

INTRODUCTION

Migration has long been considered a modern phenomenon that grew to significant importance only in the long nineteenth century, during which Europe was transformed from a largely rural and agricultural society into a highly urbanized and industrialized region. Between 1750 and 1914 the number of people living in European towns of more than 5,000 inhabitants increased sixfold, while their proportion in relation to total population more than tripled from 12 to 42 per cent. In addition, the number of cities of more than 100,000 inhabitants expanded from 28 to 195, raising their proportion of total population from 3 to 13 per cent.¹ Rural–urban migration has often been considered a major factor in achieving this spectacular growth in urban population. Older historiography and sociology regarded urban migration as both a salient symptom and the main vehicle of the ongoing modernization process, which was pushing people out of dwindling rural activities, and pulling them into more productive urban manufacturing. While large-scale migration was considered an essentially new and city-oriented phenomenon driving urban growth, migrants were in turn seen mainly as the desperate victims of rural uprooting. The increasing marginalization of rural income activities left them no other choice but to try their luck in cities, where they became the prime victims of the overcrowding and degeneration, which the unprecedented and unregulated growth of urban populations entailed.²

Over the past decades, research in different domains has led to significant revisions of this powerful image of a one-off rural–urban population transfer in the course of the long nineteenth century. One fundamental revision is that migration was not such a new or modern phenomenon as implied in earlier visions. Several studies have by now amply demonstrated that also in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries many Europeans moved, in search of work, a career, a spouse or simply a better life, sometimes over long distances and often several times in a lifetime.³ Others have shown that migration patterns in the nineteenth century were much more varied than allowed for in the vision of a simple population transfer from the countryside to cities, and have argued that they did not differ substantially from migration patterns in

preceding periods: as before, migration remained mostly short-distance, took place within well-defined regions, occurred as much from small to larger settlements as the other way round, and was primarily inspired by considerations related to work and family.⁴ Detailed studies at city-level have confirmed that the nineteenth-century city was a terminus for only a relatively small number of immigrants. Most urban migration was temporary, and rural–urban flows were to a large extent matched by (re)migration streams from the city to the countryside, thus significantly reducing the net contribution of immigration to urban growth.⁵ Demographers have in turn argued that natural increase played a far greater role in promoting urban growth than originally thought. Although the precise evolutions of fertility and mortality in the long nineteenth century remain heavily debated, several scholars have indicated that natural increase rather than rural–urban migration became the dominant growth factor in many towns from at least the middle of the nineteenth century.⁶ A final major revision is that urban immigrants should not necessarily be regarded as desperate and passive victims of societal uprooting. Research on the socio-economic positions and social mobility of urban immigrants has demonstrated that migrants did not necessarily belong to the most marginal groups of nineteenth-century cities. On the contrary, some could rely on important financial or social resources, while others made use of different individual and collective strategies – such as carving out an employment niche – to establish their position or to climb the social ladder.⁷ From a different perspective, econometric research has indicated that urban migration remained a selective affair throughout Britain's long nineteenth century, positively selecting those who stood most to gain from moving to higher-wage cities.⁸ These revisions on the relative success of migration in turn link up with a more general shift away from structural explanations of migration as a passive response to push and pull forces at a macro level, in favour of a growing adherence to views stressing the importance of individual and collective agency in migration behaviour.⁹

These revisions of the erstwhile dominant image of long-nineteenth-century urban migration have led to an intriguing paradox. How can the emergent view of urban migration as a relatively undisruptive and successful phenomenon eventually be reconciled with the disruptive processes of economic transformation and population redistribution that were taking place during this period, and with the available evidence on rising levels of gross mobility and urban pauperization? Do the arguments of scholars maintaining an essential continuity in migration patterns imply that there was really nothing intrinsically new about mobility during Europe's transition from pre-industrial to industrial society? An exploration of these questions involves identifying what exactly constitutes continuity, and what embodies change. Although their observations have greatly improved insight in the historical importance of migration by breaking down the

artificial boundaries between 'pre-modern' and 'modern' mobility, recent revisions have sometimes ended up eclipsing those structural changes that did take place during the transition from pre-industrial to industrial society. In the same way, the increased attention devoted to individuals, families and social networks in decision-making has substantially enhanced historians' and social scientists' understanding of migration dynamics in the past and present, but it has tended to undervalue the role played by structural societal conditions in determining the stakes, limits and possibilities of these decisions, and therefore to obscure the impact of structural historical change on migration behaviour. Striking a new balance between continuity and change and between structure and agency in the debate on migration and urbanization, then, requires a reappraisal of the actual dynamics of migratory change during the transition from pre-industrial to industrial society, which is the point of this book. Its main purpose is to analyse closely the components of migratory change over a century-long period of profound social transformation by means of an instructive case study. By doing so, it aims to contribute to a renewed conceptualization of migratory change in the urban transition that can eventually transcend the paradox of continuity versus change, and can provide further insight in the distribution of costs and gains of societal transformation.

