

RESEARCH NOTE

“Vagrancy” as an Adaptive Strategy: The Duchy of Brabant, 1767–1776

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SUMMARY: The study builds on a representative sample of more than 2,500 court cases against vagrants in the Duchy of Brabant between 1767 and 1776. Individual evidence on social background and whereabouts has been quantitatively processed to provide qualitative insight into the “why” and “how” of their movements. Transcending the judicial framework and historical and historiographical biases, these “vagrants” are shown to have displayed various patterns of mobility that fit intelligibly within the wider framework of migration history and theory. By exposing the varied scope of the concept of “vagrancy” in meaning and policy practice, the article argues against its continued ubiquitous (and often dismissive) use in historiography as if it refers meaningfully to a distinct marginal social category, which not only often reiterates the biases of a distorted elite view, but also obstructs a more unified and insightful understanding of patterns of migration in history.

Vagrants by definition have a bad reputation. The concept of vagrancy is penal and pejorative in origin and use, figuring prominently as it did in repressive legislation from the late Middle Ages, throughout the early modern era – and beyond. For all its prominence, however, the precise meaning of the term was rather vague and variable, coloured more by loose (but powerful) semantic associations than can be encompassed by any adequate definition. Recurrently, vagrants were regarded as “idlers”, i.e. those “not working”, at least as seen from the perspective of the elites. They were also usually assumed to be poor, and begging was often associated with vagrancy. Habitually, they were considered “footloose” to an important extent as well, and seen as lacking certain sedentary ties.

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Assumptions of criminal, marginal, or antisocial behaviour typically underpinned the general image. Its many semantic associations conferred on the crime of vagrancy a wide scope, applicable and applied to the domain of labour market regulation, poor laws, relief organization, and settlement and migration legislation alike, with emphases varying through space and time. In its various guises, the concept of vagrancy had a portmanteau function in defining and addressing the “social problems” with which early modern elites found themselves confronted, and was as such sometimes perceived as nothing less than an overall moral threat to the very foundations of society.¹

Vagrants have retained much of this bad reputation in historiography. The available sources are invariably negative and hostile, situated almost exclusively in the sphere of repression that pertains to the traditional domain of historians of crime. The “criminalistic” discourse of the sources was retained in much of the older historiography, often preoccupied with constructing pathological explanations of crime and deviance, of which vagrants were considered exponents *par excellence*.² Although innovative in many ways, most recent studies relating to vagrancy are in the domain of crime history, and have concentrated mostly on the more sensational examples of “rogue bands”.³ Both the nature of the sources and the specific

1. For an analysis of the conspicuous and wide-ranging semantic history of the term “vagrancy” in legislation and discourse from the late Middle Ages onwards, see Leo Lucassen, “Eternal Vagrants? State Formation, Migration, and Travelling Groups in Western Europe, 1350-1914”, in Jan Lucassen and Leo Lucassen (eds), *Migration, Migration History, History: Old Paradigms and New Perspectives* (Bern, 1997), pp. 225-252; and also Bronislaw Geremek, “Criminalité, vagabondage, pauperisme: La marginalité à l’aube des temps modernes”, *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 21 (1974), pp. 337-375. The versatility of the concept in relation to changing preoccupations in the domain of social policy also appears from Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, “Policing the Early Modern Proletariat, 1450-1850”, in David Levine (ed.), *Proletarianization and Family History* (Orlando, FL, 1984), pp. 163-228; A.L. Beier, *Masterless Men: The Vagrancy Problem in England 1560-1640* (London, 1985), pp. 8-13, 171-173; Paul Slack, *The English Poor Law, 1531-1782* (Basingstoke, 1990), pp. 29-34, 38-39; Robert Humphreys, *No Fixed Abode: A History of Responses to the Roofless and the Rootless in Britain* (Basingstoke [etc.], 1999). A fine example of semantic confusion is Jacques Depauw, “Pauvres, pauvres mendiants, mendiants valides ou vagabonds? Les hésitations de la législation royale”, *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 21 (1974), pp. 401-418.

2. See, among others, Christian Paultre, *De la répression de la mendicité et du vagabondage en France sous l’ancien régime* (Paris, 1906); Frank Aydelotte, *Elizabethan Rogues and Vagabonds* (Oxford, 1913), and overtly racist: Robert Ritter, *Ein Menschenschlag. Erbärztliche und erbgeschichtliche Untersuchungen über die - durch 10 Geschlechterfolgen erforschten - Nachkommen von “Vagabunden, Jannern und Räubern”* (Leipzig, 1937).

3. For instance, the works of Carsten Küther, *Räuber und Gauner in Deutschland: Das organisierte Bandenwesen im 18. und frühen 19. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 1976); Carsten Küther, *Menschen auf der Strasse. Vagierende Unterschichten in Bayern, Franken und Schwaben in der zweiten Hälfte des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen, 1983); Ernst Schubert, *Arme Leute. Bettler und Gauner im Franken des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Neustadt a.d. Aisch, 1990); Florike Egmond, *Underworlds: Organized Crime in the Netherlands, 1650-1800* (Cambridge, 1993).

interests of their principal students help to explain why vagrants, when studied, have typically appeared in historiography as marginal groups at the fringes of society, if not as asocial or even antisocial “underworlds”, characterized by deviant norms and criminal behaviour.⁴

Beier’s work on Elizabethan vagrants – looming large in the hearts and minds of contemporary English elites – represented an important break away from “criminal” and “marginal” approaches, in identifying the bulk of these “wandering masterless men” as young men simply looking for work, brought on the road by processes of proletarianization and guided by the spatial dynamics of the labour market of the time.⁵ Yet, studies consciously transcending the criminal framework of vagrancy have been generally rare and, at best, descriptive and largely anecdotal.⁶ Overall, there has been little interaction between studies of vagrancy and recent developments in the flourishing field of migration history. Each take place in as yet strongly separated fields of historical practice, dominated by historians of crime and social historians respectively, among whom differences in historical tradition, interest, approach, sources, and methodology seem to hinder substantial academic interchange.

The generally “marginal” image of vagrants, in turn, probably helps to explain why migration historians, on their side, have tended to devote rather little attention to them, and in doing so have to a certain extent perpetuated some of the negative imagery. When reference is made to vagrants at all, it is often in a sidelong manner, as the more marginal, poor, unsuccessful, aimless, and hopeless counterparts to the actual group being studied, i.e. “normal migrants”. If not portrayed in criminal terms, vagrants emerge as, at best, a wrecked and wretched underclass, the

4. An excellent critical literature survey on the negative and often “marginalizing” and “criminalizing” treatment of vagrants in historiography is Leo Lucassen, “A Blind Spot: Migratory and Travelling Groups in Western European Historiography”, *International Review of Social History*, 38 (1993), pp. 209–235.

5. A.L. Beier, “Vagrants and the Social Order in Elizabethan England”, *Past and Present*, 64 (1974), pp. 3–29; Beier, *Masterless Men*.

6. And are typically undertaken in the context of local historiography and/or in extension of (and secondary to) the historiography of institutions, with the treatment of vagrants often limited to descriptions of social profile characteristics, see for instance Armand Deroisy, “Aspects du vagabondage dans le plat-pays de Brabant dans la deuxième moitié du XVIIIe siècle”, *Revue du droit pénal et de criminologie*, 3 (1957), pp. 331–347; Robert Liris, “Mendicité et vagabondage en Basse-Auvergne à la fin du XVIIIe siècle”, *Revue d’Auvergne*, 79 (1965), pp. 65–78; P. Crépillon, “Un ‘gibier des prévôts’: Mendicants et vagabonds au XVIIIe siècle entre la Vire et la Dives, 1720–1789”, *Annales de Normandie*, 17 (1967), pp. 223–252; Pierre Goubert, *Cléo parmi les hommes. Recueil d’articles* (Paris [etc.], 1976), pp. 265–278. With more room for analysis: Jean-Pierre Gutton, *La société et les pauvres. L’exemple de la généralité de Lyon, 1534–1789* (Paris, 1970), pp. 123–211; Véronique Boucheron, “La montée du flot des errants de 1760 à 1789 dans la généralité d’Alençon”, *Annales de Normandie*, 21 (1971), pp. 55–86; Jean-Pierre Gutton, *L’état et la mendicité dans la première moitié du XVIIIe siècle. Auvergne, Beaujolais, Forez, Lyonnais* (Lyon, 1973), pp. 178–200.

directionless, purposeless victims and symptoms of societal deracination.⁷ The complete prevalence of “push” over any “pull” forces in this image of vagrants, implicitly or explicitly excludes them from the logic of migration theory, which has recently stressed the subtle intrinsic “rationality” or “efficiency” of migration decisions.⁸ In one way or another, then, vagrants are still surrounded in modern historiography by many of the pejorative associations inherent in the origin of the concept, set apart as a group from “normal society” or “normal migrants” by some sort of “distinctiveness” in terms of criminality, marginality, poverty, and/or purposelessness in their mobility.

