

Pernicious consequences of predatory capitalism? Agrarian capitalism and water management in the early modern Low Countries

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Introduction

During the past ten years Tim Soens has produced an impressive oeuvre on the history of water management in the medieval and early modern North Sea area.¹ He has made an enormous contribution to our knowledge of the interaction between environment and economy and society of reclaimed wetland areas. One of the main themes of his research is the change from peasant societies to societies characterized by agrarian capitalism in the period from the late Middle Ages to the eighteenth century. His publications make abundantly clear that he is not happy with that change. In the first place, he deplores the fact that a peasant society that was able to provide a living to a large number people was replaced by one where any benefits were only reaped by a few large farmers and landowners. Secondly, in his view the rise of agrarian capitalism leads to a tendency to lower investment in flood protection: 'For larger and absentee landowners, (short-term) financial profitability rather than safety was increasingly the determining factor in the level of capital investment'.²

In this paper I will concentrate on the second of these contentions, although I have some doubts about the general applicability of the first one too.³ I think Soens has convincingly demonstrated that the sixteenth-century crisis of water management in the Flemish coastal plain was caused by decreasing investment in flood control by large absentee landlords, and that this can be extended to other areas like the estuary of Rhine and Meuse.⁴ However, I seriously doubt whether his conclusions can be extended to the early modern period without any modifications. I will underpin these doubts by first defining agrarian capitalism and then checking to what degree we can define rural societies in the coastal areas of the Low Countries as capitalist, and which consequences this had for investment in the flood defences. This will mostly be based on evidence from the area stretching from Dunkirk

¹ Tim Soens, 'Floods and money: funding drainage and flood control in coastal Flanders from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries', *Continuity and Change* 26 (2011) 333-65; idem, *De spade in de dijk? Waterbeheer en samenleving in de Vlaamse kustvlakte (1280-1580)* (Gent, 2009); idem, 'The social distribution of land and flood risk along the North Sea coast: Flanders, Holland and Romney marsh compared, c. 1200-1750' in Bas van Bavel and Erik Thoen, eds., *Rural societies and environments at risk. Ecology, property rights and social organisation in fragile areas (Middle Ages-twentieth century)* (Turnhout 2013) 147-179; idem, 'Explaining deficiencies of water management in the late medieval Flemish coastal plain, 13th-16th centuries, *Jaarboek voor Ecologische Geschiedenis* (2005/2006) 35-61; idem, 'Threatened by the sea, condemned by man? Flood risk and environmental inequalities along the North Sea coast, 1200-1800' in: G. Massard Guilbaud and R. Rodger eds., *Environmental and social inequalities in the city. Historical perspectives* (Cambridge, 2011) 91-111; idem, 'Capitalisme, institutions et conflits hydrauliques autour de la mer du Nord (XIIIe-XVIIIe siècles)' in Patrick Fournier and Sandrine Lavaud, eds., *Eaux et conflits dans l'Europe médiévale et moderne* (Toulouse 2012) 149-171; idem, 'Het waterschap en de mythe van democratie in het Ancien Régime. Het voorbeeld van de Vlaamse kustvlakte in de late Middeleeuwen', *Jaarboek voor Ecologische Geschiedenis* (2001) 39-55; idem, 'Dijkenbouwers of rustverstoorders? De Vlaamse graven en de strijd tegen het water in de laatmiddeleeuwse Vlaamse kustvlakte', *BMGN* 122 (2007) 321-356; idem, 'Polders zonder poldermodel? Een onderzoek naar de rol van inspraak en overleg in de waterstaat van de laatmiddeleeuwse Vlaamse kustvlakte', *TSEG* 3 (2006) 3-36.

² Soens, 'Floods and money', 352 (quote), idem, 'Social distribution', 172-173.

³ Piet van Cruyningen, 'From disaster to sustainability: floods, changing property relations and water management in the south-western Netherlands, c. 1500-1800', *Continuity and Change* 29 (2014) 252-256.

