

# Pirenne and economic and social theory: influences, methods and reception

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Henri Pirenne (1862-1935) is still regarded as one of Belgium's most important historians. During his life and after his death in 1935 he has remained popular with many groups of historians for two reasons: they either wish to refer to his theories, or contradict his opinions. In the last case, he is usually considered a 'child of his time'. However, he is rarely situated in the correct historical context, and those who judge him reveal more about themselves and their own temporal contexts than about Pirenne and his era.

The goal of this article is twofold: on the one hand, we aim to examine and clarify the origins of his methodology and ideas, in order to establish a starting point for new research. Then we will briefly summarise the influence of his work on economic history up to the present day. We will show that his methodological foundations and his genius as a writer were responsible for his lasting historiographical success, even now as his methodology enjoys a certain revival.

To reconstruct the influences on his methodology and ideas over the course of his career, we have consulted the huge body of his historiographical writing, in particular some published letters, methodological articles and, last but not least, the notes he wrote while he was imprisoned in Germany during the First World War (dating back to 1917).<sup>2</sup> Bryce and Mary Lyon, along with Pirenne's son, published these notes as *mémoires d'un solitaire*.<sup>3</sup> We anticipate that thorough study of his entire personal archive will modify or nuance the tentative conclusions we draw below.

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<sup>2</sup> Most of this is available on the Internet thanks to the Digithèque of the University of Brussels (ULB) that stores Pirenne's personal archives. The Digithèque of the Free University of Brussels (ULB) has published most (not all) of the texts written by Pirenne on the Internet (see: <http://digitheque.ulb.ac.be>). Warning: In the Digithèque, the pages are re-numbered, so the page numbers do not match the originals. Unless otherwise mentioned, in this article we refer to the page numbers from the Digithèque.

<sup>3</sup> Bryce Lyon and Mary Lyon (1994), *Réflexions d'un solitaire by Henri Pirenne* (hereafter: Pirenne, 1917).

## 1. THE BIRTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF PIRENNE'S GENERAL METHODOLOGY FOR ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL HISTORY

To understand Pirenne as an economic historian, we must situate him within the evolution of 'economic history' as a discipline. When Pirenne began his career in the 1880s and 1890s, 'economic history' had just become a separate discipline. In history, the main focus remained on political and institutional history which, during the 19th century, had been the first disciplines in the historical field to adopt the methodology of the positive sciences. Judicial history followed quickly, although, to use Pirenne's own words, this discipline derived from Romanticism and nationalism to which it was connected (Pirenne, 1917, 209). Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886) was probably the most prominent (German) representative of this 'school'. Shortly afterwards, while Pirenne was just a student, other disciplines of historical science – such as palaeography and diplomatics – were developing in the same way, particularly in France, where Pirenne went to study these methodological 'auxiliary' sciences. However, economic *history* was still developing towards a full discipline within the field of history during Pirenne's studies and early career. He contributed to its development as a mature discipline of history.

It was only at the end of the 19th century that economic history became a recognised scientific discipline. However, the 'birth' of this 'historical' discipline did not take place among historians, but within the field of 'economics'.<sup>4</sup>

Under the influence of positivism, scholars applied methods used in the positive (or hard) sciences to study human behaviour, both in terms of economics and sociology. At the turn of the century, historians were still very sceptical about positivism and its uses in history, because they doubted if there were laws to be discovered in historical processes. Their aversion to positivist influences gradually changed, as scholars began to introduce history itself into the application and interpretation of positivist methods, first in economics and later in history. Pirenne played an important part in this evolution.

The birth of this change was in Germany (and not in France or the Anglo-Saxon world), hard as this is to believe today, when economic history has practically disappeared in that country. Pirenne was highly influenced by

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<sup>4</sup> The discipline of economics itself was still evolving as well. Born in the late 18th century out of 'moral philosophy', it was called 'political economy' until the late 19th century. Only then was the term generally replaced by 'economics', especially among neo-classical economists working on mathematical and axiomatic bases (Wings, 1973).

positivist German historiography, and in fact his ideas and methods formed a bridge which helped create a new economic and social history in France, the Anglo-Saxon world and the rest of Europe.

Economic history emerged not from history, but from the field of economics, which had changed greatly in the second half of the 19th century and increased in significance. A major question is why Germany 'modernised' later than other countries such as England. German social scientists reacted strongly against classical economics, which had its roots in the Anglo-Saxon world with Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and John Stuart Mill as its most prominent representatives. This (Anglo-Saxon) classical economy evolved into neo-classical economics in the second half of the 19th century. By the time that Henri Pirenne was a student, this school had evolved into a group of researchers who sought to identify economic patterns which could be explained by mathematical models. These neo-classical views had many adherents in Germany and Austria, including the Austrian Carl Menger, best known for his debate with Schmoller. However, in Germany many economists rejected this neo-classical mathematical-model approach. In many cases, these sceptics believed that economies should be centrally guided and based on social principles, but they also used more 'historical' or source-based and comparative methodological approaches to explain economic phenomena. They avoided formulating overly general 'theoretical' economic laws, preferring to contextualise economic patterns with attention to the differences among areas and periods. In other words, they thought one should work 'historically' to explain economics. This new group was later called the 'German historical school'.

In contrast to the neo-classical school, this new economic school was profoundly influenced by sociology and even more by psychology. Scholars in the younger school examined the psychological motives for human behaviour, looking for something much more complex than Adam Smith and his colleagues had assumed. Not all Humans were identical '*homines economici*', or as Pirenne – influenced to a large extent by this school – wrote himself in 1917:

"The economic man is a joke. Man is always the same, with the same passions, but with different methods of assuaging them because of the difference in environments" (Pirenne, 1917, 223).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In this article most quotes originally written in French by Pirenne, are translated in English by the authors.

Economics is history. Therefore, many economists conducted historical studies that went back to the Middle Ages. At the same time, this school allowed some outside influence and adopted methods from other fields. They engaged in a true methodological conflict with the followers of the neo-classical school, their major foes. However, these new economists were otherwise quite diverse. Some, such as Werner Sombart and to some extent Karl Bücher, were close to Marxism, while others remained closer to the neo-classical school even as they rejected 'patterns' in history. A third group, which included Max Weber, attributed more importance to mentality. Still others focused on racial differences. These diverse beliefs caused huge controversies amongst economists, but their collective aversion to 'unchangeable' rules and patterns unified them into a school. Pirenne shared the same opinion well before World War I. As early as 1901 he wrote:

"It should be mentioned that, during the 50 years which have followed the appearance of the Wealth of Nations, we have lived with the conviction that the political economy is a scientific fact, a system of absolute and immutable laws, true always and everywhere, which apply equally to the nomadic hunter or fisher in primitive times and to the entrepreneur or large industrialist in modern times. While it allows differences of intensity in economic activity over time, it does not allow difference in nature. It operates in rigid categories, it follows a rigid formalism, and it therefore can only consider the study of economic data over passing time periods as an antiquarian pastime, without usefulness or impact" (Pirenne, 1901, V).

Pirenne clearly adopted the objectives of the 'German historical school' in economics. But by whom was he influenced? The same text<sup>6</sup> (*Ibid.*, VI) makes clear that he agreed with the most important economists of this school since he wrote that people such as Roscher, Hildebrand, Knies, Nitzsch, Schmoller, Inama-Sternegg, Lamprecht, Gothein, and many others had demonstrated earlier that

"to whatever school one belongs, in our time, one can no longer be considered as an economist if one claims to confine this science to the narrow limits of the present".