Yet, if one avoids any *a priori* assumptions about the “distinctiveness” of “vagrants” – after all a label resulting from an undoubtedly distorted and biased perspective on the part of elite groups towards certain forms of mobility – the study of the often qualitatively rich sources relating to them can provide a valuable contribution to the wider domain of migration studies. Whereas migration, if not calculated in net terms on the basis of natural deficit rates, is typically studied on the basis of sources that allow

7. Cf. Olwen Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford, 1974), pp. 71, 83–102, 120. Even after finding out with surprise that most actually concerned migrant workers, Gutton still defines “real” vagrants in criminal terms, although conceding “nous sommes embarrassés pour trouver une limite convenable”; Gutton, *L'état et la mendicité*, pp. 180–199, 188, also *idem*, *La société et les pauvres*, pp. 123–212. Also Moch sets vagrants apart as “marginal migrants”: Leslie Page Moch, *Moving Europeans: Migration in Western Europe since 1650* (Bloomington, IN, 1992), pp. 88–93. Clark and Souden have treated vagrants as a prime example in their typology of “subsistence migrants”, i.e. disproportionately (and thus “disfunctionally”) driven by “push” forces, versus (“normal” and “functional”) “betterment migrants”, although also conceding the problematical limits between such two categories: Peter Clark and David Souden, “Introduction”, in Peter Clark and David Souden (eds), *Migration and Society in Early Modern England* (London [etc.], 1987), pp. 11–48, 22–38, relying on the findings of the reprinted 1978 article by Paul Slack, “Vagrants and Vagrancy in England, 1598–1664”, in the same collection, pp. 49–76, and elaborating upon the typology originally introduced in Peter Clark, “The Migrant in Kentish Towns 1580–1640”, in Peter Clark and Paul Slack (eds), *Crisis and Order in English Towns, 1500–1700: Essays in Urban History* (London, 1972), pp. 117–163. This intimate association of vagrants with such completely push-driven “subsistence migration”, is restated in I.D. Whyte, *Migration and Society in Britain, 1550–1830* (Basingstoke, 2000), pp. 49–57. Even Beier relies on this concept of “subsistence migration” to characterize the migration experiences of the “vagrants” studied by him: Beier, *Masterless Men*, pp. 29–30. For criticism of such dichotomies and “miserable” interpretations of vagrants: Lucassen, “A Blind Spot”, pp. 218–221; Jan Lucassen and Leo Lucassen, “Migration, Migration History, History: Old Paradigms and New Perspectives”, in Jan Lucassen and Leo Lucassen (eds), *Migration, Migration History, History: Old Paradigms and New Perspectives* (Bern, 1997), pp. 9–38, 19–20.

8. At least within the complexities and limits of incomplete information and social, political, cultural, and psychological factors, for instance: Moch, *Moving Europeans*, pp. 6–18; Dirk Hoerder, “Segmented Macrosystems and Networking Individuals: The Balancing Functions of Migration Processes”, in Lucassen and Lucassen, *Migration, Migration History, History*, pp. 73–84; Lucassen and Lucassen, “Migration”; Michael P. Hanagan, “Labor History and the New Migration History: A Review Essay”, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 54 (1998), pp. 57–79.

the reconstruction of origin and destination in post-factum and often quantitative terms, the analysis of sources about vagrants can sketch out a more lively and qualitative picture of actual movement behaviour.⁹ Of course, the wide scope and multi-usage of the concept of vagrancy call for historical caution and scrutiny in evaluating the precise social group designated as “vagrants” in relation to wider society at different times in different places. Yet, in at least one instance in history, which is probably far from unique, it is precisely the wide scope of the concept that has provided us with historical information about “vagrants” who, on close inspection, represent a rather wide and heterogeneous cross-section of people on the move. These are the people prosecuted on suspicion of vagrancy in the years up to 1776 by the *drossaard* tribunal of the Duchy of Brabant in the then Austrian Netherlands. Beyond the criminal framework, the records produced in the course of their prosecution, with relatively rich information about their backgrounds and movements, provide a valuable source of insight into the causes and nature of displacement in the transformational closing years of the *Ancien Régime*.

Overall patterns of geographical mobility widened and intensified in the closing decades of the eighteenth century as a general acceleration of fundamental economic, demographic, political, and socio-economic transformations marked an era of profound societal transition in western Europe, confronting households with changing restraints and opportunities in their income-pooling, and with processes of deracination and challenges of adaptation. In the wake of the uneven and unbalanced nature – both in time and space – of general macrodevelopments, demographic pressure, land concentration, impoverishment, and proletarianization brought more and more people on the road in search of an alternative or supplementary source of income.¹⁰ The present study, then, aims to analyse the “why” and “how” of the movements of the *drossaard*’s “vagrants” in relation to overall migration patterns and to changing socio-economic conditions at macro- and household levels.

In particular, the study focuses on evaluating the role of the mobility of these “vagrants” as an *adaptation strategy*. This implies due acknowledgement of the role of “push” forces in bringing people onto the road, yet without obscuring the role of “pull” forces in structuring the direction and purpose of their movement. It therefore explicitly integrates questions about the potential “efficiency” of their movements, however narrow the limits – incomplete information, limited resources, social conditions and traditions, household strategies, political constraints, and psychological

9. On the sources typically used in migration studies, see Clark and Souden, “Introduction”, pp. 18–20; Whyte, *Migration*, pp. 16–21.

10. Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, *Poverty and Capitalism in Pre-industrial Europe* (Brighton [etc.], 1979), pp. 188ff; Moch, *Moving Europeans*, pp. 60ff; Robert S. DuPlessis, *Transitions to Capitalism in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge [etc.], 1997), pp. 184ff., 259ff.

factors – within which migration decisions took place. In this, the approach follows recent migration theory in stressing the interplay of general social, economic, and political developments (macro level), social relations and cultural norms (meso level), and individual and family characteristics (micro level) in determining the limits, possibilities, aims, and options of the household strategies that structure overall migration patterns.¹¹ Instead of considering these “vagrants” *a priori* as a separate, and in a sense rather timeless, stereotypical category of “down and outs”, the present study aims to analyse intelligibly their movements *within* the general framework of migration studies and in relation to the changing conditions of their time. In short, it seeks to uncover the social reality “behind” the concept of vagrancy in order to provide further insight into the “why” and “how” of patterns of mobility in this era of transition.

The study is based on a representative sample of 776 out of the 2,541 court cases handled by the tribunal of the *drossaard* of Brabant between 1767 and 1776.¹² In a first section I shall elucidate the “institutional conditions of social selection” that made for a relatively wide cross-section of people on the move among those arrested and prosecuted in the period under consideration. I shall then elaborate on the methodological and historical-critical issues involved with the processing of the source material, before presenting the overall findings as distilled from the individual evidence contained in the court documents. In a third section I shall give an aggregate overview of some general characteristics of the social profile and mobile life of the “vagrants” in question. The fourth section proceeds to a more qualitative elaboration on the “how” and “why” of the different patterns of mobility thus displayed, which will allow us to relate the varied social reality “behind” vagrancy to the wider socio-economic and migrational context and, ultimately, to conclude that “vagrancy” as a defining characteristic of a distinct migrant (or other) category is socially meaningless.

