

# EUROPEAN URBANIZATION 1500–1800

Jan de Vries



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# FOR NICHOLAS AND SASKIA

# **FOREWORD**

When I embarked on this study I had no intention of writing a book, and as it expanded to become one I often felt that it could better be written by a committee. Now that it is finished I am hard pressed to explain how I came to write it.

This book began as an effort to satisfy my curiosity about the number and size of Europe's larger cities. As an agrarian historian with an interest in cities as markets for agricultural products, I was struck by the imbalance between how little is known and how much is asserted about the role of cities in the pre-industrial economy. I then began, over ten years ago, to gather and save references to city population totals. Since then, matters have got completely out of hand, and I now present a study that immodestly aspires to function as a framework for urban history. All this I blame on my environment.

An invitation to present a paper at the International Conference on Urbanization and Functional Differentiation, organized by a group of Dutch historians and geographers in 1979, introduced me to urban historians and acted as a catalyst to make me think more deeply about some of the issues latent in the materials I had assembled over the years. Thereafter, my efforts to analyse and interpret the data on urban population were repeatedly stimulated, corrected and advanced by contact – both formal and informal – with colleagues at the University of California at Berkeley, other campuses of the University of California, and Stanford University.

This study would surely have assumed a different, more limited form were it not for the establishment at Berkeley of the Graduate Group in Demography, the support given by the Institute of International Studies to the Berkeley – Stanford Demography Seminars, and the long-standing Berkeley – Stanford Economic History Seminars (supported by nothing more than the purses of the participants). These initiatives have brought together

#### **FOREWORD**

historians, economists, sociologists, anthropologists and demographers to create the intellectual environment that made this study possible. Thus, before turning to acknowledge individuals I wish to express my appreciation to the 'faceless bureaucrats' who have helped make my university a good place to do research.

I profited, often in ways unsuspected by my benefactors, from the comments of many individuals, among them the late Allan Sharlin, Tom Smith, Carlo Cipolla, Claude Fisher, Ronald Lee, Ken Wachter and Gene Hammel at Berkeley; G. William Skinner and Paul David at Stanford; and, elsewhere, David Ringrose, Jeffrey Williamson, Charles Tilly and Franklin Mendels.

I collected my thoughts and wrote this book while a Fellow at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study. For this second opportunity to enjoy the excellent facilities of NIAS I am very grateful. A year in the Netherlands also enabled me to gain access to research materials and renew academic contacts whose impress on this study will be apparent. Long discussions with Ad van der Woude and the many suggestions of Paul Klep helped me improve this book, but, even more, they have supplied me with ideas for further work on the subject of European urbanization.

This project has seen a succession of students come and go, each of them supported by the modest but welcome Committee on Research grants awarded by the University of California. Polly Pfar, Bonnie Bishop and Louise Schneider hunted for obscure journals and helped bring to heel the unruly scholarly apparatus. John Brega prepared the computer programs and performed a wide variety of computational work with efficiency and good humour. I am grateful to them all.

Finally, a note of warning. Every month brings new information to light requiring revision in the quantitative description of European urbanization presented here. Most of these changes are minor refinements, but some are – and will be – more consequential. I like to imagine a conference convening, say, in a decade's time, at which urban historians of the various European countries present the latest findings on historical urban population and demography. They will, I am certain, find much to correct in this volume. If I have done my work well they will improve upon, but not cast aside, the broad lines of the interpretation I offer here. But even if it should come to pass that my analysis is found to be steeped in grievous error, I will continue to take comfort in having presented a quantitative basis for the study of European urban history, one that can be examined, tested, altered and built upon by later investigators.

Berkeley, California January 1984

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