Clearly his German connections and his studies there had convinced Pirenne. His writings show clearly – and this is up to now largely neglected by biographers – that two economists had an especially significant impact on his thinking. He was the student and personal friend of two extremely influential economists of the late 19th century, Karl Bücher and especially Gustav Von

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<sup>6</sup> This text is not well known, but it is an important source for understanding the influences on Pirenne. It is not published in the 'Digithèque' of the ULB.

Schmoller.<sup>7</sup> Pirenne took classes with Von Schmoller in 1885 (Ganshof, 1936, 179; Lyon, 1974, 63) and knew Bücher well enough to write an introduction in one of Bücher's books (Pirenne, 1901).

As was the case with the other 'members' of the German historical school, the interpretations and theories of Bücher and Schmoller were very cautious about formulating unchangeable patterns because they thought that these patterns as such were determined by cultural history.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, to a large extent Bücher and Schmoller were the founders of economic history. Pirenne, as mentioned, became the intermediary between this trend in German economics and economic history in the rest of the Western world, at least for the methodological components (although not for the 'applied economics' portion of course).

This does not mean that Pirenne always agreed with the writings of Bücher, Schmoller and others, such as Brentano. He often disagreed and challenged their positions<sup>9</sup>, but this 'disagreement based on data' was also part of the methodology of the young historical school. Their work inspired him, nonetheless, to reflect deeply on a range of economic and social topics, which he traced further back in historical time.<sup>10</sup> Throughout his career, he continually referred to the ideas and historical data of these two economists/economic historians. It was often through them that he became aware of other theories and concepts. Their 'historical approach' certainly appealed to Pirenne from the start, and he maintained that approach with only slight modifications to the end of his career.

With a bit of exaggeration, some scholars have attributed to the German historical school the creation of an "inductive methodology" to replace the supposedly "deductive methodology" of the neo-classical school. Schmoller and other adherents of the German historical school favoured an "objective" approach to economic reality, and extrapolated from the data more general

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<sup>7</sup> Schmoller influenced other historians who in the late 19th century opposed 'traditional' history, such as Kurt Breysig, a German historian who was a contemporary of Lamprecht (1866-1940) (see: vom Brocke, 1971), whom Pirenne refers to in a positive way in one of his rare methodological pieces (Pirenne, 1897, 3, note 1 and 5 note 2, where he writes "les idées exposées de M.K. Breysig dans... se rapprochent beaucoup de celles de M. Lamprecht"). On the influence of Schmoller on Pirenne see also Dumolyn (2008).

<sup>8</sup> On Bücher, see the articles in Backhaus (2000); on Schmoller, von Beckerath (1973) (among other references).

<sup>9</sup> He even criticised Bücher in the introduction of his own book (Pirenne, 1901, X ff).

<sup>10</sup> Schmoller and Bücher e.g. inspired Pirenne to think about the importance of the textile industry, urban history and the existence of long-term stages in economic development. They themselves had worked on the same topics (see e.g., Von Schmoller (1879), on the textile industry, Bücher on the stages of capitalism and the nature of merchants (Bücher, 1901; Pirenne 1898, 6)).

patterns of behaviour which were limited in time and space. This strategy was called "induction". In contrast, Carl Menger and other neo-classical economists only used history to apply contemporary and supposedly universal models, a strategy labelled "deduction" (Krabbe, 1983, 88 ff.).

- reaction against the neo-classical school as too close to the concepts of Smith, Ricardo, Mill and others
- demand for interpretations based on empirical data and minimal reliance on universal theoretical models
- adaptation of interpretative concepts to changing circumstances (in time and space): the 'historical component' of ideas
- 'pluralism' in interpretation
- emphasis on the comparative aspect
- importance of institutions in economic development
- incorporation of interdisciplinarity into economics
- significance of ethical considerations
- importance of comparative psychology as an explanatory mechanism
- applied economics: many adherents tended to favour a directed 'moral' economy (*Kathedersozialismus*), economic nationalism and 'neomercantilism', some following a member of the 'old school', Friedrich List

FIGURE 1: SOME FEATURES OF THE '(YOUNG) GERMAN HISTORICAL SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS'<sup>11</sup>

The inductive methodology required a thorough historical foundation. Schmoller and his followers conducted a written debate with Menger in the well-known "Methodenstreit". Pirenne had clearly chosen to join the historical school. He approved of their methods, which required a solid historical analysis of events, institutions and texts combined not with a narrative, but with a clear causal methodology typical of the social sciences. Schmoller had published studies on themes that especially interested Pirenne, such as urban history and textile history. Pirenne's famous "scientific mémoires" or "Reflections" of 1917 reveal that he shared the view that the deductive analysis of models could not lead to universal principles.<sup>12</sup> However, this opinion dates back to a much earlier period of his career, indeed to his formative years. Pirenne also liked the interdisciplinary focus of many of these

<sup>11</sup>. The table is our own synthesis based on the articles in Yuichi Shionoya (2001; 2005), as well as Pearson (2002), and Charles E. Mc Clelland (1971), among others.

<sup>12</sup>. "Le plus mauvais système pour arriver à s'habituer à la construction historique scientifique est de partir du présent", [The worst system for getting used to scientific historical construction is to start from the present] (Pirenne, 1917, 194).

economists. He appreciated their use of collective psychology, as described above, and their integration of sociology and history. In 1917 he wrote:

"... sociology and general psychology ought to be the starting point, just as individual psychology is the starting point for the study of sources".

He continued that

"just as men are different, all groups of men are different. It is impossible to simply use abstract rules to explain reality. Those rules can only be used to note point of view, always to be adjusted by undertaking careful study of the historical context" (Pirenne, 1917, 192).

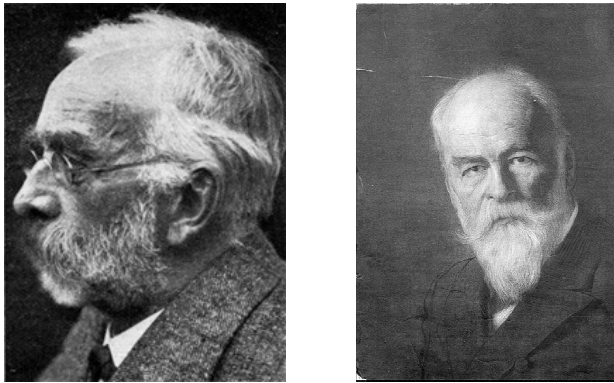


FIGURE 2: KARL BÜCHER (1847-1930) & GUSTAV VON SCHMOLLER (1838-1917)

Following the direction of his teachers, he again emphasised the need for being careful about the general application of 'rules' and patterns and the necessity to contextualise and verify the theoretical *point de vue*.

In the introduction he wrote for Karl Bücher's book (1901), Pirenne already expressed his preference for Schmoller's work as work that was not only less deductive but also much more 'sociological' (Pirenne, 1901, X-XI). Many historians who have studied the work of Pirenne have emphasised the influence of Karl Lamprecht (1856-1915) on Pirenne's ideas and writings. Lamprecht convinced Pirenne of the value of interdisciplinarity for historical writing (see Lyon, Prevenier, Dhondt, and Ganshof). While the impact of the economists in this area is often underestimated, we do not want to minimise the influence of the historian Karl Lamprecht on Pirenne. They were friends for years before they parted ways after Lamprecht began to collaborate with the German authorities at the beginning of the First World War. This

historian and art historian was also at the core of a '*Methodenstreit*' with traditional historians and art historians who opposed the combination of an interdisciplinary focus and close study and interpretation (Chickering, 1993, 269ff). Pirenne was lucky to have witnessed these discussions during the final decades of the 19th century as well. However, the connection of this '*Streit*' with the *Methodenstreit* dividing the economists is often forgotten.<sup>13</sup> In the works of Bücher, for example, one can find many references to Lamprecht and vice versa. For a long period Lamprecht even invited a specialist in economics to his students' examinations (*Ibid.*).