INSTITUTIONAL CONDITIONS OF SOCIAL SELECTION

The nominal jurisdiction of the *drossaard* of Brabant, originally installed as a central supervisor over judicial matters in the duchy, had, by the late eighteenth century, been reduced to prosecuting crimes committed by people without a legally recognized residence. In this, he wielded both

11. Cf. among others: Moch, *Moving Europeans*, pp. 6-18; Jacques Dupaquier, “Mobilité géographique et mobilité sociale”, in Antonio Eiras Roel and Ofelia Rey Castelao (eds), *Les migrations internes et à moyenne distance en Europe, 1500-1900* (Santiago de Compostella, 1994), pp. 3-26; Hoerder, “Segmented Macrosystems”; Lucassen and Lucassen, “Migration”.

12. Algemeen Rijksarchief, Brussels [hereafter, ARA], I 108, Drossaard van Brabant [hereafter, DvB], 145-180. For details on the sample and other methodological issues, see Appendix.

police and magisterial authority, in the countryside and in the “open cities” of the duchy. As a police officer, the *drossaard* disposed of a “company” of forty-odd men who had to execute regular patrols. His judicial personnel judged those arrested by this company as well as detainees delivered by other authorities. Those with a fixed residence in the duchy had to be sent before their “natural judges”, as they fell outside the judicial competence of the *drossaard*. In practice, this *de iure* competence directed police and magisterial activity almost exclusively towards the prosecution of “vagrancy” and was biased against foreigners.¹³ Both the legal definition of vagrancy and the job description of the *drossaard* in force at the time were vague and prone to varying interpretation.¹⁴ More than any normative prescriptions, the “material” in-the-field conditions determined the actual activities of the *drossaard* and his personnel.

Between 1767 and 1776 more than 2,500 people went before the

13. Who could, of course, not claim a legal residence in the duchy. On the institutional workings and history of the *drossaard*, see: E. Poulet, *Histoire du droit pénal dans le duché de Brabant depuis l'avènement de Charles Quint jusqu'à la réunion de la Belgique à la France, à la fin du XVIIIe siècle* (Brussels, 1870), pp. 296–298; M. Vanhaegendoren, *Inventaris van het archief van de Drossaard van Brabant en van de Provoost-Generaal van het Hof en van de Nederlanden* (Brussels, 1949), pp. 5–13; Armand Deroisy, “La répression du vagabondage, de la mendicité et de la prostitution dans les Pays-Bas Autrichiens durant la seconde moitié du 18e siècle” (Ph.D., Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1964); Fernand Vanhemelryck, “Bijdrage tot de studie van het politieapparaat in het Ancien Régime. De opsporing van het misdrijf in Brabant”, *Belgisch tijdschrift voor filologie en geschiedenis*, 50 (1972), pp. 356–394; Armand Deroisy, “Un aspect du maintien de l'ordre dans les Pays-Bas autrichiens après 1750: La lutte contre le vagabondage”, in R. Mortier and H. Hasquin (eds), *Etudes sur le XVIIIe siècle* (Brussels, 1978), pp. 133–145; Armand Deroisy, “Juridictions particulières chargées des poursuites contre les vagabonds dans les Pays-Bas autrichiens au XVIIIe siècle”, in Jean-Luc Delattre et al. (eds) *La Belgique rurale du Moyen-Age à nos jours. Mélanges offerts à Jean-Jacques Hoebanx* (Brussels, 1985), pp. 295–308; W.Ch. Depreeuw, *Landloperij, bedelarij en thuisloosheid: een sociohistorische analyse van repressie, bijstand en instellingen* (Antwerp [etc.], 1988), pp. 72–81; Claude Bruneel, “Drossaard van Brabant”, in R. van Uytven et al. (eds), *De gewestelijke en lokale overheidsinstellingen in Brabant en Mechelen tot 1795* (Brussels, 2000), pp. 172–180. The workings of the police company were laid down in the in 1765 revised regulations, printed in *Placcaeten van Brabant*, pp. 96ff.

14. “Déclarons pour vagabonds et gens sans aveu tous ceux qui ne sont pas dans quelque service ou emploi ou qui ne font pas quelque trafic, négoce et métier, ou qui n'ont pas les moyens de pouvoir aucunement subsister” was the legal definition in force during the period under consideration: Recueil des ordonnances des Pays-Bas autrichiens [hereafter, ROPBA], IX, p. 244; XI, p. 138. Associations with begging and mobility figured in the general appeal to arrest “vagabonds, mendiants, étrangers ou autres natifs du pays, qui courent d'un endroit à l'autre”: ROPBA, XI, p. 339. That the normative applicability of the crime of vagrancy varied according to specific preoccupations is aptly illustrated by a rare explicit statement that the targeting of “remouleurs, ramoneurs de cheminées et autres étrangers semblables” in 1740 had only been a temporary measure “par rapport aux circonstances particulières de la disette de ce temps-là et du grand nombre d'ouvriers étrangers qui se trouvoient pour lors dans ce pays”: ROPBA, IX, pp. 154–155. The official police mission of the *drossaard* was described only in very vague terms as “apprehender et punir tous malfaiteurs, vagabonds et criminels personnes”: Deroisy, “La répression”, p. 72.

drossaard tribunal, with an absolute peak of over 1,500 arrests from 1772 to 1775, representing a marked increase in activity compared to the years before and after (Figure 1). This upsurge in arrests turns out to have been driven predominantly by a combination of: (a) a significant increase in the number of full-time personnel; and (b) a system of high bounties per vagrant apprehended. Limited forces and rampant corruption severely limited the actual impact of the regular police company of the *drossaard* on arrest activity, accounting for a mere 15 per cent, at most, of all arrests made between 1767 and 1776. The many investigations and complaints from above about payments made for nonexistent company members and unperformed duties, the proceeds of which went into the pockets of the *drossaard*, make it doubtful whether any regular patrols by the company actually took place in the late eighteenth century.¹⁵

In 1772, however, an apparently minor institutional rearrangement of the system of village vigilante patrols, and as such unduly neglected by historians involved, in effect greatly extended the actual police personnel resorting under the *drossaard*, adding the manpower of more than 200 local guards stationed permanently in villages all over the duchy.¹⁶ The latter appear to have been quick to realize fully the advantages of the bounty system, already quietly in force for some twenty years, which awarded them the equivalent of four-fifths of their monthly pay per foreign vagrant arrested.¹⁷ In the following spurt of arrests, their contribution was paramount, responsible for over 90 per cent of all arrests

15. On the many investigations regarding corruption in workings of the company: *ibid.*, pp. 74-79, 89; Deroisy, "Un aspect du maintien de l'ordre", pp. 133-134.

16. The new regulation allowed local authorities in Brabant to replace the compulsory but unpopular and malfunctioning vigilante patrols with full-time local guards, under the orders of the *drossaard*, whereas taking on such a guard had previously not officially discharged local authorities from organising vigilante patrols: ARA, T 460, Geheime Raad, 474/A. The later publishers of the standard collection of laws promulgated in the Austrian Netherlands considered this edict too insignificant for inclusion (see ROPBA, X, p. 278, n. 2), whereas they did print many other long and probably much more trivial regulations regarding the *drossaard*. Likewise, historians of the *drossaard* institution, maybe too preoccupied with finding antecedents of a central police force and equivalents of the French *Maréchaussée*, and too much directed by the ROPBA selection, have all focused on the probably virtually non-existent company and spent hardly any attention on the 1772 edict and these local guards. Yet under the new regulations, the numbers of such local guards rose from a mere 40 before to well over 200 (to 236 according to Deroisy, "La répression", p. 136, n. 4, 141; to 275 according to Guido Vrolix, "De drossaard van Brabant (1765-1794)" ("Licenciaat" thesis, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 1977), p. 51, followed by Bruneel, "Drossaard van Brabant", p. 174; and to at least 230 according to a pay list in the provincial archives: ARA, T 502, Staten van Brabant, cart. 161/2: 161/14).

17. The bounty was 12 guilders (ROPBA, IX, p. 245), the equivalent of 18 day's wages of an unskilled labourer. The guards, whose remuneration was chiefly in kind (food, clothing, and lodging) were awarded a monthly allowance of 15 guilders: Vrolix, "De drossaard van Brabant", pp. 93-94. Although some bounty system had been installed in 1749 (ROPBA, VI, p. 440), it is plausible that knowledge about its existence and "possibilities" (claimants had to make a formal request) had been limited: cf. Deroisy, "La répression", pp. 126-127.