At the heart of the research questions underlying this book lies the conceptualization of migration as an adaptive strategy, bound up with material conditions, social relations and individual aspirations. The embedded nature of migration implies that it takes place in the form of identifiable patterns, channelling certain groups of migrants to particular destinations. These migration patterns can be regarded as social systems, which are mediated via social networks, information channels, customs and preferences, but are ultimately based on underlying social and economic conditions that will determine whether the decision to move is viable or worthwhile. Its systemic nature makes migration a selective affair and endows existing patterns with strong positive feedback links, predisposing them towards continuity. At the same time, however, migration patterns are vulnerable to structural social change. While infringements on existing livelihoods are likely to make more people turn to migration as an adaptive strategy, the transformation of social and economic conditions may at the same time undermine the usefulness of existing migration patterns. In this sense, structural social change is likely to subject existing migration patterns to processes of both intensification and adaptation, in which new patterns emerge while others are invalidated and eventually disappear from view. Both the establishment of new patterns and the transformation or obsolescence of existing ones are anything but straightforward affairs, and require a new balance to be struck between an unstable array of societal, social and individual factors, whose outcome is by no means guaranteed.

It is exactly at this intersection of continuity and change, between adjustment and readjustment, that a renewed exploration of urban migration in Europe's long nineteenth century can yield important insights. I propose to regard migration patterns in this period as being at the heart of a societal transformation that was both increasing people's likelihood of moving and invalidating the conditions upon which most pre-existing migration patterns had been based. While patterns of long-nineteenth-century urban migration drew upon a lengthy history, growing rural pressure and shifting economic conditions produced mounting challenges of adaptation. Whilst the increasing marginalization of small-scale farming and the demise of rural industry led to the disintegration of many rural livelihoods, income opportunities in cities underwent both a precarious expansion and a qualitative transformation, that was fraught with new rhythms of seasonal and cyclical slumps. The uneven development of labour supply and demand undermined the population exchange patterns that had been characteristic of rural-urban migration in the early modern period, without providing a ready alternative for growing household constraints. Given that we now know that migration was no novelty of the 'modern' age but instead evolved along paths beaten by earlier generations, questions of continuity and change in this period can be recast in a new mould, whereby the focus is shifted to exploring the ways in which different groups of migrants succeeded or not in adapting their migratory behaviour to the shifting constraints and opportunities. Adequately exploring the dynamics of migratory change, therefore, means evaluating the success or otherwise of ongoing adaptive strategies from a long-term perspective and for different groups. This differential perspective is important, as it can be assumed that different groups had to cope with the transformatory challenges of the long nineteenth century in different ways. The direction of social change was such as to make some groups better suited to reap the benefits of newly emerging opportunities, while other groups were disproportionately affected by the negative aspects of rising constraints. All patterns of migration were likely to experience attempts at adaptation, but the speed and success of adaptation was likely to differ for different migrant groups. This study therefore proposes to focus upon these different *speeds of change* to transcend the apparent paradoxes between continuity and change, and between structure and agency, and to re-explore the limits and possibilities of migration as an adaptive strategy during Europe's transition from pre-industrial to industrial society.

The setting of the case study is the city of Antwerp in present-day Belgium between 1760 and 1860. In this period, the city went through a profound economic and social conversion, while its main hinterland regions were confronted with fundamental economic and demographic changes which increased pressure on rural livelihoods. From an earlier medium-sized regional textile centre of around 50,000 inhabitants, Antwerp developed into a major international

port of more than 110,000 inhabitants by the middle of the nineteenth century, which entailed a radical transformation of its labour market structure, and which was accompanied by changing patterns of migration. This economic and demographic conversion was not a gradual affair, but a jerky process at different speeds. Several regime changes played an important role in repeatedly restructuring the economic-geographical conditions of urban development, and transforming Antwerp from a relatively peripheral regional centre in the Austrian Netherlands, via a prime naval base of the French Empire, to a major colonial port under Dutch rule, and eventually a prime distribution centre of the precociously industrializing and liberal Kingdom of Belgium and a key node in the integration of the developing Atlantic economy. Meanwhile, the period between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries witnessed a doubling of the population in Antwerp's main hinterland regions, dominated mainly by smallholding agriculture, which gave rise to a growing proportion of villagers with little or no land. An analysis of the relationship between the changing economic, social and political conditions at origin and destination on the one hand, and the evolution of patterns of migration on the other hand, is the central pre-occupation of this piece of empirical research.