⁴ Soens, 'Floods and money', 351-352; Van Cruyningen, 'Disaster to sustainability', 245-249.

to Rotterdam. This will be followed by a case-study that will illustrate the differences of opinion between Soens and me, but will also show there is common ground between us.

What is agrarian capitalism?

Agrarian capitalism is a problematic concept, especially because the scholars who use it often attach very different meanings to it. According to Tim Soens the difference between a peasant society and an agrarian capitalist one is that in a capitalist society access to land, labour and capital is only possible through the market.⁵ British historians have a somewhat different view. They agree about the importance of markets, but to them what is more important is the resulting type of rural society, characterized by a 'tripartite social structure in which most of the land was owned by large landowners, rented to large-scale tenant capitalist farmers, and worked by agricultural proletarians'.⁶ However, implicitly, Soens' view is not that different from that of British scholars. He too is concerned with increasing social inequality and speaks of large absentee landowners and capitalist tenant farmers.⁷ Clearly, what he has in mind is the same type of rural society, so I think it is best to use the British definition of agrarian capitalism.

Agrarian capitalism in its 'classic', tripartite form only was predominant in England and even there only from the nineteenth century.⁸ Outside England, it only existed in some geographically limited areas, several of which were situated along the southern North Sea coast. It collapsed under the pressure of the late-nineteenth century agricultural crisis, so it seems to have been a rather short-lived phenomenon. Some scholars even claim it never really existed.⁹ But that means throwing away the baby with the bathwater. It is undeniable that from the late Middle Ages to the eighteenth/nineteenth centuries in several regions of north-western Europe the structure of rural society changed in the sense that it became more capitalist. This does not mean that these regions became fully-fledged capitalist. The tripartite social structure was only achieved in a limited number of regions. Most early modern societies were situated on a sliding scale somewhere between fully peasant and fully capitalist.¹⁰ The English fenland societies, for example, are usually considered as peasant societies. But as Joan Thirsk already remarked, there were also larger farmers there, raising cattle and sheep for urban markets.¹¹ So there is no simple dichotomy; if we want to study the influence of agrarian capitalism on investment in flood defences, we will have to know to which degree the economy of a region was capitalist.

⁵ Soens, 'Floods and money', 335.

⁶ Leigh Shaw-Taylor, 'The rise of agrarian capitalism and the decline of family farming in England', *Economic History Review* 65 (2012) 26.

⁷ Soens, 'Floods and money', 335-336; 351-352.

⁸ Shaw-Taylor, 'Rise of agrarian capitalism', 57-58.

⁹ Robert Albritton, 'Did agrarian capitalism exist?', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 20 (1993) 419-441.

¹⁰ Mike Zmolek, 'The case for agrarian capitalism. A response to Albritton', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 27 (2000) 139, 155.

¹¹ Joan Thirsk, *English peasant farming. The agrarian history of Lincolnshire from Tudor to recent times* (London and New York 1981) 116.

This brings us to the next problematic aspect of agrarian capitalism: how to measure it. One indication is the distribution of landownership. This can be relatively easily reconstructed by using tax records. Another indicator that is often used is farm size. Recently, Leigh Shaw-Taylor has pointed out the drawbacks of this, especially the arbitrary limits drawn between 'small' peasant holdings and 'large' capitalist holdings. Occupational data, on the ratio of labourers to farmers, would be a better measure of the degree of agrarian capitalism.¹² For the pre-1750 Low Countries, however, such data are almost completely lacking, so we will have to make do with farm size. Otto Knottnerus has calculated that in the North Sea coastal areas farms over twenty hectares normally could not be run without recourse to wage labour.¹³ On farms just over twenty hectares, however, the use of wage labour will have remained limited. In English historiography, 100 acres is often taken as the limit between large capitalist and smaller holdings.¹⁴ We can safely assume that on farms of more than 100 acres or 40 hectares most of the work was performed by hired labour. This still leaves us with another problem. As Mark Overton has rightly stated, large farms will almost always tend to be a minority. Even in England as late as 1870, only 18 per cent of all farms was larger than 100 acres.¹⁵ This problem can be solved by taking into account the percentage of the agricultural land cultivated by large farms. This gives a much better impression of the predominance of large-scale farming.¹⁶ Let's now turn to the *plat pays* and see how capitalist it was.