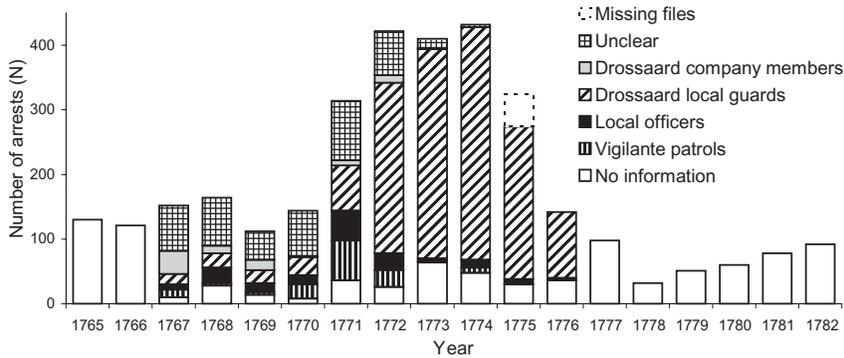


Figure 1. Authors of arrests per number of arrests per year, 1765–1782.¹⁸

made between 1772 and 1775. Their extremely high arrest rate yielded them repeated reprimands from the central authorities for arresting “innocent people” purely out of financial motivations – these reprimands themselves undoubtedly being no less financially motivated.¹⁹ That such motivations indeed played a great role, is well illustrated by the sudden drop in arrests when government intervention eventually cut down the bounty system early in 1776: arrest rates dropped by 50 per cent in the same year, and remained well under one-quarter of the peak level during the years following.²⁰

An analysis of the actual motivations for the arrests, as mentioned in the court documents, and of the eventual convictions, further suggests that the high arrest rate in the years up to 1776 was driven more by “quantitative” motivations than strict “qualitative” criteria. In any case, it makes clear that those arrested were in no way “criminals”. The inadequacy or absence of travelling documents (61 per cent), and some form of begging (55 per cent), which could range from asking for a glass of milk to busking, were mentioned most frequently by far as initial motivations for the more than 2,500 arrests between 1767 and 1776, a variety of other reasons each being cited in less than 5 per cent of cases. The eventual convictions reflect this picture. About one-

18. The arrest numbers from 1765–1766 and 1777–1782 come from Véronique Mauroy, “Mendiants et vagabonds arrêtés par le Drossard de Brabant, 1765 à 1787. Essai d’étude quantitative” (Licentiaat thesis, Université Catholique de Louvain, 1983), pp. 184–186. Other calculations are mine. For the category “unclear” it is not possible to establish unambiguously whether the authors of the arrests concerned local guards or company members.

19. ROPBA, X, pp. 419–420; XI, p. 25; Deroisy, “La répression”, pp. 124–127, 210; Deroisy, “Juridictions particulières”, pp. 300–301.

20. Two general pardons were executed in 1776 by the central authority, discharging present and future detainees if they had been arrested solely for begging (which concerned, as we shall see, the majority of the *drossaard* cases), with the important stipulation “qu’il n’écherra à l’égard de pareils mendiants aucune recompense en faveur des officiers des endroits où ils auront été appréhendés”: ARA, T 460, Geheime Raad, 474/A; ROPBA, XI, p. 138.



Figure 2. The *Hallepoort* [townport of Halle] in a drawing by Paul Vitzthumb from 1785. Paul Vitzthumb, *Vues de Bruxelles et environs*, II, 1800–1825, Pl. 41. Copyright Royal Library of Belgium Albert I, Brussels, Prentenkabinet

fifth of all detainees was eventually released without charges, and another 70 per cent was convicted only for “minor offences”, i.e. begging or having inadequate travelling documents. “Vagrancy” was always added as a “crime” in the case of a conviction, but it never figured as sole reason – which again illustrates the semantic looseness of the concept. Only one in ten detainees faced more serious charges, but of these the vast majority were “recidivists” – i.e. people who had ignored an expulsion order, the typical sanction for “minor offences”, pronounced on them by the *drossaard* some time earlier. In the end, fewer than 4 per cent of all cases were convicted of some more “weighty offence”, and even then mostly for petty theft. Also, most were travelling alone (50 per cent), or with one (30 per cent) or two (12 per cent) companions at the time of their arrest, these co-travellers mostly concerning partners (15 per cent), other family members (31 per cent), and acquaintances or colleagues, typically from the same village or town (38 per cent).²¹

All in all, it appears that the people judged by the tribunal of the *drossaard* in the years up to 1776 were arrested and thus “selected” on the basis of relatively loose criteria. The institutional conditions were such as to encourage a high arrest rate, in which any indication that could be vaguely related to the broad concept of vagrancy was enough to instigate an arrest.

21. A far greater proportion of women (34 per cent) than of men (9 per cent) was accompanied by her or his partner respectively at the time of the arrest. Less than 1 per cent of men and 6 per cent of women were accompanied by a partner to whom they were not lawfully married.

The result was the arrest of a very wide selection of people somehow on the move, be it biased against foreigners, whose heterogeneous profiles defy any interpretation in terms of some shared “vagrant distinctiveness”.

AMBIGUOUS READING AND HISTORICAL INTERFERENCE

Once arrested, detainees were taken to the *Hallepoort* prison in Brussels, where the court sat. Upon arrival, each was interrogated by the judicial personnel on his or her identity, livelihood, and whereabouts, an account of which has been preserved in individual court files, alongside a copy of the eventual verdict and any possible testimonies, correspondence and documents produced during the trial. The qualitative individual information contained in these documents has been subjected to a careful quantitative analysis, aided by database (Access) and statistical computer programmes (SPSS). Rather than a genuine methodology with an explanatory function, this “quantitative method” served chiefly as an aid in data storage and handling, since meaningful applications of purely statistical operations and parameters were ruled out by the capriciousness of the source material. Of course, these court documents do not constitute an unconstrained direct account of standard information, but a transliteration of variable evidence given in the light of a possible conviction, with all possible distortions of reality and problems of comparability that this entails.

There are good reasons, however, for not radically doubting the credibility of the detainees’ answers during questioning. For one thing, they were not major criminals. The petty offences, with which the vast majority was charged, probably did not constitute any behaviour regarded by the accused as abnormal or even reprehensible, as attested by frequent remarks to this effect. In any case, they were generally “caught in the act”: there was little point in denying or twisting stories, as their fate was usually sealed by the circumstances of the arrest. Moreover, preserved correspondence indicates that the judicial personnel tended to check assertions by detainees that had a direct bearing on the charges, including residence and past employment. The potential conviction may in fact not have represented too frightful a prospect, as the standard sentence was one of expulsion, which was typically only repeated if breached.²² In any case, the fact that detainees only rarely disputed the charges that determined their conviction, makes it rather doubtful that

22. The standard expulsion was nominally to be punished with whipping, in addition to a reiteration of the banishment if ignored, yet in reality only one in ten “recidivists” underwent such whipping, typically only when arrested under aggravating circumstances; the others received only a reiteration of their expulsion order. All in all, less than 4 per cent of all court cases ended in a punishment other than expulsion. The relatively high rate of “recidivism” - one in ten of the accused between 1767 and 1776 had earlier been sentenced by the same tribunal - might then indicate that the deterrence emanating from the *drossaard* was in reality rather modest.

they would have consciously misrepresented other information that had no bearing on the sentence, especially since this “circumstantial evidence” would have contributed nothing to the judges’ possibly regarding them in a more favourable light.

Historical reading is also hampered by the process of transliteration carried out by the interrogators, in interpreting and writing down the detainees’ stories within their judicial concerns and standardized Q & A patterns. There are no indications to suggest that examiners might have deceptively put words into the detainees’ mouths, as objections on the latter’s part seem truthfully recorded. Yet, many standard phrases, especially those bearing on the detainees’ judicial status, undoubtedly reveal the use of shorthand jargon for a probably more complex reality.²³ Interpreting the value and meaning of the indirect and disparate individual “stories” therefore entails a scrupulous application of the principles of historical criticism at two levels, tackling both the trustworthiness of the original evidence and the amount of distortion present in its transliteration.