Pirenne's interest in economic history, awareness of interdisciplinarity, and reliance on 'institutions' to explain evolution, as well his nuanced view towards models and concepts, result from his contacts with the German-speaking world, in which huge methodological changes have been taking place, not only in history but also in other fields such as economics. His education in France was less important in the formation of his theoretical views on history, although it was of huge importance for his skills in textual analysis and his acquaintance with the work of Vidal de la Blache, the founding father of human geography. Our view is that his 'German' and to a large extent *economic* education was at the core of his nuanced theoretical view on historical methodology which made him so famous.

In that sense, we believe that some studies that have been published about Pirenne's views need to be nuanced. It is probable that a scholar from the university at which Pirenne taught most, Jan Dhondt (1979), together with the Pirenne's American admirer Bryce Lyon (1997), and later scholars such as Prevenier (1986<sup>14</sup>) and Witte (2007) overestimated the change in Pirenne's methodology after World War I. They based this view on Pirenne's memoirs of the war and articles he wrote later on methodology. According to Dhondt (1979), after the war "un Pirenne 'lamprechtien' n'était guère de mise".<sup>15</sup> Dhondt also cites the fact that Pirenne presented three papers between October 1931 and March 1933 about the importance of coincidence in history. However, the content of these papers is unknown (Dhondt, 1979).<sup>16</sup> Bryce

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<sup>13</sup> [www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Methodenstreit](http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Methodenstreit) (22-3-2009).

<sup>14</sup> Although he also relativised the "radical" change in Pirenne's "determinism" after 1918 (Prevenier, 1986, 44).

<sup>15</sup> But was this method "*Lamprechtien*"? In fact, Pirenne's appeal in 1897 in favour of Karl Lamprecht was probably more of an appeal for the use of social sciences in history, rather than an appeal to Marxist or similar influences. "It is easy to characterise Lamprecht's method. It is to consider history from the viewpoint of the social sciences" p. 5 (via Digithèque ULB).

<sup>16</sup> If in these papers (the content of which is unknown) he expressed the same ideas as in his mémoires of 1917, his point of view might have been nuanced. Indeed, in these mémoires he said that he did not believe that world history was directed by coincidence. See e.g. Pirenne



Lyon added that after the First World War Pirenne paid much more attention to individuals and accidental events than to collective movements. Both Dhondt and Lyon may have engaged in wishful thinking for ideological reasons; Dhondt may have found Pirenne too much to the right; Lyon probably considered some of Pirenne's writing too much to the left.

This position is rather difficult to prove decisively since there are few articles from Pirenne's early career which address methodology. He only systematically began to write on method after he had become famous in the Anglo-Saxon world. However, if his formative connection to the German Historical School of Economics – which he continued to admire throughout his career – is taken into consideration, it is likely that Pirenne held a nuanced view on using concepts in economic and social history from the very beginning. If we analyse the works of Pirenne from the start of his scholarly production, it is clear that he had already begun nuancing causal relationships. The fact that he used concepts such as 'class' more often does not contradict this position (see below). Lyon used Pirenne's *Réflexions d'un solitaire* to 'prove' that Pirenne had changed his position. However, we can clearly see that even in 1917, when these 'reflections' were written, he was still influenced by the 'historical school' in his opposition to starting with the present and working backwards to explain economic developments of the past (e.g., Pirenne, 1917, 194). When Pirenne wrote about the possible role of coincidence and contingency in history, he was always nuanced.<sup>17</sup> One example comes from his *Réflexions* and can illustrate this:

"Yet again, not exaggerating the impact of events at court or extra-marital affairs, what could Spain have done without the resources of the New World? And what could she have been able to do if those two natural states, France and England, were not there to stop her? In acting for themselves, as in the Boniface VIII affair, they acted for the world" (*Ibid.*, 212).

Many other similar examples can be found in these notes. The same is true for the role of individual behaviour. His 1917 writings are anything but a plea to emphasise the role of individual behaviour as can be read in this quote:

"I think that it is necessary to consider it differently, that is to imagine from the beginning that one is dealing with human groups with identical essences, but whose actions are modified by circumstances: geographical position, climate, economic

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(1917, p. 187-188, 212-213, 215, 233) "mais encore une fois, n'exagérons pas la portée des événements de cour et d'alcôve malgré les mariages..."

<sup>17</sup> The remarks of Brice Lyon, who edited the *Réflexions*, are completely misleading, as he mainly quotes from only half of Pirenne's notes (maybe hoping that Pirenne was less nuanced than he really was) (Lyon, 1997, 293)

situation, differing social order (density of population, class relations, etc.) proximity and influence of other peoples, and religion. The alleged influences of race and nationality ought to be carefully disregarded. It might happen that in looking for everything to be explained by purely human causes, an inexplicable residue remains. It is then time to see whether it is necessary to involve those factors which, if you had introduced them in the beginning, would have falsified the calculations by giving a predetermined value to an unknown factor. It is left behind like the actions of key figures which also have to be methodically reduced to the minimum. This is to say that if one can fall back on the general, then it does not belong to science but to generality. Until now, it is usually done the opposite way" (*Ibid.*, 192-193).

Even before the World War, he warned against the blind application of sociological theory. In 1897 he wrote that using a sociological approach might lead not to sociology, but to "a reintroduction of arbitrary historical philosophy" (Pirenne, 1897, 7).

But does this mean that World War I did not influence Pirenne as has been suggested so many times? The war did influence him but only to a certain extent. The fact that so many of his former German intellectual friends and sources of inspiration had chosen to collaborate actively with the German *Reich* and that he himself became a prisoner of war impacted his ideas tremendously. Both Lamprecht and Von Schmoller signed the famous "Manifesto of the Ninety-Three", which caused a rupture in their personal relationships with Pirenne.<sup>18</sup> After the war he focused much of his energies on challenging the 'nationalist view', as well as racist and Pan-Germanic ideas during and after the war (Violante, 1997). However, in his lectures after the war he still concentrated on the importance of comparative history, a method which he had learned from the very inspirational sources he later rejected. In his reflections he repeatedly emphasised that economic attitudes were and should not be confined within national borders (Pirenne, 1917, 201; Pirenne 1933). However, his methodological ideas do not show much change, despite what others have argued. His thoughts were never 'radical', never purely 'Marxist', and never purely 'liberal'. He never renounced the role of interdisciplinarity, or the importance of sociology and psychology for

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<sup>18</sup> The "Manifesto of the Ninety-Three" is the name commonly given to a 1914 proclamation signed by prominent German scientists, scholars and artists, in which they declared their unequivocal support of German military actions in early World War I. (It was signed by others, such as Lujo Brentano, the other economist of the historic school, Ernst Haeckel the biologist, the theologian and church historian Adolf von Harnack, and the physicist Max Planck. For the entire list, see: [http://www.worldlingo.com/ma/enwiki/en/Manifesto\\_of\\_the\\_Ninety-Three](http://www.worldlingo.com/ma/enwiki/en/Manifesto_of_the_Ninety-Three) [20 June 2010]).