Agrarian capitalism in coastal Flanders, Zeeland and Holland

Data on the distribution of landownership in seven areas in the late sixteenth and the seventeenth century are presented in table 1. The table demonstrates that in most of the regions rural people owned considerably less than forty per cent of the land. The only exception seems to be the area around Veurne in the 1570s, but for some reason the historian who compiled the data for this region counted inhabitants of the city of Veurne who lived on rent income as farmers.¹⁷ They should of course have been categorised as town dwellers, so the percentage of the land owned by the rural population in this area must have been lower.

The distribution of landownership confirms the idea that rural societies in the region under study were more or less capitalist. In this respect they are comparable with south-eastern England, but they are also very different. In England, most land belonged to large consolidated estates, owned by the gentry or aristocracy. In the coastal areas of the Low Countries such estates were very unusual. Most landowners did not have very large possessions (usually less than 100 hectares) and the properties of the larger landowners were always spread over several areas. Hendrick Thibaut, for example, probably the biggest

¹² Shaw-Taylor, 'Rise of agrarian capitalism', 49, 57.

¹³ Otto S. Knottnerus, 'Yeomen and farmers in the Wadden Sea coastal marshes, c. 1500-1900' in Bas J.P. van Bavel and Peter Hoppenbrouwers, eds., *Landholding and land transfer in the North Sea area (late Middle Ages-19th century)* (Turnhout 2004) 156.

¹⁴ J.D. Chambers and G.E. Mingay, *The agricultural revolution 1750-1880* (London 1966) 132; Robert C. Allen, *Enclosure and the yeoman. The agricultural development of the south Midlands 1450-1850* (Oxford 1992) 57.

¹⁵ Mark Overton, *Agricultural revolution in England. The transformation of the agrarian economy 1500-1850* (Cambridge 1996) 171-172, 175.

¹⁶ Knottnerus, 'Yeomen and farmers', 155.

¹⁷ Paul Vandewalle, *De geschiedenis van de landbouw in de kasselrij Veurne (1550-1645)* (Brussel 1986) 133.

landlord in Zeeland in the 1660s, possessed 1,200 hectares in Zeeland Flanders, situated from Cadzand in the west to Stoppeldijk in the east; these villages are 50 km apart. Also contrary to England, where the gentry lived most of the year in its country houses, most landlords lived in cities, even the noblemen among them.

Table 1. Percentage distribution of landownership in some areas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries

Area	Hectares	Rural population	Town dwellers	Church	Nobility	Other/unknown
Polders Veurne 1570s	9,165	49	3	29	19	0
Hulster Ambacht 1570s	10,570	c. 25	c. 7	63	1	4
Beijerlanden 1627	2,199	22	51	0	26	1
West Kraaijert 1648	460	9	76	0	15	0
Uitslag van Putten 1661	420	32	58	0	0	10
Zeeland Flanders 1665	27,945	18	65	7	6	4
Polders Dunkirk 1670	27,391	38	20	20	22	0

Sources: P. Vandewalle, *De geschiedenis van de landbouw in de kasselrij Veurne (1550-1645)* (Brussel 1986) 123-134; idem, *Quatre siècles d'agriculture dans la région de Dunkerque 1590-1990. Une étude statistique* (Gent 1994) 137-143; H.D. Nijenhuis and M.C. Nijenhuis-van Pienbroek, *Hulster Ambacht. Penningkohieren 1570-1580* (s.l. 1992); C. Baars, *De geschiedenis van de landbouw in de Beijerlanden* (Wageningen 1973) appendices 1 and 9; Van Cruyningen, 'Disaster to sustainability', 251.