Distilling *aggregate* pronouncements out of this disparate and ambiguous evidence naturally implies an even more profound and hazardous process of critical analysis and evaluation, interpretation, deconstruction, and reconstitution of the original information. No such undertaking can be considered “objective”, and readers should be aware of the conscientious yet active historical interference of which the findings presented here are the result. There is no room or scope here to go into full detail regarding the precise ways in which the many caveats of interpretation, comparison, and aggregation on the way have been dealt with, but an extensive discussion of these matters has been presented elsewhere.²⁴ The findings presented below are therefore the product of a profound yet cautious process of historical analysis, and the unavoidable limitations of the sources and of their interpretation mean that the results to be valued as indicative rather than absolute.

AGGREGATE CONTOURS OF DISPARATE PATTERNS

Although concepts of “origin” and “profession” posed some methodological problems of interpretation,²⁵ the standard evidence on the back-

23. The almost obligatory observation “no fixed residence”, for instance, served merely to establish the competence of the court on the case: it conveys nothing more than that the person in question had no legally certified residence within the duchy, and tells us nothing about the actual sedentary nature of his or her life - within or without the boundaries of the province. Likewise, evidence on whereabouts before detainees had entered the duchy appears considerably abbreviated in busy periods - as it was irrelevant for prosecution.

24. Anne Winter, “Mobiliteit in een transitieperiode: ‘Vagebonden’ in Brabant, 1767-1776” (“Licenciaat” thesis, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, 2001), pp. 56-79. For a short comment on methodological issues: see Appendix.

25. Most importantly, it is clear that “profession” was often understood more in the sense of schooling and skill than of actual livelihood and employment, which could be divergent and

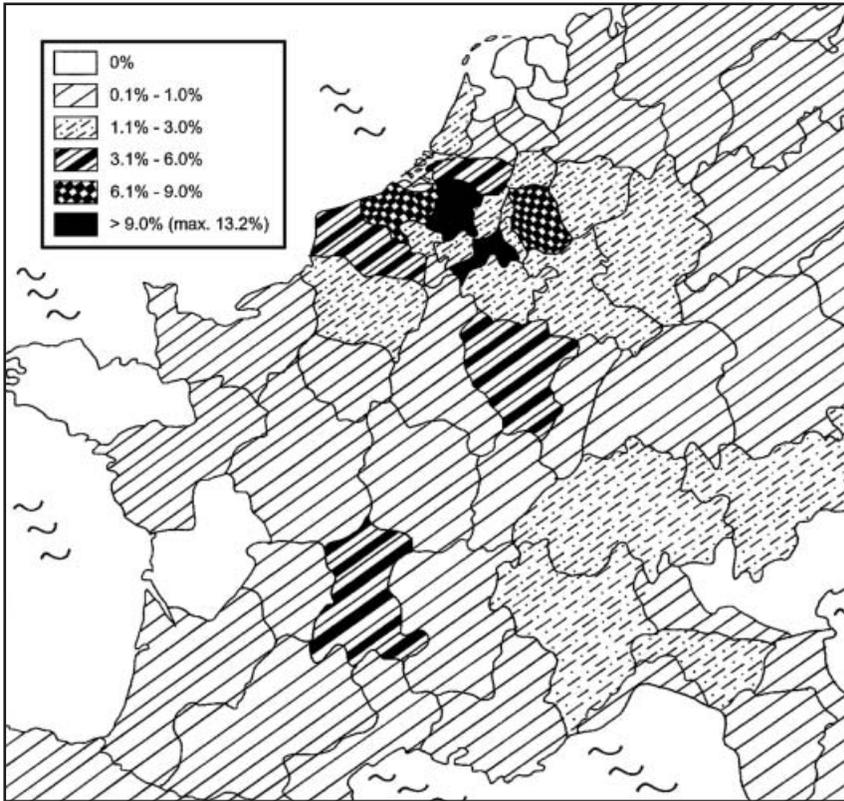


Figure 3. Geographical origin of the *drossard's* detainees, 1767–1776 (%).²⁶

ground of the detainees was the most straightforward to handle, and makes it possible to sketch out the contours of an overall social profile. Men made up the overwhelming majority; only one in five detainees was female. Young adults were predominant among both sexes: the distribution along five-year age groups resembles a broad-based pyramid, albeit on a “platform” – with the biggest concentration (21 per cent) aged between 20 and 24. Half was younger than 30, three-quarters were younger than 45, only about 9 per cent was older than 60. Detainees came from a variety of regions, all but the odd few from within north-western continental Europe (Figure 3), yet the dominant pattern was one of regional proximity, and this was even more prominent among women.

multiple. For instance, people “without profession” often demonstrably worked, but typically as unskilled casual labour. As such, this information does constitute a valuable indicator of the “professional background” and level of schooling, and in extension of socioeconomic status.

26. A residual of 2.8 per cent came from a variety of regions not represented on the map, each providing less than 0.6 per cent of detainees.

Roughly about two in three detainees came from regions within a delineated “proximate core area”, stretching west to east from the northern regions of France to the east banks of the Rhine, and north to south from the southern parts of the Dutch republic to French Lorraine. The vast majority from this “core area” – albeit with regional variations – was made up of textile workers and unskilled casual labour. Among the men, another 1 in 5 was active in other trades, mostly as leather, wood, and metal workers. Further away, two other relatively isolated – and almost exclusively male – regions of concentrated origin are to be distinguished, where respectively about 5 per cent and 7 per cent originated: the French Auvergne on the one hand, providing almost solely ambulant craftsmen, chiefly tinkers and knife-grinders, and a more diffuse region around the Alps on the other hand, mostly sending out hawkers and travelling “artists”. However patchy, the general characteristics of the prisoners’ social profile, then, suggest the existence of some more or less identifiable and diverse subgroups. The strong presence of “foreigners” (76 per cent came from beyond the borders of the Austrian Netherlands) undoubtedly reflects their greater vulnerability to suspicion and arrest.

Evidence about the detainees’ “mobile life”, was, of course, more patchy and varied and consequently more difficult to organize into comparable pieces of information, and a specific group of ex-soldiers had to be omitted from the general analysis for reasons of comparability and specificity. As existing studies on migration typically focus on events of displacement in retrospect rather than on actual circumstances of acts of movement, the available literature offered little help in devising operational concepts by which to organize and process the information about the parameters of “mobile life” itself. Finally, I opted for a working method of deconstruction and reconstitution of the evidence, via the concept of “mobile phases”. At the level of analysis, this processing method enabled a twofold strategy capturing both the aggregate and the details. In concrete terms, an overall layout of variance in certain aggregate features will first sketch out the general contours of the detainees’ mobile experience, whose salient patterns are subsequently fleshed out in a more detailed approach that incorporates some of the more specific evidence. At the aggregate level, three dimensions were eventually singled out to allow a meaningful preliminary overview of the variations in patterns of mobility: *time*, i.e. the period elapsed since the detainees claimed to have left what they considered “home”; *motive*, i.e. the reasons they gave for their departure; and *activity*, i.e. the ways in which they had provided for their livelihood since leaving.²⁷

Great variation existed in the length of time since detainees had been on the move, i.e. since they had left what was considered “home”. Of those we

27. For some further comments on the processing of the information, see Appendix.

know of (70 per cent), one-quarter had left less than twelve days before the arrest, half less than two and a half months, another 28 per cent had been away between that and a year, and 22 per cent had been on the move longer than one year. Women generally moved around for considerably shorter periods than men: only 22 per cent had been away more than six months (vs 39 per cent of men), and only 12 per cent more than a year (vs 25 per cent). Some correlation with the area of origin is clearly observable: those from the “proximate core area” had predominantly left home less than six months before the arrest, and had only rarely been away longer than a year, whereas the great majority of the French *Auvergnats* and their Alpine counterparts had been away for more than six months and more than a year respectively.