explaining historical events. His ideas and methodological principles after the war were just as nuanced as they had been during his educational period. At both times, his ideas conformed to the initial general "principles" of the (Young) German historical school. In the second stage of his career, it was the radicalisation of the ideas of many of this school's adherents that he particularly challenged. This radicalisation of many German economists developed from their critique of free market principles, which led them to favour forms of neo-mercantilism and finally to abandon "classical" economic principles completely (von Mises, 1969). Pirenne also criticised radicalism because it was based on racist ideas encouraged by (pseudo-)romantic and pseudo-interdisciplinary concepts, but he continued to defend their methodological principles with which he found nothing wrong. One visible change in his methodology is that before the war he could still agree with Lamprecht that it was 'the nation' which determined "l'esprit collectif ou objectif qui se manifeste dans chacun de nous" (the collective or objective spirit that manifests itself in each of us) (Pirenne, 1897, 6), while he rejected this notion after the war. In his methodological article defending the use of sociology and psychology, written in 1928 and published in 1933, he wrote:

"The comparative method alone can diminish racial, political, and national prejudices among historians..." (Pirenne, 1933, 444).

The war probably sharpened (but was not the origin of) Pirenne's focus on "comparative (after the war also and even more non-nationalistic) themes", such as the Pirenne thesis, which minimalised the role of Germanic invasions in the evolution of Western Europe (Violante, 1997).<sup>19</sup> In 1923, he even wrote an article dealing exclusively with this comparative and anti-nationalist point of view (Pirenne, 1923, 10).<sup>20</sup> However, this article also stemmed from his earlier thinking, because he had written a similar plea for the same methodology in 1898 (Pirenne, 1898, 11). Moreover, his increased focus on comparatism was certainly as much influenced by the progressions made within comparative sociology via the work of Emile Durkheim, which he did

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<sup>19</sup> However, the general idea of this thesis goes far back in Pirenne's career. See Dhondt (1979).

<sup>20</sup> "...We only come to scientific knowledge by comparison. We confine ourselves within the limits of national history..." See also Pirenne (1917, 192-193): "One chiefly has studied national history. The vices of this method are blindingly obvious. Here are some: 1. the danger of mistaking the general for the national (primitive Germanic constitution); 2. the danger of mistaking something that stems from chronologically different development for the national (aristocracy, democracy, etc.); 3. the danger of mistaking something borrowed for the national (gothic style), feudalism which is ...".

not yet quote in his 'réflexions', but had a major influence on the early 'Annales school' (Thompson, 2002, XIII). Another less striking change is perhaps that Pirenne became more 'positivist' in the sense that he seems to have made less use of psychological arguments, although he did not employ many in his early period either (while he had shown some sympathy for the method, for example, in his admiration for Lamprecht) (Pirenne, 1897). Moreover, since Lamprecht had not wanted to be associated with extreme positivism (Wils, 2005, 292), Pirenne was now distancing himself somewhat from the 'historical school of economics'. In his 1928 article he went even further when he argued that historical narrative was hypothetical and more reflective of the historian's perception than of reality, paving the way for post-modernism before its time (Pirenne, 1933). However, in the second part of his career Pirenne's ideas were also more influenced by sociology than by psychology.

Clearly further in-depth research is needed, especially into his surviving class notes, which might be more instructive as he would refer more explicitly to the ideas which influenced him<sup>21</sup> than in his work itself.<sup>22</sup> At this point, it seems that the alleged change in his methodological thinking in the course of his career did exist, but has been somewhat exaggerated. In his nuanced ideas about the use of models and theory, he was a child of late 19th-century economic tradition, and he largely retained this nuanced way of thinking. While those who had inspired him originally moved in a different direction, he retained his view that 'objective' historiography should not be dominated by any single theory, even though he was conscious that he was aiming at an illusory ideal. He believed that the highest degree of objectivity was attainable only through "comparative history", his chief focus during the latter part of his career. His great achievement was to bring these ideas, born within the field of economics and applied in the historical field, to the attention of most of the western academic world, along with economic (and social) history. The famous Annales school, which he inspired greatly, actually worked in the same "pluralistic" tradition, as did many of the most important economic historians of the second half of the 20th century.

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<sup>21</sup> The Pirenne archives are stored in the archives of the University of Brussels (ULB). Lyon (1974, 146) suggests that these class notes are available in the archives. A more systematic classification of these archives is under construction and will make systematic research in these archives possible in the near future. Currently, PhD research at the university of Ghent by Sarah Keymeulen based on these archives will certainly reveal more about this matter.

<sup>22</sup> Indeed, according to the traditions of his time, Pirenne quoted others' theories sparsely. In general, in many of his articles he made only a few footnotes.

## 2. PIRENNE'S CAUSAL METHODOLOGY, EXPLANATORY MODELS AND THE APPLICATION AND RECEPTION OF HIS IDEAS

In the previous section, we argued that as an economic and social historian Pirenne generally followed the principles of the German historical school of economics, which he had adopted during the final decades of the 19th century. He was therefore influenced by interdisciplinarity and theoretical concepts and somewhat sceptical of general explanations and models, denying that they had an absolute value and believing that they should be adapted according to space and time. We will now examine the way in which Pirenne explained economic and social change and the 'models' which influenced him. This will include an overview of how different schools of historians received his ideas, because this reception is linked with the position he is alleged to have taken on explaining changes and trends. Following the path of his masters in the field of economics, Pirenne dealt directly with the evolution of capitalism, and the studies he published on this theme offer clear evidence of his methodological, conceptual and ideological inspiration.

### 2.1. Pirenne's theory on the birth of capitalism: Smithian, Marxist or an early use of the 'New Institutional Economics' approach?

Many discussions on the origins of capitalism referred, especially until the 1980s but today there is a certain revival as we will see, to the "Pirenne thesis" – actually a compilation of two hypotheses – to the economic decay of (Western) Europe because of the rise of Islam in the seventh and eighth centuries (*Mohammed and Charlemagne*), and the rise of cities and a new merchant class beginning in the 11th and 12th centuries. Showing his talents as a comparative historian, in the first hypothesis Pirenne stressed the geographical presence or absence of capitalist-minded merchants bent on economic development, and linked this to political events and institutions. This theory was very influential until the 1970s/1980s, but lost much of its appeal as new evidence (especially archaeological) came to light.<sup>23</sup>

Pirenne's location of the birth of capitalism in the commercial renaissance of European towns beginning in the 11th century is still widely accepted

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<sup>23</sup>. See e.g. Verhulst (2002, 2-5, 103 ff.); see also Hodges and Whitehouse (1983).

among economic historians. He argued that the medieval European town had a special "generative" character, based on its corporative, communal organisation, which made it a capitalist nucleus with the capacity to dissolve feudal social relations (Merington, 1975). Thus the European towns' corporative autonomy and relatively open communal structure allowed them to "develop as autonomous worlds according to their own propensities" (Sweezy, 1978, 172). Just as the closing of the Mediterranean trade routes had been the key factor in the shift to an agrarian economy in the seventh through the ninth centuries, the reopening of long-distance trade in the 11th century – the counter-attack of Christianity against Islam – revived towns and markets (in Italy and Flanders) and broke down the rigid manorial system. Urban markets attracted agricultural production towards the towns. For this reason, long-distance trade and the new class of long-distance merchants did not originate from the local, rural economy (Polanyi, 1944, 60-65).