This information about the distribution of landownership seems to confirm Tim Soens's worst fears. Most of the land was owned by absentee landlords living in cities, who owned properties spread over several polders. So there is every reason to suspect they will behave like medieval landowners: they will try to keep the costs of dike maintenance as low as possible and when they do not succeed in that, they will take their loss and use their right to 'abandon' their land in the imperilled polder. However, in the next section I will show reality was a bit more complicated.

The second indicator of agrarian capitalism is farm size. Information on this is available for several areas and polders from the late sixteenth century onwards. They are presented in tabel 2. Wherever possible I have divided the holdings into three categories: smallholdings and family farms of less than 20 hectares, substantial and partly capitalist farms of 20 to 40 hectares and fully capitalist farms of 40 hectares or more. It is clear that in most areas capitalist farmers cultivated a substantial percentage of the land, often more than half, so agriculture in most the area under study can be considered as capitalist.

Table 2. Percentage distribution of agricultural land between small, middling and large holdings in the sixteenth - eighteenth centuries

Area	Hectares	<20 ha (%)	20-40 ha (%)	>40 ha (%)
South-Holland				
Oud-Beijerland (1627)	1,144	23	38	39
Zuid-Beijerland (1659)	1,355	22	28	50
Uitslag van Putten (1661)	420	32	38	30
Northwest Brabant				
Dinteloord (1662)	1,752	7	46	47
Zeeland				
West-Kraaijertpolder (1648)	460	29	19	52
Zuidwatering Walcheren (1608)	2,653	67	26	7
Dreischor (1651)	1,060	45	55	0
Bruinisse (1612)	765	44	56	0
Scherpenisse (1666)	898	68	32	0
Zeeland Flanders				
Hulster Ambacht (1570s)	10,570	50	47	3
Hulster Ambacht (1647)	5,913	20	47	33
Hulster Ambacht (1769)	9,036	13	38	49
Groede (1665)	1,830	16	22	62
Axel (1689)	2,022	9	19	72
Cadzand (1694)	3,059	14	23	63
Flanders		< 25 ha		>25 ha
Dunkirk polders (1655)		39		61

Sources: Peter Priester, *Geschiedenis van de Zeeuwse landbouw circa 1600-1910* (Wageningen 1998) 700-704; Baars, *Geschiedenis van de landbouw in de Beijerlanden*, appendices 2 and 18; Nijenhuis and Nijenhuis-van Pienbroek, *Hulster Ambacht*; Van Cruyningen, 'Disaster to sustainability', 254; Vandewalle, *Quatre siècles d'agriculture*, 121.

The only non-capitalist areas are Hulster Ambacht in the 1570s and some polders in Zeeland. The emergence of agrarian capitalism in this area was to a large degree caused by the sixteenth-century floods and the destruction wrought by warfare in the last three decades of that century. Reconstruction was financed with urban capital and in the new land not much place was left for smallholders. The polders in Zeeland had not been flooded nor heavily damaged by warfare, so there the old, 'peasant' structure had survived. The 1570s survey of Hulster Ambacht was made just before war hit this area, and the 1647 data show what the consequences of deconstruction and reconstruction were for the structure of rural society. Zeeland Flanders was the part of the study area that suffered most – 80 per cent was flooded around 1600 – so it is not surprising this had become the most capitalist part of the region in the seventeenth century.¹⁸

As the data on Hulster Ambacht show, farm size continued to increase. This happened also in the polders where peasant society had survived the sixteenth century. In Dreischor, for example, farmers with more than 40 hectares held 42 per cent of the land in 1756. The most extreme case is probably western Zeeland Flanders, where in 1750 holdings of 40 hectares occupied almost 80 per cent of the agricultural land, whereas smallholders and family farms with less than 20 hectares had to make do with only 7 per cent. Only on Walcheren capitalist farms remained relatively unimportant with still only 17 per cent of the land around 1830.¹⁹ Both the distribution of landownership and farm size indicate that farming in the research area can be characterized as capitalist. What consequences did that have for investment in the flood defences?