The sources that can be used to reconstruct changes in the patterns of urban migration over time are exceptionally rich in the Antwerp case. Its status as a prime naval base under French rule meant that Napoleonic endeavours in the domain of population registration were pursued with particular vigour in Antwerp, resulting in a long series of 'immigration registers' kept during the first decades of the nineteenth century. In addition, a number of important censuses – in 1796, 1815 and 1830 – and a relatively continuous series of population registers yield important complementary evidence on the background of immigrant households and their relationship to wider urban society in terms of occupational or spatial clustering. From 1846 onwards, national legislation ensured a continuation of Antwerp's already well-developed population registration system, underpinned by ten-yearly censuses, dynamic population registers and a separate registry for foreigners. Sources from relief institutions, such as hospital admission lists and settlement examinations, yield important complementary and qualitative information on certain groups of newcomers. A series of representative samples from these different sources resulted in the collection of individual data on a total of 23,000 newcomers entering town between 1760 and 1860, ranging from basic evidence on the age, sex, origin and occupation of immigrants, to more detailed information on the life trajectories of themselves and their parents, which were then processed and analysed by means of database (Access) and statistical (SPSS) software. As both Antwerp's transformation from a regional textile centre to a port town and the materialization of rural pressure into push forces were realized only at the turn of the century, the chronological

scope of the collected materials is long enough to reconstruct patterns of migration in the relatively stable context of a middle-sized pre-industrial textile town on the one hand, and to examine the short-term and long-term influence of the rural and urban transformations of the nineteenth century on the other hand.

The main aim of the research is to uncover changes in overall patterns of migration and to relate these to the changing opportunity structure at origin and destination and to the evolution of migration information channels that mediated these changes. The focus therefore lies with exploring changes in the direction and composition of migration flows rather than with examining patterns of settlement. Although the implications of these changes for the prospects of immigrants after arrival will receive due attention, the approach differs from so-called settlement studies in that all forms of movement, not only the presence of those who stayed long term, here hold centre stage, and in that the focus lies not with relations between migrants and non-migrants within the city, but rather on the shifting migratory connections between the city and migrants' places of origin. Research efforts have been concentrated on retracing and explaining changes in the numbers, origin, social composition, length of stay and re-migration destinations of different migration circuits over time, rather than on the affective relationships between newcomers and the receiving society. By analysing the evolution of all types of migration, short and long, in and out, foreign and internal, to a rapidly changing urban economy during the first half of the long nineteenth century, this study aims to provide insight into the differential role of migration as an adaptive strategy in Europe's urban and industrial transitions. While some patterns of migration to nineteenth-century Antwerp were radically new and targeted at newly created port-related opportunities, the degree of long-term continuity in some other migration patterns was remarkable given the profound changes wrought both in the home area and at destination. Examining the nature and causes of these different speeds of change, it is argued, helps to yield a better insight into the influence of a changing local opportunity structure on the composition of immigrant flows, and on the dynamics of migration change in general.

Examining these central research questions in ways which allow the conclusions to transcend the time and place specificity of an empirical case study requires a conceptual and historiographical framework, which is the subject of the first two chapters. Chapter 1 presents the central explanatory framework on the how and why of migration which was employed throughout our research, and elaborates on the research questions which structure this study. Chapter 2 in turn applies these questions to the main debates which surround the issue of urban migration in Europe's industrial and urban transitions, discusses the dynamics of urbanization in the Southern Netherlands, and introduces the Antwerp case study to arrive at the focus of the empirical research. Chapters 3 and 4

explore the diachronic shifts in migration patterns during the city's transformation from a regional textile centre to an international port. Chapter 3 uses the 1796 census and the eighteenth-century burgher books to reconstruct the main features of migration patterns to Antwerp in the second half of the eighteenth century, when the city was a regional textile centre of around 50,000 inhabitants. Chapter 4 draws upon a range of nineteenth-century source materials to map and analyse the changes in migration flows that took place during Antwerp's conversion to a port town in the first half of the nineteenth century. The fifth and final chapter deals with the socially differentiated dynamics that underlay the aggregate shifts identified in Chapters 3 and 4. It explores the dynamics of change separately for different groups of migrants, and tries to explain the different degrees of resilience or adaptability in relation to differences in migrant manoeuvrability.

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