Analysing these theories, some historians still see Pirenne as a follower of Adam Smith (e.g., Green, 1993), as both shared the idea that commerce was important for the development of capitalism. However, we have seen that Pirenne himself disagreed with Adam Smith (see above). Why was this? Pirenne believed that the commercial shift to the West and the origin of towns was not merely the consequence of a 'universal' pattern of supply and demand. Nor was the origin of towns produced by market mechanisms. Cities did *not* owe their origin to market places, because markets also developed outside of the towns (cf. the Champagne fairs) (Pirenne, 1898). For the same reason the countryside did not play a fundamental role (e.g. for demand) in his theory of urban origins, but long-distance trade was rather the crucial core of urban development in the medieval period. In other words, merchants – not trade – made the towns. These merchants were escaping from the feudal (non-free) structures and sought free structures for activity and protection. In her evaluation of the debates on this transition, Ellen Meiksins Wood, following Brenner, places Pirenne's theory at the root of the "commercialisation model" (Meiksins Wood, 1999, 11-13 based on Brenner, 1976). In this model, capitalism emerged when the market was liberated from age-old constraints and opportunities for trade expanded. By arguing that commerce revived with the growth of cities and the liberation of merchants, Pirenne assumed that the embryonic cities were capitalist.

"This liberation of the urban economy, of commercial activity and mercantile rationality, accompanied by the inevitable improvements in techniques of production which evidently followed from the emancipation of trade, was apparently enough to account for the rise of capitalism" (Meiksins Wood, 1999, 13).

Pirenne actually analysed the merchant class itself as an 'institution' in the current sense of the word. The evolution towards freedom and democracy was embedded in the evolution of institutions. Institutions, such as merchant guilds, tolls, or mercantilism, played a huge role, either positive or negative, in the development of capitalism. We will later return to this anachronistic 'institutional' approach of Pirenne, another debt he owed to the German Historical School.

## 2.2. Pirenne, the origin and development of capitalism, and his alleged inspiration by Marxism

Pirenne's rather 'institutional' approach (more or less in the sense as the word is actually used today in the New Institutional Economics, see below) to commerce led some Marxists to integrate his theories into their class struggle analyses, while other Marxists rejected Pirenne's ideas because of his emphasis on commerce. The split is especially clear in the well-known debate between Maurice Dobb and Paul Sweezy during the 1940s and 1950s (and trailing off in the 1970s). Marxist scholars such as Maurice Dobb and Rodney Hilton denounced the 'external' model, and attributed the rise of capitalism to the primary feudal relationships between landlords and peasants and the introduction of market mechanisms into the British countryside.<sup>24</sup> Conversely, Paul Sweezy reiterated and extended the Pirenne thesis, by arguing that establishment of localised urban trading and trans-shipment centres based on long-distance trade set a process in motion that encouraged the growth of production for exchange, which existed in tension with the feudal principle of production for use. The debates took on a new intensity in the 1970s after Robert Brenner wrote articles defending a more extreme version of Dobb's approach (Aston & Philpin, 1987). He accused followers of Pirenne's commercialisation model, such as Sweezy, André Gunder Frank and Immanuel Wallerstein, of being "neo-Smithean" (an epitaph Pirenne would have hated!). Henri Pirenne's theories about the fate of the European economy after the Roman era have continued to be extremely tempting to historians with a structural and long-term focus. Fernand Braudel followed Pirenne's path as Braudel sketched capitalism perpetuating itself "through the

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<sup>24</sup>. Michael Postan made a similar evaluation of Pirenne's thesis of commercial expansion: "His thesis was, however, confined to trade, and trade, important as it may have been, was not the main economic activity of medieval men and women" (Postan, 1973, 4). In fact Pirenne was more concerned with (professional) traders than with trade.

ages" from its beginning in pre-Renaissance Europe (Braudel, 1992). Just as Pirenne had done, Braudel viewed the strength of the capitalist system to be its constant need to replenish capitalist 'stock' in order to maintain its adaptive and aggressive spirit of risk and innovation:

"The northern countries took over the place that earlier had so long and so brilliantly been occupied by the old capitalist centres of the Mediterranean. They invented nothing, either in technology or in business management. Amsterdam copied Venice, as London would subsequently copy Amsterdam ... What was involved ... was a shift in the centre of gravity of the world economy, for economic reasons that had nothing to do with the basic or secret nature of capitalism" (Braudel, 1977, 66-67).

Eric Mielants, a former student of Ghent University, rejuvenated the Pirenne thesis by arguing that the western European city states of the medieval era were nurseries of the emerging capitalist system, in which the western European merchant bourgeoisie was the critical player (Mielants, 2007).

Apart from his 'institutional' approach to capitalism, Pirenne also shared his beliefs in the lengthy evolution of capitalism and mass movements with Marxist historians and others who focused on structure and long-term developments. In a famous article on the stages of capitalism, he argued that the evolution towards capitalism did not follow a teleological course.

He developed his thesis on the stages of capitalism in an address he delivered at the International Congress of Historical Studies at London in April 1913. One year later the text was published in English and in French nearly simultaneously. Pirenne addressed the question of the pendulum of capitalism swinging between expansion and recession. He connected times of expansion with economic freedom and times of recession with economic regulation (Bademli, 2009, *passim*). In three periods of expansion, territorial and economic growth went hand in hand. During the first expansion period, the crusades and colonisation of the Mediterranean islands stimulated commerce. The discovery of the Americas triggered the second period of expansion. When some of the African and Asian countries were colonised and pulled into the system following the Industrial Revolution, the third period of expansion started. Recession ensued when entrepreneurs decided against taking further risks. After working for a long time and accumulating enough capital, they invested their capital in landed property and began collecting rent from their land. They became aristocrats, a new social class. Once entrepreneurs withdrew from business, their hegemonic power declined, until others took their place (Pirenne, 1914, 515).



The Ghent historian Jan Dhondt called Pirenne's argument on the recurrence of capitalism "l'œuvre la plus remarquable qu'ait laissée Pirenne" (the most remarkable work Pirenne left behind) (Dhondt, 1976, 89). Dhondt wrote that Pirenne gave several lectures on the theme of "liberty and regulation" in the history of capitalism between 1911 and 1924. After 1924 he never again addressed this topic, and never developed it in a more extensive way. This Pirenne thesis evoked little resonance in continental historiography.<sup>25</sup> Lucien Febvre applauded the audacity of the concept and suggested some general afterthoughts (Febvre, 1946, 141-142, our translation):

"... one of the great benefits of Pirenne's remarkable theory is that it allows us to demolish one of the most indigestible and confusing notions in our conception of social evolution: the notion of the middle class. Across history, there is no compact, homogeneous middle class complete in itself".

Fernand Braudel showed less enthusiasm (Braudel, 1992, 478-482). Pirenne's theory "concerns the periodisation of the social history of capitalism, which is still worth some consideration," Braudel wrote, agreeing with Pirenne's effort to describe capitalism as a successive, repeated series of movements. However, Braudel wrote that Pirenne's notion

"bypasses conjunctural explanations, suggesting rather a recurrent social pattern which can be confirmed in the context of individual or rather family behaviour" (*Ibid.*, 478).