Capitalists and water management

From the 1590s to the 1660s urban capitalists invested enormous sums in reclamation of flooded areas in the Low Countries. In Zeeland Flanders alone these investments amounted to at least 8-9 million guilders.²⁰ According to Tim Soens, however, these were short-term investments, aiming at quick profits. If that were true, one expect urban investors to sell the reclaimed land quickly. Some of them indeed did that, but many others did not sell. An illustration of this is the Beijerlanden area, for which the distribution of landownership is shown in table 1. The two polders were reclaimed in 1558 and 1582 respectively, but in 1627 still over three quarters of the land in the polders was owned by urban capitalists or – also urban – noblemen, many of them children or grandchildren of the original investors. One can hardly call this a short-term investment.

Soens may be right when he claims that large absentee landlords tried to keep investment in maintenance of the dikes low in the second half of the seventeenth century. The level of the *geschot* (rates) of the Watering Cadzand in Zeeland Flanders supports this, as is shown in figure 1. After considerable investments in the first half of the century to repair the damage done by warfare in the period 1583-1604, investment clearly decreased in the second half of the century. In that period federal and provincial taxes were raised while grain prices dropped. Farming became less profitable and lease prices of land decreased. For large

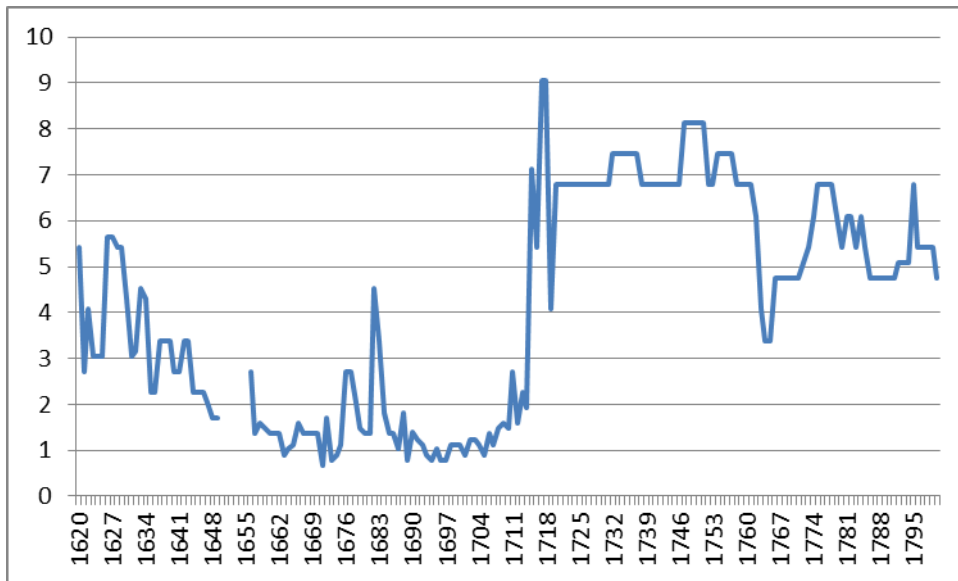
¹⁸ Van Cruyningen, 'Disaster to sustainability', 248-254.

¹⁹ Peter Priester, *Geschiedenis van de Zeeuwse landbouw circa 1600-1910* (Wageningen 1998) 700-705; P.J. van Cruyningen, *Behoudend maar buigzaam. Boeren in West-Zeeuws-Vlaanderen 1650-1850* (Wageningen 2000) 99.