Insofar as motivations for leaving were given (63 per cent), those relating to livelihood (77 per cent) were absolutely predominant.²⁸ Looking for work (40 per cent) figured as by far the most frequently given motive, followed by exercising an ambulant craft (12 per cent of men – no women), begging (9 per cent), hawking (9 per cent), and performing “ambulant artistic activities” (5 per cent). Looking for work was particularly strong as a motivation among the dominant professional profile of the “proximate core area”, while the travelling “arts and crafts” men from the Auvergne and Alpine region typically mentioned the performance of their ambulant activities as reasons for departure. Still, hawking, and to a lesser extent “artistic activities”, figured as reasons for departure also among a variety of people who did not identify these activities as their profession. Begging, on the other hand, appeared to be a motive solely among people from very nearby regions, especially among those with “no profession”. Non-livelihood-related reasons like paying a visit (8 per cent) or undertaking a pilgrimage (8 per cent) – the latter arguably related to livelihood too – were also more or less exclusive to people from closely proximate regions.

Conversely, recent leavers had generally left for very different reasons than those who had been on the move for quite some time already. Begging, for instance, was almost solely mentioned as a motivation by people who had left only recently, as was making a visit or a purchase. Among their counterparts on the move for longer than twelve days, motives related to livelihood were absolutely predominant: those away less

28. All examinations where such motivations were mentioned have been taken into account, even when not explicitly related to the initial departure, as they all provide information on overall aims and functions of mobility. Although such unverifiable and subjective evidence might easily be disregarded as post-factum and ad-hoc “excuses”, these motivations appeared intelligibly and insightfully related to other aspects of the detainees’ social profile and mobile experience. Also, the mention of “begging” as an explicit motivation, for instance, can hardly be interpreted as a manoeuvre to alleviate the charges.

than a year had left primarily to find work, while those on the move even longer had also frequently left in order to exercise their ambulant craft. Performing “artistic activities” was also mentioned more frequently as a reason for departure the longer people were on the move. Hawking, on the other hand, was mentioned with varying frequency.

Seven different categories group the various ways in which the detainees claimed to have provided for their livelihoods since leaving: begging (60 per cent); performing non-ambulant paid work (25 per cent); hawking (15 per cent); exercising an ambulant craft (9 per cent); living on their “own money” not gained whilst on the move (7 per cent); performing ambulant “artistic activities” (6 per cent); and working as a servant (3 per cent).²⁹ Various sources of income had been combined in one in four (23 per cent) cases. Apart from living on their “own money”, exercising an ambulant craft figured as the most “exclusive” way of making a living, whereas people who had performed other paid work had more frequently than not also addressed other sources of income, most typically begging. In turn, one in three of those who had begged had also gained their living in other ways, leaving 47 per cent of women and 31 per cent of men as having solely begged.

People who claimed to have left for “non-livelihood related” reasons, had typically either begged (like almost all of the pilgrims) or lived “on their own money” (like one-third of those paying someone a visit) whilst on the move. As most motives for leaving were related to livelihood, a preliminary view on the “efficiency” of departure can be gauged by comparing these motivations with the ways in which a living had actually been made since. In this, strong one-way correspondences are evident among those who had left to go begging, and to perform ambulant activities. The strongest discrepancy, on the other hand, lies with those claiming to have left in search of work: about 80 per cent of them had begged, whilst a careful extrapolation brings the rate of those who had indeed worked to only 56 per cent. In turn, about one-half of those who had begged were people who said they had left to find work. Aim (or appearance?) and reality seem to have been incongruent for these would-be workers. Yet, the time element appears to have played a significant role.

In general, people tended more frequently to have combined different sources of income the longer they had been on the move (Figure 4). In particular, “exclusive begging” was predominant only among those away less than a month. Among those on the move longer, this proportion

29. As livelihood had direct bearing on the charges of vagrancy, most interrogations duly recorded such information (87 per cent). Although begging may be relatively overrated, as it was often mentioned as the motive for arrest, the interest of both interrogators and detainees appear to have stimulated a high overall completeness of livelihood information. (Ex-)servants had typically been arrested on charges of theft (typically at their (ex-)master’s home), and their small number inhibits further detailed analysis.

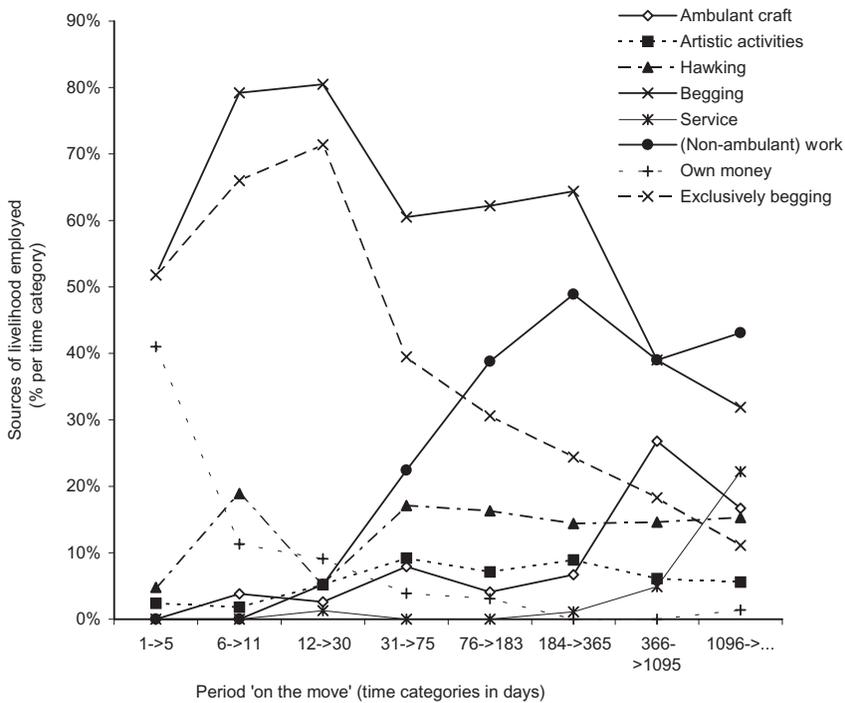


Figure 4. Sources of livelihood employed per period “on the move” (%).³⁰

decreased as the length of the mobile period increased, giving way to a growing contribution from other sources of livelihood, mostly the performance of non-ambulant work and ambulant trades. Only detainees away longer than a month, then, had to some substantial extent indeed worked, this proportion amounting to about 40 per cent and 50 per cent of those on the move longer than two months and a half. It appears that the discrepancy between having left to find work and having indeed worked was filled up predominantly by begging, and that this discrepancy was essentially time-related, possibly reflecting the period necessary to travel to the destination where work was to be found. The high proportion of those who had also begged among those who had worked, further indicates that begging was used frequently in combination with performing paid work, to overcome the period before working, for one thing, but possibly also the period afterwards.

30. Period “on the move” has been grouped in eight time categories each comprising more or less an equal proportion of detainees (15 per cent, 10 per cent, 13 per cent, 12 per cent, 15 per cent, 13 per cent, 12 per cent, and 10 per cent respectively).

FLESHING OUT MOBILE LIFE

One in four of the *drossaard*'s prisoners, then, appears to have performed paid work at some point during their travels. Added to the number said to have left with this in mind, this ranks "labour" as an important parameter in the mobility of two out of five of the detainees. Almost all of the "workers" came from the "proximate core area". Some, relatively skilled and almost exclusively male, had worked at their trade, mostly in the Austrian Netherlands, and also in the north of France and the Dutch Republic. Yet, the great majority of the "workers" had performed casual work on the land, predominantly in the southern coastal areas of the Dutch Republic, in Zeeland and Zeeland-Flanders, in particular around Cadzand. They had chiefly come from the Austrian Netherlands, the Ourthe region, and the Rhine coasts, typically with a low-skilled proletarian background, as textile workers or casual labourers, and one out of every three was a woman. The majority had been away for a couple of months and can be described as "on their way back", among whom, for instance, the eighteen-year old labourer Anna Catharina Luyts from Bonn, arrested together with her twenty-one-year old sister whilst returning home from summer work in Cadzand.³¹

Their "unsuccessful" counterparts shared most of their basic profile characteristics, and predominantly claimed to be heading for the coastal destinations from which the "workers" were typically returning. Half of them had been travelling less than twelve days, four out of five for less than a month. As we know, the vast majority had since only begged during that period. However, their profile diverges from that of the other "exclusive beggars" described below and indeed appears rather to correspond to the previous histories of the above "workers". We know that the latter also frequently begged whilst travelling, even when on their way back and provided with ready money.

