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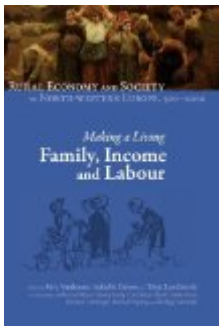

E. Vanhaute, Isabelle Devos, Thijs Lambrecht, eds.. *Making a Living: Family, Labour and Income.* Turnhout: Brepols, 2011. xvii + 347 pp. $109.00, cloth, ISBN 978-2-503-53049-9.

Reviewed by Joseph M. Gonzalez

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Despite the fact that civilization is dependent on the acquisition, production, and processing of food, comprehensive comparative histories focusing on agriculture and the rural society at the core of agricultural production have been few and far between. With a few notable exceptions, the majority of those histories produced have been narrow in focus and frequently defined by political interests or national boundaries. The four-volume series Rural Society and Economy in North-Western Europe, 500–1500 is therefore noteworthy not only because of its topic, rural life, but also because of its scope, Northwestern Europe from 500 to 2000 CE. The gargantuan task of accumulating and synthesizing historical data from this vast and diverse geographical region and documenting changes and developments over a period of 1,500 years represents a singular achievement. Drawing on the expertise of more than seventy scholars, the editors have undertaken to construct a narrative portraying the history of rural Northwestern Europe that reveals the deep roots of the rural economies and societies of the current day. Rather than presenting this story in the classical chronological manner, the authors elected to take a thematic approach that enhances their ability to develop four central perspectives: land use and productivity; production, distribution and consumption; family formation, income, and labor; and property and power relations. In the process links are developed that demonstrate the relationship between the local and the regional, and the long-term perspective allows for the tracing of the evolution of agrarian production and its relationship to the dynamics of family, community, and state. This volume, *Making a Living: Family, Income, and Labor*, deals specifically with the relationships between production, reproduction, and labor in rural societies. As it deals directly with the most essential unit of agricultural production, the family, this volume serves as a foundation for the series and shares the overall approach and theoretical structure of the series as a whole.

The geographic territory the series deals with, Northwestern Europe, is defined in this case by the relationship of the featured regions to the

North Sea. The authors defend their choice by arguing that the North Sea provides the region with a unity based on shared geographic characteristics and economic and cultural similarities developed in large part because of the ease of transport provided by the North Sea. The intense contact among the different regions around the North Sea led to the development of common characteristics, and thus makes the region an ideal subject for comparative analysis. Yet, because the geographical definition of the study largely ignores the political divisions that have traditionally framed investigations of this type, the approach adopted raises interesting questions regarding the complex relationships between region and state and economics and politics. Though it might certainly be argued that the political shifts and realignments that transformed the political map of Northwestern Europe over the 1,500 years covered by the study reveal the superficiality of those political entities, there is no question that the region was related to larger networks and political entities, and that economic and political systems interacted in different but important ways. Thus the fact that the volume presents the whole of Britain and the Low Countries but only the northwestern portions of France and Germany and selective bits and pieces of the Scandinavian kingdoms clearly shapes the findings in distinct ways that at times feel artificial. However, this is the consequence of attempting such a tight focus, and the book's limitations are also its strengths.

This volume is a compilation of essays that divides the European Northwest into five distinct regions: Britain, Northern France, the Low Countries, Northwest Germany, and Scandinavia. Each of these sections is dealt with in two chapters, the first covering the period from roughly the years 1000 to 1750 and the second from the years 1750 to 2000. Despite the fact that each chapter is authored by a separate group of experts, the chapters benefit from similar organization, and identical sets of research questions are addressed for each and every region and period. Each chapter begins with general comments on the geographical and demographic makeup of the region, and moves on to a set of specific topics: the family and demography, the family and its members, the family and income, the family and the local community and the state, and finally, a conclusion that offers a summary of important findings and general regional characteristics or conditions. Despite changes in voice and style—a consequence of the large number of authors involved in producing the text—the writing is remarkably even and the analysis presented is consistently of very high quality.