²⁰ Piet van Cruyningen, 'Profits and risks in drainage projects in Staats-Vlaanderen, c. 1590-1665', *Jaarboek voor Ecologische Geschiedenis* (2005/2006) 139.

landowners financial profitability may indeed have become preferable to safety, especially since they themselves did not live in the polders. Indeed, the last three decades of the seventeenth and the first decade of the eighteenth century seem to have been a period of consistently low – too low – investment in dike maintenance in the south-west of the Netherlands.²¹ But the question is whether this can be blamed solely to the absentee landlords. Landowning farmers also had reasons to keep the rates low, because the profitability of their farms was already heavily eroded by decreasing grain prices and rising taxes. The last thing they needed was high polder rates.

Figure 1. Rates of the Watering Cadzand, 1620-1800 (guilders/hectare)



Source: Archief Waterschap Scheldestromen, Terneuzen, accounts of the Watering Cadzand.

Another way in which medieval landlords shirked their responsibility for investing in maintenance of flood defences was to make use of their right of *abandon*. They gave up their land in an imperilled polder, including the obligation to contribute to dike maintenance.²² In that case the land reverted to the sovereign (the count of Flanders, Zeeland or Holland) who then had to maintain the dikes or sell the land to others. There is surprisingly little evidence of this for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This does not mean that landlords did not try to get rid of land for which high rates had to be paid. In this period, however, they sold the land. In all polders reclaimed between c. 1550 and 1650 landownership by urban or noble landlords decreased. This was a slow and ‘natural’ process, caused by factors like heirs who squandered the family capital.²³ In polders which were heavily imperilled and therefore had to very high rates, this process went much quicker. An example of this are the polders Oud- and

²¹ Adriaan M.J. de Kraker, ‘Two floods compared: perception of and response to the 1682 and 1715 flooding disasters in the Low Countries’ in K. Pfeifer and N. Pfeifer, eds., *Forces of nature and cultural responses* (Dordrecht 2013) 196.

²² Soens, ‘Floods and money’, 349.

²³ C. Baars, *De geschiedenis van de landbouw in de Beijerlanden* (Wageningen 1973) ; Van Cruyningen, ‘Disaster to sustainability’

Jong-Breskens in Zeeland Flanders that suffered heavily from dike erosion and where consequently the rates of the water board were very high. In 1665 absentee landlords from Holland and Zeeland owned almost three quarters of the land in these polders, by 1825 this had been reduced to seven per cent. They sold most of their land to local farmers, who owned only six per cent of the land in 1665, but had increased their share to almost seventy per cent at the beginning of the nineteenth century. These farmers paid low prices for the land, but they also took huge risks, because if the polder would be flooded, they would lose everything. If that did not happen, they often became prosperous landowners themselves, as was the case in Breskens.²⁴ The rise of a class of landowning farmers in the coastal polders must have been very important for investment in the flood defences in the eighteenth century. These people stood to lose their possessions, their standing and their power when the polder was flooded, so they had every reason to promote investment in dike maintenance.

A case study: conflict in the Watering Cadzand, 1715-1719

Soens's pessimistic view of the role of absentee landlords is not entirely wrong, as the previous section has demonstrated, but I think it is too schematic. There is no simple dichotomy between 'bad' absentee landlords and 'good' landowning farmers. In reality, there often was no divide *between* social groups. Instead, the divide went *through* social groups. A conflict within the Watering Cadzand can illustrate this. After many years of underinvestment, the flood of 3 March 1715 functioned as a wake-up call. Landowners and administrators of water boards in the south-west of the Netherlands realized they would have to invest seriously in repair of the dikes if they wanted to prevent disasters.²⁵ This was also the case in the Watering Cadzand, where the dunes protecting the western side of the Watering had all but disappeared. Ten days after the flood, the *directie* (board) and the main landowners met to discuss the crisis.²⁶ They decided to launch an ambitious program of investments. Both the budget and the rates were quadrupled, and new dikes and a new sluice were to be constructed. The increase of the rate was to be partly compensated by tax exemptions the board was going to request from the States-General, but the landowners would have to pay considerably more than they had been used to in the previous decades. This ambitious program seems to have been accepted without much discussion by the majority of the landowners.

