

# Rural crisis and rural exodus? Local migration dynamics during the crisis of the 1840s in Flanders (Belgium)

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## Abstract

This article analyses the migration dynamics in the wake of the 1845–1847 subsistence crisis in Flanders by means of a quantitative analysis of key demographic and economic data at municipal level. The data are unique in that they allow to directly measure in-migration and out-migration at the level of individual villages and towns. The results show that contrary to the powerful image of a push-driven rural exodus, it was not the villages hardest hit by the crisis that recorded the highest levels of migration. Rather, in-migration and out-migration rates often moved in tandem, and were determined primarily by existing migration traditions.

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## 1. Introduction

Rural crisis can act as a catalyst for migration. Rural ‘push’ forces have played a large part in explanations of increased levels of migration and urbanization in nineteenth-century Europe (see Moch (2003)) as well

as in present-day developing countries (Parnwell, 1993). While harvest failures are often the proximate cause of rural crises, the associated demographic effects are determined primarily by underlying socio-economic structures that shape the resilience of rural livelihoods, such as landownership patterns, income diversity and

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communal organization (Devereux, 2007). At the same time, both historical and present-day migration research has over the past decades increasingly stressed the high degree of selectivity involved in migration behaviour, dismissing the idea of a uniform and automatic effect of rural push forces on emigration (Williamson, 1990; Massey et al., 1993; de Haas, 2010). While no one is likely to deny the role of rural ‘push’ forces, then, many questions remain with regard to the actual relationship of such forces to migration dynamics in Europe’s long nineteenth century. This article aims to shed new light on some of these questions by means of an instructive case study on the basis of unique data, which allow for a quantitative analysis of key demographic and economic data at the municipal level in the wake of the rural crisis of 1845–1847 in the Flemish countryside, when a series of dramatic harvest failures exacerbated an already existing crisis of rural industry and long-term processes of peasant marginalization. While Flanders is an interesting case because of the coincidence of a severe crisis with seemingly modest migration levels, the data used are unique in that they measure a number of economic characteristics as well as yearly in-migration and out-migration at the village level. This avoids having to rely on calculated migration residuals and/or on larger geographical units of analysis (see for instance Ó Gráda and O’Rourke (1997)) – two oft-used methods which, as we will demonstrate, in fact provide a distorted view of the actual patterns of mobility involved. The insights gained by this analysis therefore not only throw new light on the social history of Belgium during the transition from preindustrial to industrial society, but also on the influence of rural ‘push’ factors on migration patterns in nineteenth-century Western Europe and on the dynamics of crisis migration in general.

The first section will relate the central research question of this study to the broader historiography of migration in nineteenth-century Europe. The second section will provide the background to our case study by discussing existing insights with regard to the Flemish crisis of the 1840s. The third section will describe the main source materials used. Subsequently, the empirical analysis will be presented in three steps: first, a discussion of aggregate population dynamics in the 1840s, secondly a discussion of the seven indicators of local social and economic structure that function as independent variables in our analysis, and lastly the examination of multivariate regression models to measure and isolate the effects of the selected variables on local migration dynamics in the wake of the 1845–1847 crisis.

## 2. A rural exodus? Push forces in nineteenth-century migrations

In the course of the long nineteenth century, Western Europe was transformed from a largely rural and agricultural society into a highly urbanized and industrialized region. Between 1750 and World War I the number of people living in towns of more than 5000 inhabitants increased sevenfold, while their proportion in relation to total population grew from 12 to 41% (Bairoch, 1988). Both contemporaries and early historiography attributed this spectacular growth in urban population to large-scale migrations from the countryside to towns in response to a disruptive process of modernisation that increasingly undermined traditional rural living conditions (Jackson and Moch, 1996). The mass transatlantic migration of many millions of Europeans in the latter half of this period has likewise traditionally been explained as the desperate move by the uprooted in the wake of the increasing marginalization of especially rural livelihoods (Handlin, 1951). More recent studies, however, have tended to retreat from this simple but powerful image of rural exodus in favour of views that stress the resilience of coping mechanisms in rural communities (Groote and Tassenaar, 2000), continuities with earlier patterns of geographical mobility (Pooley and Turnbull, 1998), the importance of return and intra-rural migration (Hochstadt, 1999), or the selectivity of migration patterns (Williamson, 1990; Hatton and Williamson, 1998). These approaches stress that it was not necessarily the poorest who moved, but rather a subset of the population that was relatively well equipped to make the most of newly emerging opportunities (Moch, 2003).

While such revisions have helped to introduce more nuance into the view of nineteenth-century migrations, much is still unclear as regards the precise relationship between the selectivity of migration and the disruptive economic, social and political changes that *were* taking place in this period, including the disintegration of rural livelihoods, and rising levels of mobility, urbanization and pauperization (Lucassen and Lucassen, 2009; Lees and Lees, 2010). The extent of migration selectivity is likely to have increased with the costs of moving and decreased with the intensity of push forces (Clark, 1972; Chiswick, 1999). Dribe (2003a) for instance attributed the low levels of migration among poor, landless people in nineteenth-century Sweden to a lack of attractive destinations within affordable distances in combination with prohibitively high costs of long-distance overseas migration – which even under the high-pressure conditions of Ireland remained a relatively selective affair (Ó Gráda and O’Rourke, 1997; Ó Gráda, 2000): it was not the poorest who emigrated. Moreover, not only travel

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