The geographical patterns displayed by the workers and "would-be" workers clearly fit in with the contours of the seasonal labour flows within the "North Sea system" that Jan Lucassen has described on the basis of the French survey of 1811 on seasonal migration. The Dutch coastal areas yearly attracted around 30,000 migrants from up to 300 km away to perform labour intensive seasonal work on its reclaimed land, fields, and in water management. Of course, few traces are to be expected of the greatest of these labour flows, the *Hollandgänger* moving from German Westphalia to the northern coasts of the Republic, as their route did not cross Brabant. Yet, the production of madder, cereals, flax, and other agricultural products, typically undertaken in a landlord–capitalist tenant–wage-labour structure, are known to have attracted a few thousand

31. ARA, I 108, DvB, 162: Anna Catharina Luyts (17/11/1772).

seasonal labourers yearly to the Zeeland regions. The “land of Cadzand” in itself mobilized about 1,300 of these each year in the eighteenth century. Conversely, the origins of many of the “workers” and “would-be workers” fall within areas identified by Lucassen as “push-regions” in the mobilization of the coastal work force, whose shortest route to their destination would take them through Brabant.³²

The evidence with regard to the performers of ambulant activities likewise fits in with existing historical knowledge on certain migration patterns. This is most clearly the case for those who had exercised an ambulant craft, viz. one in ten of male prisoners, made up chiefly of tinkers and knife-grinders from the Auvergne. Evidence of their “mobile life” suggests a relatively stable and sufficiently rewarding pattern: the majority had left their region of origin longer than a year before, had not had other sources of income, regularly claimed to have sent remittances home, and had operated in relatively confined areas – mostly covering the surrounding countryside of a Brabant or Flemish town where they were staying. They also typically operated in groups, frequently sharing family and village bonds, like the twenty-three-year-old tinker, Jean Lamigni, and his brother from Aurillac who had come to Ghent in the summer of 1767, and were arrested together with another Auvergnat colleague while on one of their countryside “rounds” in January 1769, carrying 18 guilders.³³

All these traits are familiar to the operation of so-called hawking and craft “companies”, i.e. village or regionally-based bands organizing the activities of migrant and ambulant labour and salesmen abroad, not uncommon in the French highlands. Already characterized by a long-standing tradition in household strategies that combined small-scale agriculture with various forms of temporary emigration, overall migration rates from these regions increased even further during the eighteenth century due to increased pressure on land. Such migrant labour was undertaken at various levels of the social ladder, was typically locally or regionally specialized, and in its more stable forms often organized in “company” structures. The Haute Auvergne was particularly renowned for its ambulant metalworkers and salesmen, many of whom could spend

32. Most came from regions within the “push-areas” C (encompassing the north of Flanders and the border regions of Brabant and Limburg) and D (part of département Ourthe and Meuse Inférieure) as delineated by Lucassen, and from adjacent areas in the Roër département which at the time of the French survey temporarily absorbed its and other (especially from the Ourthe region) labour migrants by the digging of the “Grand Canal du Nord”. Jan Lucassen, *Migrant Labour in Europe 1600-1900: The Drift to the North Sea* (London [etc.], 1987), pp. 25-27, 56-64, 107, 145-155, 162-163, 228-229, and details in Jan Lucassen, *Naar de kusten van de Noordzee. Trekarbeid in Europees perspectief, 1600-1900* (Utrecht, 1984), pp. 303-305, 309-310, 315-317. On migrant labour in Zeeland-Flanders also: P.J. van Cruyningen, *Behoudend maar buigzaam. Boeren in West-Zeeuws-Vlaanderen, 1650-1950* (Wageningen, 2000), pp. 97ff., 123-125, 130ff., 171-178.

33. ARA, I 108, DvB, 150: Jean Lamigni (14/01/1769).

up to several years away as part of life-cycle-specific income strategies. While the classic Auvergne companies that had traditionally focused on Spain underwent a relative “elitization” during the eighteenth century, a general shift north in the dominant region of operation is thought to have been prompted by the Napoleonic invasion of Spain. Apparently, at least some Auvergne metalworking companies, not too badly off, were active in the Netherlands as early as the 1760s and 1770s, possibly blazing a trail for others to come.³⁴

The prisoners who had earned (part of) a living by peddling, viz. about 15 per cent of the total, form a very varied group, selling a variety of goods, from needles and nails, via cloth, scythes, and picks, to ink and jewellery. About two in three came from the “proximate core area”, the others mostly from the Alpine regions. Interestingly, the further away the region they came from, the more these hawkers designated this activity as their genuine “profession”. The 41 per cent who did not give peddling as their profession, i.e. mostly from regions nearby, had in half of the cases also begged during their travels. Among the “professional hawkers”, often travelling in structures similar to those of the ambulant craft companies, this proportion was negligible. This division seems to correspond to quite different functions and natures of the mobile selling concerned, as a modest temporary subsistence strategy – sometimes also undertaken while travelling in search of work – or as a more elaborate, well-structured and remunerative long-term occupation, reflecting the wide variety in socio-economic status that has been observed in historical studies of mobile traders.³⁵

Among the prisoners who had performed “ambulant artistic activities”, viz. about 6 per cent, two distinct subgroups emerge. On the one hand were people from proximate areas, typically musicians or exhibitors of some “curiosity”, who generally made short rounds in their home area, like two young spinners from Brussels, arrested while roaming the countryside for a fortnight, playing a hurdy-gurdy and selling self-made toys to earn extra cash.³⁶ On the other hand were people from the Alpine region, mostly Italians, often presenting animal entertainments, like bear dancing, who embarked on much longer and wider travels, typically in

34. Abel Poitrineau, “Aspects de l’émigration temporaire et saisonnière en Auvergne à la fin du XVIIIe et au début du XIXe siècle”, *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 9 (1962), pp. 5–50, 11–23; Hufton, *The Poor*, pp. 72–75, 81–83, 87–90; Abel Poitrineau, *Remues d’hommes. Les migrations montagnardes en France, 17e–18e siècles* (Paris, 1983), pp. 126–130; Lucassen, *Migrant Labour*, p. 89; Jean-Pierre Poussou, “Mobilité et migrations”, in Jacques Dupâquier (ed.), *Histoire de la population française, II: De la Renaissance à 1789* (Paris, 1988), pp. 99–143, 105–106, 109–111; Moch, *Moving Europeans*, pp. 79–88.

35. Serge Jaumain, “Un métier oublié: Le colporteur dans la Belgique du XIXe siècle”, *Revue belge d’histoire contemporaine*, 16 (1985), pp. 307–356; Lucassen, *Migrant Labour*, pp. 88–92; L. Fontaine, *Histoire du colportage* (Paris, 1993).

36. ARA, I 108, DvB, 150; Jean François Vascon and Pierre Dufour (21/10/1769).

small family- or village-related groups: twenty-eight-year-old Andreas Thadei, for instance, had travelled for more than eighteen months around much of central and northern Europe, together with two friends from the same village near Parma, and a bear and a monkey to earn their keep.³⁷ About one in three “ambulant artists”, of various origins, had also begged, and some combined their activities with small-scale hawking. “Artists” from nearby regions again appear to have taken up their rounds mostly as a temporary strategy to gain supplementary income, often related to local festivities. For the Alpine artists – who remained familiar figures in nineteenth-century popular culture – these activities seem to have been more permanent, although references to family plots at home suggest that they were possibly part of long-term household strategies in income-pooling. Although some features resemble the company-like structures of their hawking or craft counterparts, these foreign ambulant artists generally operated at a lower level of mobile-income strategies, with fewer resources and skills.³⁸

Of all sources of income, “begging” figured most frequently – not necessarily most substantially – as part of the variable income-pooling of the *drossaard*’s detainees in general. In addition to those who had combined it with other earning activities as described above, two out of every five prisoners had relied *solely* on this particular source of livelihood: 47 per cent of women and 31 per cent of men. An important proportion of these “exclusive beggars” has been leniently identified above as “would-be” workers travelling to their destination. Yet, even if this proportion is disregarded, this still leaves one in four of all detainees that cannot be linked to any of the livelihood-related patterns of mobility described up until now. The dominant motives for travelling of this substantial group appear to be quite distinct from those of the other groups: begging (41 per cent), pilgrimage (27 per cent), and paying someone a visit (16 per cent). Apart from a residual miscellaneous group stating a variety of singular motives, these “exclusive beggars” predominantly also came from very close regions and had typically been on the move for only a short time, from a couple of days to two or three weeks at most.