This easy acceptance of the investment program may have been a result of the way in which power in the Watering was distributed over social groups. Only major landowners with at least 30 *gemeten* (c. 13 ha) had the right to vote at the general meetings. They elected a board of six members: a *dijkgraaf* (dike reeve) and two *gezworenen* (jurors) who were responsible for the daily management and three *hoofddirecteuren*. The finances were managed by a treasurer, also elected by the main landowners. The three *hoofddirecteuren* only joined the board meetings when important decisions had to be taken, and that usually meant decisions on investments. From the 1620s onwards dike reeve and jurors were always elected from the most prominent landowning farmers in the Watering and the *hoofddirecteuren* from absentee landlords, usually from the nearby town of Sluis, but also from Bruges or even further away. This meant that the two most important groups of landowners – farmers and

²⁴ Van Cruyningen, *Behoudend maar buigzaam*, 113-115, 259-260.

²⁵ De Kraker, 'Two floods',

²⁶ This section is mostly based on Archief Waterschap Scheldestromen, Terneuzen, Watering Cadzand nos. 29, 202 and 203.

large absentee landlords – were equally represented in the board and that when the board made a proposal to increase investments members of both groups tended to follow their representatives in the board.

Another proposal made by the board, however, was controversial. At the meeting of 13 March 1715 representatives of the board of the adjacent Tienhonderdpolder had also been present. The flood defences of their relatively small polder had also been damaged heavily and they were afraid they would not be able to bear the costs of repair. They proposed to form a ‘combination’ of their polder with the Watering Cadzand, which would mean that the costs of repair could be spread over a much larger area. The board of the Watering supported their request, because if the Tienhonderdpolder were flooded, the Watering would have 3.5 km of dike more to maintain, whereas forming a combination might cost a bit more in the short run, but would guarantee that the dikes of the Tienhonderdpolder were maintained well and would not breach. This seemed a reasonable proposition, especially since the Watering Cadzand already had such combinations with other adjoining polders. At a meeting of *directie* and main landowners on 31 May 1715 the proposal was accepted. Dike reeve, jurors, two out of three *hoofddirecteuren* and 28 landowners voted in favour of a combination for twelve years, only 3 landowners opposed it.

One *hoofddirecteur* had not been present, *jonkheer* Cornelis de Boodt, lord of Moersbergen, Giessenburg and Giessen-Nieuwkerk. He lived at Utrecht and complained the board had sent the convocations for the 31 May meeting too late, so many absentee landlords like him had not been able to attend. He perceived this as the result of a conspiracy of the board members and landowners living on the island and in Sluis to make all landowners pay for an expensive agreement between the two water boards. On 14 June 1715 he and other absentee landlords, like Samuel van der Laen, secretary of the city of Haarlem, formally protested at a meeting of the landowners. They threatened they would not pay rates if the board continued with the combination. The ensuing conflict lasted for four years and in the end the board had to give in because the States-General did not permit the board to sell the land of those who refused to pay rates, the only sanction the board had. With the benefit of hindsight we can say that the opposition to the combination was counterproductive. The Tienhonderdpolder got deeper and deeper into debt and both the Watering Cadzand and the States-General had to support it with subsidies. With the combination this might have been prevented.

All of this seems to confirm Tim Soens’s fear that absentee landlords preferred short-term profit over safety and I think to a degree this was indeed the case. But there were attenuating circumstances. De Boodt’s accusation of a conspiracy was not wholly unfounded. The board had sent convocations for meetings only four days before those meetings were to be held. It is clear that made it impossible for people from places like Utrecht or Haarlem to attend the meetings and the board must have realized that. Furthermore, there were very strong connections between the two water boards, if only because Sluis notary Johannes van Weenegen was treasurer of both. De Boodt and his friends had reasons to be suspicious. It is very likely that the rich farmers from the island and the Sluis notables on the board deliberately tried to exclude the absentee landlords from the decision-making process to ensure the acceptance of a plan they considered to be in the interest of the island of Cadzand as a whole. Another attenuating circumstance is that De Boodt and his associates did not oppose the ambitious investment program of the Watering Cadzand itself and in the compromise that was reached in 1719 they agreed with a one-off subsidy of 9,000 guilders to the Tienhonderdpolder. In a period in which the Watering itself was in financial trouble this was a considerable sum. So they were not wholly unconcerned with safety. Their opposition to the combination may have had more to do with the wish not to be excluded from decision-making than with the actual contents of the plan. Especially Cornelis de Boodt must have