According to Braudel, the fact that merchant families do not appear to have survived more than two or three generations and abandoned trade for less risky and more prestigious activities does not indicate that they withdrew from the capitalist sphere. Social rhythms in capitalism were directed at social groups and not at individual families as such:

*"So it was possible to advance by stages within capitalism: a merchant could become a banker, a banker become a financier, and both become capitalist rentiers – thus surviving as capitalists for several generations"* (*Ibid.* 480, original italics).

Advancing by stages within the world of capital was only possible if society offered a choice:

"the reasons for eclipse and replacement are indeed at this level explained by economic change".

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<sup>25</sup> References in non-Anglo-Saxon works are rare (e.g., Béraud & Changeur, 2006, 131-132).

Thanks to the reprints of the original article in English and the English translation of Fernand Braudel's works, Anglo-Saxon social scientists took up Pirenne's stage theory of capitalism more enthusiastically. Most scholars who analysed the history of capitalism over the long term, initiating its development long before the Industrial Revolution, included Pirenne in their pantheon of famous sources of inspiration. As Richard Hartwell (1969, 15) summarised:

"These historians recognised two phenomena – the rise of capitalism and the Industrial Revolution – but reckoned the latter to be a later stage in the development of the former, and were therefore more interested in the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist economy than from early to industrial capitalism. And although they distinguished earlier commercial and financial capitalisms from industrial capitalism, it was only a distinction of degree, usually measured by capital intensity".

"The phenomena of the 16th century are reproduced," wrote Pirenne of the 19th century, "but with tenfold intensity". In one of his earlier articles Robert Brenner (1972, 361) labelled Pirenne's 'generalisation' as oversimplified. He wrote:

"Nevertheless, Pirenne did try to understand economic change in terms of the men who actually carried it out. In this respect, his approach can provide a necessary corrective to the economic determinism which has characterised many more recent publications of economic development".

Therefore, Pirenne clearly inspired historians with a structural and long-term focus, including Marxists. But how 'Marxist' was he himself? Some have written that Pirenne had Marxist influences.<sup>26</sup> Verhulst made this claim fairly recently in his conclusion to the proceedings of the conference dedicated to Pirenne in 1989 (Verhulst, 1986). The charge is partially correct but much exaggerated, to a certain extent due to the fact that Pirenne used terminology thought to be exclusively Marxist, such as 'classes', in his articles. For Pirenne and many of the historians and economists who were his contemporaries this was a general term to design a social group. All historians and economists used this concept from the end of the 18th century until the beginning of the 20th century, including Adam Smith, the 'father of

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<sup>26</sup>. According to Prevenier (2010, 492): "It was Pirenne's acquaintance with Karl Lamprecht (which) led to a temporary flirtation with Marxist analyses from circa 1900 on". Certainly Marxism influenced Pirenne much earlier, during his stay in Germany in the 1880s and his contact with the 'German historical school of economics' there and later; see above.

free trade', in his "Wealth of Nations".<sup>27</sup> Moreover, in this early period there was still a regular dialogue between the neo-classical school and (neo-) Marxists, which only came to an end after the Bolshevik revolution and certainly after World War II. We doubt that Pirenne ever read Marx's works. In his *Réflexions*, Marx is mentioned only once (Pirenne, 1917, 181). Indirectly, of course, Pirenne was influenced by Marxism, again through the German historical school, which was as open to these ideas as it was to others. It is well known that Pirenne showed a certain respect for Hegelian ideas as well. Karl Bücher, whose works Pirenne knew well, is sometimes labelled a Marxist. Sombart was certainly a Marxist during one period of his life, but Pirenne challenged Sombart's work seriously, just as he questioned the ideas of Max Weber (*Ibid.*, 213, in which he made both Weber and Sombart look ridiculous). Lamprecht was influenced by Marx as well, but Lamprecht misread and confused Marx's ideas (Chickering, 1993, 121). The fact that most followers of this school favoured certain types of guided economies brought them closer to Marxism. In passing, it is interesting to note that Pirenne used ethical arguments to critique certain social groups and he was not entirely the 'bourgeois' right-wing 'liberal' historian (Prevenier, 2010, 497) that some have claimed, since he clearly did not favour untamed capitalism. Thus he called the church a typical medieval-feudal institution that did not fight poverty. Moreover he was convinced that the first capitalist gains were based on fraud...<sup>28</sup>

### 2.3. Pirenne, Malthus and quantitative history

To which degree did Pirenne think that Malthusianism was an underlying motive for (under)development in history? We know that he was very much in favour of historical demography. He even published some interesting work on it (Pirenne 1903a, 1903b – on Ypres). However, nowhere in his work have we found decisive evidence that the population movement was a '*primum movens*' in history. Pirenne may have been too much of an 'economist' to incorporate the Malthusian model into his thinking, just as this model has always been preferred by those outside the field of economics (Young, 2008).

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<sup>27</sup>. See e.g. Adam Smith's "The Wealth of nations", published in many copies on Google books.

<sup>28</sup>. "La plupart des grandes fortunes au XIII siècle ont été accumulées par fraude..." (The majority of the great fortunes of the 13th century were accumulated by fraud) (Pirenne, 1917, 180). See also Pirenne (1917, 180) and compare with Prevenier (2010, 497).

For him, demography was primarily a tool to study social family structures. Here he was as well inspired by the 'German historical school' and especially by Carl Bücher, whom Pirenne called the father of scientific historical demography on the basis of Bücher's study of Frankfurt (Pirenne, 1903a). A short piece on the nature of the proletariat in his *Réflexions* is typical:

"Ils ne proviennent pas de la surpopulation. Ils ne sont en rien d'ailleurs un objet de mépris, au contraire" (They did not arise from over-population. They were in no case, however, a subject of contempt, on the contrary) (Pirenne, 1917, 237).

In addition, the influence of Malthusian thought on economics and especially on economic history was quite limited in Pirenne's period of active scholarship.<sup>29</sup>

In this connection, it must be said that Pirenne did not use intensely quantitative data. Although intellectually inferior, his contemporary Belgian colleague Van Houtte published much more in this respect (e.g. the first useful price series for Old Régime Belgium). Pirenne's interests (and those of the German historical school) were more focused on seeking out those incentives which made commerce and economics possible or impossible than in temporary fluctuations of prices and wages. Typically, he paid scant attention to the works of François Simiand (1873-1935), who many consider the founder of price history in France. However, his 'positivist' and multidisciplinary orientation, which received a certain boost after the turn of the century, led him to publish a short article on statistical documentation (Pirenne, 1900).

#### 2.4. Pirenne and new tendencies in economic history: the 'New Institutional Economics'

One of the relatively new tendencies in economic history, originating from the field of economics, is the 'New Institutional Economics', a school which received three Nobel prizes since 1991 (Ronald Coase, Douglas North, Oliver Williamson). This school focuses on understanding the roles of the evolutionary process and institutions in shaping economic behaviour, firmly in connection with classical economics.<sup>30</sup> According to this school, transaction

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<sup>29</sup> It became only very popular from the 1930s, with the works of W. Abel and others.

<sup>30</sup> Institutions are "the humanly devised constraints that shape human action" (North, 1999, 3).

costs (all the direct and indirect costs of trade in commodities) determine commerce and economics. These ideas have become very popular in economic history, especially through Douglas North's work (see *inter alia* the studies of J.-L. van Zanden, B.J.P. van Bavel and many others) who refers to Pirenne directly (e.g., North, 1995, 13):

"Pirenne's story is one of the creation of the institutional infrastructure of democratic order within thriving town economics, which was gradually undermined by guild restrictions and conflict between patrician and lesser citizenry over control of the polity".