The central issue the authors seek to address is "the way in which resources became available to the rural family and its members and the strategies that were employed to generate these resources" (p. xii). The book's goal is to understand the relationship between household formation and economic behavior in the context of specific regional agricultural systems. To these ends the authors' inquiries are shaped by two sets of research questions: 1) what was "the impact of these processes on the family as a unit of reproduction and production and the relationships between the family members"; and 2) how did families adapt their behavior to adjust to changing social and economic circumstances (pp. 1-2)? The perspectives brought to bear on the material are thus alternately sociodemographic and socioeconomic. The material that forms the actual basis for the study is drawn from numerous regional and case studies and is fundamentally interdisciplinary in character. Where appropriate the authors have drawn on archeological research, demographic studies, and legal and institutional histories. Agricultural, social, and cultural histories, especially those dealing with marriage, play a particularly important role. However, the approach is fundamentally quantitative, and an extraordinary quantity of detailed data has been analyzed, synthesized, compared, and integrated. The overall results are extremely impressive. The authors have succeeded in producing a dense, but very

readable, overview of rural life at its most intimate level that, though rich in detail, reveals larger patterns, trends, and movements in the ***longue durée***.

The regional, cultural, and temporal scope of this study renders any attempt to present any but the most superficial of summaries impossible. Nevertheless, some general findings are clear. Around the year 500 CE virtually the entire population of Northwestern Europe lived in the countryside; by the year 2000 this situation has reversed itself and 80 percent of the population now lives in urban settlements of over 2,000 inhabitants. This shift is historically recent and current conditions in the region are the result of an acceleration of rural flight in the twentieth century. Throughout the majority of the period under study family farms and nuclear families with some additional workers formed the organizational and productive units of agricultural production. Though families were subject to constantly evolving pressures and influences from their communities, churches, and political authorities, the overwhelming force that determined family structure and demographics was the family's relationship to the land and the sources of production. The authors demonstrate repeatedly the degree to which families acted strategically to adjust to the availability of land and economic resources through the shifting of production strategies, i.e., the development of handicrafts, proto-industrialization, land and resource acquisition, etc., and reproductive strategies, delaying marriage, participation in life-cycle service, etc. The centrality of landed resources to agricultural production clearly places the relationship between family and land at center stage and the authors devote considerable space to discussing the shifting complexities of land tenure, inheritance, and the market forces that impacted the availability of land and the family's relationship to it. Interestingly, the studies conclude that for the majority of agrarian households in Northwestern Europe agricultural production was an unsatisfactory means to make economic ends meet. Thus the motivation to develop alternative livelihoods, such as the development of rural industry and wage labor, was very strong. The single area of this study that revealed the greatest differences was the relationship between the family, the community, and the state. The region was home to a tremendous number and variety of institutional types, some of them quite unique. The diversity of regional power relationships makes attempts at generalization difficult and for the most part unproductive. However, over the long run it does become clear that discontinuity characterized the relationship of households to institutions such as the feudal authorities, the village council, the church, and the state, even if the rate of change and types of changes were not constant throughout the region. For instance, the feudal order was maintained far longer in Denmark than elsewhere in Northwestern Europe, with clear consequences for land ownership and agrarian production. Regardless of these historical differences, in the decades since World War II the state and supranational institutions like the European Union have emerged as the most important external factors impacting the continuing evolution of rural production and rural households.

Making a Living: Family, Income, and Labor is a tremendously ambitious book. The topic area is vast geographically and chronologically, and the quantity of data involved is overwhelming. Nevertheless, this is a book that largely succeeds in accomplishing its goals. The authors have rendered a veritable mountain of facts comprehensible and meaningful. In the process they have shed light on an all-too-frequently neglected stratum of history, agrarian production and rural life, and revealed the centrality of the humble and mundane to the development of European civilization. The long view of country life they provide allows for the perception of important trends and characteristics that are too often hidden by narrower, more localized perspectives. In the process they illuminate the tremendous ability of the family to adapt,

transform, and create in the face of constantly evolving economic, political, and environmental conditions. Ultimately, they demonstrate that the family alone is constant and enduring as the greater political and cultural institutions ascend to dominance and then fade away. The book is an invaluable resource for historians, or indeed anyone else who is interested in gaining an understanding of this most fundamental and vital institution and its place in the history of Northwestern Europe.