been piqued. He, the scion of a Flemish noble family and lord of a string of *seigneuries*, had been excluded from decision-making by fellow board members he must have considered a bunch of country bumpkins: three farmers, a notary and two small-town merchants. By sabotaging the plan for a combination De Boodt and other absentee landlords made clear they had clout and were prepared to use it to defend their interests.

This conflict demonstrates that urban landowners had diverging interests. Those from Sluis, living nearby, seem to have identified with the inhabitants of the island of Cadzand. Those living further away conformed more to Soens's image of absentee landlords, but even they were prepared to invest in the flood defences. Furthermore, for many urban merchants land was an asset that may not have yielded high profit, but was a much less risky part of their investment portfolio than for example participation in shipping or the slave trade, and land also conferred social status to its owner. Profit was not necessarily the main reason for purchasing land. So we cannot say urban landlords in general were predatory capitalists looking for a quick profit. The ones who aimed for that, had probably all sold their land before 1715. Moreover, we should not idealize peasants. The plans for the combination were supported by the big, 'capitalist' farmers in the board, but several peasants supported the opponents, lured by the promise of lower rates.²⁷ Elsewhere, for example in Rijnland, peasants contributed to the destruction of the environment by mining peat.²⁸

Some conclusions

Tim Soens's work is an impressive contribution to our knowledge of the history of water management, also for the early modern period. Investments did indeed decline during the second half of the seventeenth century and some urban landlords were just aiming at a quick profit. However, those who kept on to their land proved to be prepared to raise the investments again after the flood of 1715. I think we should move away from a simple dichotomy between wise peasants and predatory capitalists. I agree with Soens that agriculture in the coastal area of Flanders, Zeeland and Holland in the early modern period was capitalist, and capitalists wanted to make a profit. But capitalists, whether urban landlords, tenant farmers of the big landowning farmers of the Watering Cadzand, also knew that if they wanted to make a profit, the land had to be protected from floods and for that investments were required. Those who were not prepared to do that, sold out. The others continued to invest.

So I maintain what I claimed earlier: the urban capitalists who became landlords from the late sixteenth century were prepared to invest in dike maintenance, even in periods of agrarian depression like the first half of eighteenth century.²⁹ But in future research our paths may converge again. Recently, Soens claimed that the rise of a class of landowning large farmers was crucial for better dike maintenance because they lived in the coastal areas and were motivated to invest large amounts of money and energy in preserving the land from flooding.³⁰ The case-study above shows that this also was the case with large owner-occupiers

²⁷ Archief Waterschap Scheldestromen, Terneuzen, Watering Cadzand, no. 29, request to the States-General, 1715.

²⁸ Milja van Tielhof, 'Turfinning en proletarisering in Rijnland 1530-1670', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* 2 (2005) no. 2, 105-116.

²⁹ Van Cruyningen, 'Disaster to sustainability', 260.

³⁰ Soens, 'Flood disasters and agrarian capitalism: an environmental Kuznets curve?', paper presented at the workshop 'The impact of disasters on pre-modern rural economies', Münster 13-14 November 2014.

in the Watering Cadzand and very probably also elsewhere in the south-west of the Netherlands. In future research it might be fruitful to track the emergence of these large farmers and the influence they had on water management. I think it may have been considerable. But they did not oppose urban landlords, they cooperated with them.