

# Continuity and Change

<http://journals.cambridge.org/CON>

Additional services for ***Continuity and Change***:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



---

## The institutional organization of land markets: introduction

BAS VAN BAVEL, TINE DE MOOR and JAN LUITEN VAN ZANDEN

Continuity and Change / Volume 23 / Special Issue 01 / May 2008, pp 9 - 11  
DOI: 10.1017/S0268416008006711, Published online: 04 April 2008

**Link to this article:** [http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract\\_S0268416008006711](http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0268416008006711)

### How to cite this article:

BAS VAN BAVEL, TINE DE MOOR and JAN LUITEN VAN ZANDEN (2008). The institutional organization of land markets: introduction. *Continuity and Change*, 23, pp 9-11 doi:10.1017/S0268416008006711

**Request Permissions :** [Click here](#)

## The institutional organization of land markets: introduction

---

BAS VAN BAVEL, TINE DE MOOR AND JAN LUITEN  
VAN ZANDEN

In the pre-industrial period, land was the most important production factor, the principal source of income and subsistence, the foremost object of property and the most solid base of power. This is why every analysis of economic and social development, and every explanation of the geographical differences in this development, must take into account the complex of questions concerning landholding, land tenure and land transfer. Clearly there has been a growing interest in this topic in recent years, with determined attempts to supersede the sometimes rather antiquarian, juridical–historical interest in the tremendous legal varieties in this field, each with their own national or regional terminology. Now the focus is more on finding a common language, in order to allow for a comparative analysis and to uncover fundamental similarities and differences in this field. The next task will be to link these differences to the actual functioning of the land market and its economic and social effects. Though some initiatives towards such comparisons have already taken place for Western Europe,<sup>1</sup> hardly any comparison has been attempted for larger areas. The three articles published here, presented at a conference organized by the Global Economic History Network (GEHN) and the University of Utrecht in June 2005,<sup>2</sup> are a first step.

The articles deal with three areas that play a central role in debates on long-term divergences in economic and social development: Western Europe, central and east-central Europe and China. The articles by Markus Cerman and Bas van Bavel deal with aspects of what might be called the ‘Little Divergence’ within Europe: the fact that first Italy and then, from the late Middle Ages onwards, northwestern Europe took a lead in economic development, in contrast to the stagnation and relative decline of east–central Europe in the long run. The article by Ken

Pomeranz has as its focus the land markets in Ming and Ching China, and is set against the background of the ‘Great Divergence’ debate that he himself (and his colleagues of the California School) unleashed.<sup>3</sup> The big issue in this debate is whether China and other parts of the Eurasian continent were, until about 1800, on a similar growth path as that identified for Western Europe. In both debates – about divergence within Europe and between Europe and other parts of Eurasia – the role of institutions in facilitating market exchange is a crucial element. One of the central questions is to what extent these diverging trends in social and economic developments can be explained by analysing developments in the land market. The three articles presented here deal with one particular aspect: they analyse the emergence of land markets in these different parts of the world in relation to the institutional constraints that complicated property rights and limited the free transfer of titles to land.

Both in the European and in the Chinese cases these institutional barriers were quite strong: kinship ties, village customs and ‘feudal’ structures seem to have limited the development of the land market to some extent. Pomeranz is rather optimistic about the net effect of these distortions on Chinese land markets, which he assesses as being quite well developed and relatively efficient from the Ming period onwards, especially in the most developed parts of China. He disagrees with the literature suggesting that land markets were underdeveloped in Ming and Ching China, and deals in detail with some of the main institutional constraints (such as ‘live sales’) that were identified in the older literature. Van Bavel finds a similar – even earlier – rise of modern land and lease markets in medieval Italy and the late-medieval Low Countries, both clearly linked to the economic success of these regions. However, Italy’s success in this field seems to have faltered in the late Middle Ages, and Van Bavel discusses the possible explanations for this turn of events. Cerman’s paper, finally, shows that to some extent developments in east-central Europe during the Middle Ages mirrored those in the western part, in the sense that the property rights of peasants became more secure in combination with a developing land market. He also questions the traditional view that this was entirely reversed during the early modern period as a result of a return of ‘demesne lordship’ and the rise of the ‘second serfdom’, thus offering an equally nuanced contribution to the debates about the little and great divergences in the economic and social development of the pre-industrial period.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 For two recent examples see L. Feller and C. Wickham eds., *Le marché de la terre au Moyen Âge* (École Française de Rome, 2005), and B. J. P. van Bavel and

P. C. M. Hoppenbrouwers (eds.), *Landholding and land transfer in the North Sea area (late Middle Ages – 19th century)*, CORN Publication Series 5 (Turnhout, 2004). The topic is also central to the European workgroup ‘Landed property’ of COST Action A35 (Programme for the Study of European Rural Societies).

- 2 We hope to present a more elaborated introduction to themes germane to this topic and to the broader topic of factor markets – the markets of land, labour and capital – in a future number of *Continuity and Change*, offering regional overviews of these factors markets in different parts of the world.
- 3 Those identified as members of this California School are, as well as Ken Pomeranz, scholars such as R. Bin Wong (UC Irvine) and Jack Goldstone (UC Davis). See the review article by P. H. H. Vries, ‘Are coal and colonies really crucial? Kenneth Pomeranz and the great divergence’, *Journal of World History* **12** (2001), 407–46.