

Welfare in the Low Countries reconsidered: the city of 's-Hertogenbosch during the long 16th century, 1500-1650¹

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Economic achievement and welfare are increasingly understood as flip sides of the same coin. In order to properly assess the growth potential and accomplishments of past societies, economic historians accept that aggregated growth figures alone are at best incomplete, at worst misleading. This has become very evident in the surprising divergence between GDP per capita and real wage series established for most parts of early modern Europe. Both indicators are accepted as proxies for welfare in the past, but are clearly targeted at different social groups and/or income brackets. This paper digs into this matter by contrasting long-term time series on real wages, GDP per capita and income levels at various brackets in the city of 's-Hertogenbosch (situated in the heart of the Low Countries). It is found that especially during the expansive opening decades of the 16th century real wage and GDP per capita experienced strongly diverging trajectories (which is not unlike, for example, 19th-century England). Interestingly, the income paths of other income brackets such as the first, second or third quartiles of the urban income distribution, tracked other paths of development. Indeed, one of the key findings of this paper is that in the face of declining real wages in the early 16th century, incomes for most other urban dwellers actually swelled. As the long 16th century progressed GDP per capita, real wages and the reconstructed socially disaggregated incomes advanced in closer unison. In other words, during its decades of most vigorous economic growth (1500-1530), the real wage proved to be a poor predictor of average and disaggregated incomes in 's-Hertogenbosch. Afterwards, the city's (and Southern Netherlands') expansive phase came to a standstill, and the urban income structure 'simplified'. Labour became increasingly important in the city's functional distribution of income, to the detriment of profit incomes which had buoyed in the century's opening years. The divergence of GDP per capita and real wages in this early modern city was very real, albeit limited to a short period of time. I conjecture that before 1500 and after 1550 in 's-Hertogenbosch and presumably the Southern Netherlands as a whole, both indicators of welfare progressed hand in glove. Why this was not so in the intermittent decades is explained by making use of the theoretical framework recently developed by Luis Angeles.

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