, the historian's tools of

<sup>32</sup> *Spatiotemporal research infrastructure for early modern Flanders and Brabant*, <http://www.stream-project.ugent.be> and Ph. De Maeyer e.a., 'STREAM (Spatiotemporal research infrastructure for early modern Flanders and Brabant): Sources, data and methods', *International Journal of Humanities and Arts Computing* (2017).



historical criticism are indispensable in this 'knowledge-based', 'social media' or perhaps even 'post-truth' age. Historians are trained in assessing representativeness, authenticity and reliability of information. In addition, historians systematically consider causality as well as the cyclicity of processes and different visions of the past. In order to deal with continuous and vast information flows, these historical skills are unarguable necessities for twenty-first-century society. In return, historians in this new millennium ought to display an engaged attitude towards societal developments. This is what we interpret as a societal turn in current social and economic historiography. Nurtured by previous historiographical developments, the significance of this societal turn will be defined in the next decade. The main keys to its consolidation are interlinked research perspectives, a contextualization in terms of scales, a renewed interaction between academia and society and finally the cooperation in collaborative structures.

The three research perspectives proposed above illustrate the importance of historical research: the historian's toolbox is needed to assess the root causes of (in)equality, to demonstrate the long-term effects of (policies on) ecology and to show how interconnectedness forces us to cooperate to overcome local, regional and global challenges. The perspectives in question are intricately linked. Consequently they should be systematically considered in social and economic historical research. One perspective cannot be studied without the understanding of and consideration of the other. The perspectives also share a new view on research methods. As exponents of the interplay between local, regional and global developments, these methods highlight the importance of scales. Local and global processes (throughout time) should be connected to one another. Local case studies are the main approach, for they allow a reassessment and a re-evaluation of the local context. This is highly needed to analyse the data so fondly referred to in public debates, and to interpret the sources behind these data. In processing these data, historians embracing the societal turn will increasingly appeal to collaborative research environments. As 'big data' and databases allow for larger comparative research, digitization offers opportunities for fruitful working together. The historian's work requests an engaged attitude towards societal developments. The commitment with broader society adds academic value to our historical research: societal debates make certain more or less outdated historical debates relevant again, which can then be analysed from new viewpoints or with new research methods.



Where *Past & Present* stood at the origins of our field of social and economic history, at the beginning of this new millennium we should walk confidently into the future. Looking ahead as young socio-economic historians, we firmly believe that now is the right time to bring the proclaimed societal turn into a decisive phase by taking up our role in historicizing future society.

## About the authors

The authors are early-stage researchers affiliated with the Economies, Comparisons, Connections (ECC) Research Unit at Ghent University. ECC brings together historians and social scientists who study the interaction of historical processes at varying geographical, social, political, environmental and economic scales. The focus on Economies, Comparisons and Connections is applied to a variety of research topics: case- and regional studies of both rural and urban history; broader societal shifts with trans-regional ramifications; and various models of explanation for economic and social change on a global scale and in the long-term. The notion of 'economy' is understood in a broad sense, to include economies of status, or affection, social power relations, and political economy. ECC questions the boundaries and scales of space and place, focusing on the co-construction of the local, the regional and the global, with special attention to (local) agency in regional, cross-regional and global processes. Read more on: <https://research.flw.ugent.be/en/ecc>.