We have suggested before that many of Pirenne's ideas would fit relatively well within this theoretical framework, because we are convinced that most of his conceptual and methodological ideas were the result of his contacts with the German historical school. In his study of this new economic school, Pearson contended that there was a clear resemblance between "transaction cost economics" and the ideas of many members of the German historical school one century earlier (Pearson, 2002, 30). Pirenne did emphasise constraints on economic development and, indirectly, the impact of "externalities" (see above). However, he probably would have found many of these current studies too imbued with neoclassical ("universal") theory, too abstract, too distant from the sources, and too detached from the historical context.

## 2.5. Pirenne and new tendencies in economic history: 'Global History'

Since the 1990s, many economic and cultural historians have turned away from a nationalistic and Eurocentric approach to global history. The realm of global economic history and world-systems theory is in many aspects a tribute to Pirenne's work. The core of these 'global ideas' goes back to Pirenne's interest in comparative history, which probably increased after World War I.<sup>31</sup>

Not surprisingly, those who have taken up the Pirenne-Sweezy arguments are mostly 'circulationists' who stress the importance of the long-distance (later: global) markets for capitalist expansion. The most explicit use and

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<sup>31</sup>. According to Chickering (1993, 268 ff.), Karl Lamprecht was a great promoter of world history. Of course, international or supranational comparison was also a theme favoured by all followers of the German historical school of economics.

elaboration of Pirenne's pendulum of capitalist development can be found in Giovanni Arrighi's *Long Twentieth Century* (Arrighi, 1994). In this book Arrighi deconstructs the political-economic evolution of the capitalist world-system into a succession of successful alliances or political exchanges between governmental and business agencies. They supported a series of systemic cycles of accumulation: the Genoese, Dutch, British, and American long centuries (Abbeles & Vanhaute, 2011). Each cycle had a phase of material expansion followed by a phase of financial expansion. This description of capitalism as an "alternation of opposite kinds of organisational structures" resembles Pirenne's pattern of alternate phases of economic freedom and economic regulation:

*"A pendulum-like movement in the evolution of historical capitalism as world system (our italics) was first noticed by Pirenne"* (Arrighi, 1994, 86-87, 243-244, quote 243).

"As Pirenne suggested, each transition to a new stage of capitalist development has involved a change in leadership in world-scale processes of capital accumulation. And as Braudel suggested, each change of the guard at the commanding heights of the capitalist-world economy reflected the 'victory' of a 'new' region over an 'old' region" (*Ibid.*, 332).

As scientific heirs to the 'circulationist' school and the Braudelian thesis of hegemonic cycles within *"une économie-monde"*, world-systems scholars in the realm of global economic history render high honours to the works of Henri Pirenne. In more mainstream modern textbooks about economic theory, global studies, or world history, Pirenne is almost always absent (see e.g., Samuels, Biddle, & David, 2007; Szirmai, 2004; Manning, 2003). Pirenne never engaged in the universal or civilisational histories of Spengler, Wells, or Toynbee, which were well-known in Pirenne's time. This is striking (Manning, 2003, 24-36) because of his life-long interest in the writings of philosophical (Hegel), positivist, and interdisciplinary (Comte, Lamprecht) historians, social scientists and economists (of the German School), from whom he learned the advantages of focusing on long-term change and nuanced ideas about patterns of 'progress'. The explanation could be that Pirenne attached his views especially to the scientists he studied in the first half of his career.

Nonetheless, his legacy in contemporary global economic history is obvious. In the early 21st century, global history is experiencing a thorough process of re-evaluation and 'rethinking' (Vries, 2009). Standard explanations of the 'Rise of the West' as a predominant internal story, be it of a Smithian-Weberian (market mechanisms and cultural peculiarity, cf. David Landes) or

of a Marxian nature (distribution of power, Robert Brenner) have been seriously challenged by new, non-Eurocentric narratives of a "Great Divergence" (Kenneth Pomeranz). This change of perspective is grounded in a more systemic analysis of space (world regions) and time (systemic cycles) (Arrighi, 2007). As Crossley has stressed in a recent overview, Pirenne's interpretation of space (the interaction of two world regions, the European and the Islamic world) and time (phases of capitalism) remains one of the first examples of historical systems theory. Pirenne placed the impetus of European change outside Europe, thus triggering an inversion of the historical geography

"that most European historians found incontrovertible" (Crossley, 2008, 85-89, quote 87).<sup>32</sup>

"The Islamic empire's economy and the local economies of Europe interacted in such a way as to transform Europe itself, which in turn initiated a series of changes that contributed to the later destruction of the Islamic empire" (*Ibid.*, 85-89, quote 88).

For the last few decades, these 'Pirennean' ideas of dynamic but unequal interaction between civilisations<sup>33</sup> and the need for more expansive theories of historical change on a global scale have inspired and will continue to inspire successive generations of world-systems analysts and global historians alike.

### 3. TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS

At the launch of the new journal "*Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*", Lucien Febvre wrote that at the turn of the 20th century history as a science was in crisis because many younger scholars could not satisfy their 'need for reality' in history, and so turned away from social sciences (Burke, 1972, 1-10). With the emergence of economic history as a separate field, a counter-movement was born in late-19th-century Germany. The new 'German historical school' made economic history a required discipline within economics. It was largely through Pirenne that this movement made an impact in the field of history and its ideas spread throughout the rest of Western Europe. Although the German historical school lost much of its importance after the

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<sup>32</sup>. It is likely that the 'global' ideas of Pirenne increased after the turn of the century and especially after WWI (see above).

<sup>33</sup>. One of the most eloquent defenders of this historical model before 'European hegemony' is Janet Abu-Lughod (1989).

First World War and disappeared almost completely, economic history has survived within the field of history.

Initially the 'German historical school', which Pirenne explored during his period as a student, adopted nuanced and integrated theories (in form and tendency), combining other social sciences and history, with a positivist, 'source-oriented', structuralist and critical-erudite attitude. This attitude determined Pirenne's way of thinking and methodology during his entire career, although, after the turn of the century, he reacted strongly against the excrescences of this school (applied economics, nationalistic and even racist tendencies), which were actually contradictory to its earlier ideas.

This 'structurally-oriented' and at the same time nuanced 'basis' of Pirenne's thinking ensured that his theories and works have been adopted by many traditions and types of historians to the present day. The emphasis he placed on trade appealed to some neo-classical economists, even while his aversion to 'unchangeable' models made him less popular in the ultra-liberal – in the European sense of the word – period from the 1970s to the 1990s. In the 1950s and 1960s, Marxists and structural historians used Pirenne's structural, long-term and stage-oriented views. His ideas continue to fit well into new historiographical trends. We have shown that because he believed that economic and social conditions evolved within 'institutions', he may be considered to a certain extent as a predecessor of the 'New Institutional Economics', which has become popular with historians in the last few decades. The supra-national and comparative approach he defended especially after World War I also meant that he is relevant to the recent field of 'global history' as well. The popularity of the 'phoenix' Pirenne is only diminishing because the data on which his theories were based have gradually been overturned by new and more modern research.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> We are very grateful to Sarah Keymeulen (Ghent University) who provided us with some interesting data when she was preparing the exhibition at the Ghent University library on Pirenne's life and work. The exhibition coincided with the conference at which this article was first presented.



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## **Henri Pirenne en economische en sociale modellen: invloeden, methodologie en receptie**

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### SAMENVATTING

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Behalve met het volume van zijn werk heeft Pirennes grote bekendheid ook en vooral te maken met de manier waarop hij historisch onderzoek deed. In

dit artikel wordt onderzocht wat het originele was van zijn methode en waar hij zijn inspiratie haalde inzake zijn economisch-historisch werk. Was hij door de economische theorievorming van de negentiende en begin twintigste eeuw beïnvloed? En zo ja, op welke manier? In een tweede deel wordt nagegaan op welke wijze zijn werk en zijn methodologie achteraf zelf werden gebruikt in de economische geschiedschrijving. We tonen aan dat zijn historiografische methodologie van in het begin zeer duidelijk geïnspireerd was door de Duitse economische school die men aanduidt als de "economisch-historische school". Dit is niet verwonderlijk want hij kreeg zijn historische opleiding voor een groot deel in Duitsland en dat land was op het einde van de negentiende eeuw het Mekka van de economie als wetenschap en tevens de bakermat van de economisch-historische geschiedschrijving. Voordien lag de nadruk bijna exclusief op politieke en institutionele geschiedenis. Pirenne is gedurende geheel zijn carrière door deze tendens in de economische wetenschap geïnspireerd gebleven. Deze Duitse School bestond uit economen die zeer historisch te werk gingen in hun analyses van economische tendensen. De school reageerde tegen de vermeende algemeen geldende wetmatigheden zoals die door Smith, Ricardo, Mill of door neomarxisten naar voren werden geschoven. Volgens deze school konden wetmatigheden niet overal en in alle perioden dezelfde zijn. Modellen zijn nuttig – Pirenne was er zeker niet tegen – maar alles dient gecontextualiseerd te worden en grondige historische analyse is dus nodig om de verschillende snelheden van de economie in diverse landen te begrijpen. Bovendien was deze school voorstander van een grote interdisciplinariteit en comparatief onderzoek. Al deze inzichten heeft Pirenne overgenomen en hij is aan deze principes trouw gebleven tot het einde van zijn carrière. Hij had bovendien het voordeel een goede bronnenanalist te zijn (wat hij uit de Franse historiografie had overgenomen) en bovendien was hij een schitterend historicus. Om die redenen kon hij zijn vroegere inspiratoren zoals Karl Bücher en Gustav Von Schmöller inzake analyse gemakkelijk de loef afsteken en ook bekritisieren ook al bouwde hij vaak verder op thema's die al door hen waren aangesneden. Zijn zin voor nuance en ongelooft in wetmatigheden is dus niet het gevolg van zijn gevangenschap tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog zoals vaak werd beweerd. De grote betekenis van Pirenne ligt dan ook in het feit dat hij de brug geslagen heeft tussen dat soort genuanceerde geschiedschrijving: eerst naar Frankrijk (de *Annales*) en later naar de Angelsaksische wereld toe.

Mede door deze genuanceerde denkwijze werd het werk van Pirenne na zijn dood door de meest diverse economische modelbouwers in hun analyses betrokken, van de neomarxistische tot de neosmithiaanse historici. Vanaf de

jaren 1980 verminderde zijn populariteit omdat vele van zijn opvattingen op empirische basis voorbijgestreefd waren. Hij wordt echter ten dele terug heropgevestigd door de populariteit van twee relatief recente tendensen in de historiografie. Opnieuw heeft een tendens uit de economische wetenschap grote gevolgen op de economische geschiedschrijving: de *New Institutional Economics* die wijst op het belang van instituties voor de transactiekosten en de economische groei. Die instituties zijn nu ook eenmaal historisch gegroeid, de reden waarom de aanhangers van die school het historisme van Pirenne herontdekken. Tenslotte is er het groeiend belang van de wereldgeschiedenis. Zij beroepen zich vooral op het comparatieve luik van Pirennes historiografie. Pirenne is blijkbaar een eeuwige feniks.

### **Henri Pirenne et les modèles économiques et sociaux: influences, méthodologie et réception**

ERIK THOEN  
ERIC VANHAUTE

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#### RÉSUMÉ

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La réputation élevée de Pirenne n'est pas seulement liée au volume de son travail, mais aussi et surtout à son approche de la recherche historique. Cet article s'intéresse à sa méthode originale et à ses principales sources d'inspiration pour son travail économique-historique. Était-il influencé par la théorie économique du dix-neuvième et du début du vingtième siècle? Et si oui, de quelle façon? Une seconde partie analyse la façon dont son travail et sa méthodologie ont été utilisés par la suite dans l'historiographie économique. Nous avons pu prouver que sa méthodologie historiographique a été clairement inspirée dès le départ par l'école économique allemande désignée sous le nom d'école 'économico-historique'. Cela n'a rien d'étonnant, car il a suivi la majeure partie de sa formation historique en Allemagne et ce pays était à la fin du dix-neuvième siècle la Mecque de l'économie comme science et le berceau de l'historiographie économique-historique. Auparavant, l'accent était mis presque exclusivement sur l'histoire politique et institutionnelle. En fin de compte, il est resté inspiré par cette tendance dans les sciences

économiques tout au long de sa carrière. Cette école allemande se composait d'économistes qui adoptaient une approche hautement historique dans leurs analyses des tendances économiques. L'école a réagi contre les récursivités prétendues générales, comme celles avancées par Smith, Ricardo, Mill ou des néo-marxistes. Selon cette école, les récursivités ne pouvaient pas être identiques partout et durant toutes les périodes. Les modèles sont nécessaires – Pirenne en était convaincu – mais tout doit être contextualisé et une analyse historique approfondie est donc nécessaire pour comprendre les multiples vitesses de l'économie dans différents pays. En outre, cette école était en faveur d'une grande interdisciplinarité et d'une étude comparative. Pirenne a repris toutes ces idées et est resté fidèle à ces principes jusqu'à la fin de sa carrière. Il avait également l'avantage d'être un excellent analyste des sources (ce qu'il avait repris de l'historiographie française) et historien. Il a donc pu facilement damer le pion à et critiquer ses anciens inspirateurs comme Karl Bücher et Gustav Von Schmöller en matière d'analyse tout en poursuivant le développement de thèmes qu'ils avaient déjà abordés dans les détails. Son sens de la nuance et son incroyance dans les récursivités ne sont donc pas le résultat de sa détention durant la Première Guerre mondiale, comme souvent affirmé. Il est donc important de souligner que Pirenne a jeté un pont entre cette sorte d'historiographie nuancée dans un premier temps en France (les *Annales*) puis dans le monde anglo-saxon.

En raison de cette démarche de pensée nuancée, notamment, le travail de Pirenne a été intégré après sa mort dans les analyses des concepteurs de modèle les plus divers, des néo-marxistes aux *neo-Smithians*. Dès les années 1980, sa popularité a commencé à diminuer vu que bon nombre de ses conceptions étaient dépassées sur le plan empirique. Il a toutefois été repêché en partie par la popularité de deux tendances relativement récentes dans l'historiographie. Une fois de plus, une tendance des sciences économiques exerce de lourdes conséquences sur l'historiographie économique: la *New Institutional Economics* qui souligne l'importance des institutions pour les frais de transaction et la croissance économique. Et ces institutions ont évolué avec le temps et sont en évolution constante... Il est donc évident que les adeptes de cette école redécouvrent l'historisme de Pirenne. Sans oublier enfin l'importance croissante de l'histoire mondiale. Ils se réfèrent essentiellement au volet comparatif de l'historiographie de Pirenne. Pirenne est apparemment un phœnix ancestral.