37. ARA, I 108, DvB, 152: Andreas Thadei (09/02/1770).

38. Demographic pressure, proletarianization and impoverishment increased overall migration rates from northern Italian regions in the late eighteenth century, mostly directed at seasonal labour in the Italian river valleys and coastal plains: Lucassen, *Naar de kusten van de Noordzee*, pp. 339–358; S. Woolf, *The Poor in Western Europe in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (London [etc.], 1986), pp. 53–58; Lucassen, *Migrant Labour*, pp. 116–122; Moch, *Moving Europeans*, p. 78; DuPlessis, *Transitions to Capitalism*, p. 157. Dutch prints from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century reprinted in Lucassen, *Migrant Labour*, plates 15 and 18, illustrate how ambulant Italian artists and hawkers were familiar phenomena in local popular culture.

The “intentional beggars”, i.e. those who claimed to have left home with the purpose of begging, were almost exclusively Brabant town dwellers and people from in and around Liège, where structural underemployment and poverty made survival precarious. An example is the fifty-nine-year-old yarn-spinner, Susanne Scheydel from Antwerp, who, deserted by her husband, had left for the countryside for a few days to go begging.³⁹ For them, and probably also for their short-distance “pilgrim” counterparts, these short “begging rounds” undoubtedly represented some temporary subsistence lifeline, called upon – probably recurrently – to make ends meet when resources were scarce. The direct access to agricultural products – as many begged for grain – and the generally lesser enforcement of begging prohibitions, probably formed the strongest attraction of the otherwise similarly poverty-stricken Brabant countryside.⁴⁰

The observation that a substantial proportion of the “exclusive beggars” claimed to have left home to pay someone a visit, or for some other singular reason might be easily disposed of by dismissing their “motive” as an excuse for begging – as with the “would-be workers” treated above. Yet, there are many indications that begging could indeed quite simply function as a way of saving on travelling expenses. What is understood under the heading of “begging”, it must be recalled, covered a variety of appeals to hospitality and charity, typically for food or drink. As has been demonstrated, such appeals had also been made frequently by detainees who had had other sources of income as well. Most strikingly, this was the case with the many returning “workers” caught “begging”, even when demonstrably provided with ready (saved) money – also observed by Jean-Pierre Gutton as a widespread strategy among travelling French seasonal labourers to preserve their savings.⁴¹ In more general terms, with omnipresent poverty and vulnerability strongly limiting the resources available for travelling – already a considerable expense simply in terms of opportunity cost⁴² – to the majority of the population, it should not surprise us that such “begging” indeed formed an essential component of any popular travelling, whether in search of work, or for social or other

39. ARA, I 108, DvB, 169: Susanne Scheydel (18/02/1774).

40. On the precarious situation in Brabant and the Liège region: Lis and Soly, *Poverty and Capitalism*, pp. 174–177; Nicole Haesenne-Peremans, *La pauvreté dans la région liégeoise à l'aube de la révolution industrielle* (Paris, 1981), pp. 183–222. On countryside begging by town dwellers to evade the stricter deterrence policy of cities: Paul Bonenfant, *Le problème du paupérisme en Belgique à la fin de l'Ancien Régime* (Brussels, 1932), pp. 391–392; Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, “‘Total Institutions’ and the Survival Strategies of the Laboring Poor in Antwerp, 1770–1860”, in Peter Mandler (ed.), *The Uses of Charity: The Poor on Relief in the Nineteenth-Century Metropolis* (Philadelphia, PA, 1990), pp. 38–67, 43.

41. Gutton, *La société et les pauvres*, pp. 140–142; *idem*, *L'état et la mendicité*, pp. 180–182.

42. Lucassen, *Migrant Labour*, p. 42.

reasons, in whatever direction, and with whatever scarce means provided.⁴³

Whether this “begging” functioned as a means or an end of travelling, or somewhere in between, its wide practice among the *drossaard*’s detainees in any case implies the existence of some support mechanisms for these “vagrants” in wider society. Furthermore, their appeals were not limited to food and drink, but often extended to overnight shelter: one in four of the detainees had spent the night in farmers’ barns. Research on “vagrants” in Normandy during the same period has likewise illustrated how these “downmarket travellers” could rely on relatively common hospitality among farmers to find shelter overnight, most commonly in barns, for free or in return for a moderate sum, for which they then often received a bowl of soup or a meal as well.⁴⁴ A classic thesis on the matter, however, is that a common mentality of hospitality, widespread in medieval Europe, became increasingly eroded during the early modern period, as it gave way to popular feelings of suspicion, fear and rejection of strangers.⁴⁵ Although the Norman study cited suggests a decline in hospitality in the last two decades of the eighteenth century, and we might suspect that the general increase in mobility did exert some pressure on support mechanisms, it is evident that at least some part of the populace was responsive to the need for food and shelter of travelling strangers – an attitude which contrasted sharply with the criminalizing discourse evident in vagrancy policy, and which in any case weakens any *a priori* theses on the supposed marginality of “vagrants”.

WHICH VAGRANTS?

Although any attempt at strict categorization runs up against the non-quantifiable nuances of rich individual detail, some intelligible patterns of shared social and migratory experience nevertheless emerge from the heterogeneousness of the *drossaard*’s detainees. The mobility of most was situated geographically within what we have termed the “proximate core

43. As also Gutton has remarked on “la pratique très répandue dans le menu peuple de faire des voyages à pied, avec des ressources fort limitée, en vivant d’expédients dont le plus normal est la mendicité. Ou même, mendier n’est que le moyen d’économiser une somme, qui, de toutes manières, permettrait de faire le voyage dans des conditions normales”: Gutton, *L’état et la mendicité*, pp. 180–181.

44. Boucheron, “La montée”, pp. 77–81.

45. Most recently restated in Xavier Rousseaux, “L’incrimination du vagabondage en Brabant (14e–18e siècles). Langages du droit et réalités de pratique”, in G. van Dievoet *et al.* (eds), *Langage et droit à travers l’histoire. Réalités et fictions* (Louvain [etc.], 1989), pp. 147–183; Marie-Sylvie Dupont-Bouchat, “L’invention de la prison moderne”, *Paedagogica historica*, 26 (1990), pp. 63–98; Marie-Helene Renaut, “Vagabondage et mendicité: délits périmés, réalité quotidienne”, *Revue historique*, 298 (1998), pp. 287–322.

area". The attraction of temporary work, mostly in the southern coastal area of the Republic, prompted a great deal of the movement that took place within this area. Shorter movements primarily involved hawking, or artistic or begging rounds over relatively small distances – probably functioning as temporary subsistence strategies. "Professional" ambulant activities, on the other hand, conducted on a more stable and probably more remunerative basis, typically involved men from the other two regions of concentrated origin, who not infrequently travelled in company-like structures: the Auvergnat metalworkers typically operated within a relatively small-scale area in which they lived temporarily, while the mobile salesmen and artists from the Alpine regions covered greater distances in a more continuous state of travelling.

In the parameters structuring these various patterns of mobility, different sets of "push" factors can be related to the "pull" factors at work. The general sociogeographical profile of those coming from and moving around within the "proximate core area" suggests that processes of proletarianization, impoverishment, and disintegrating livelihoods, prompted by the uneven general processes of socio-economic transformation, acted as important general "push" factors. Yet, this did not imply that the migration response was necessarily synonymous with dead-end despair and misery. Movements appear to have been structured in accordance with specific aims, motivations and pull factors, and were generally "efficient" in relation to the – modest – aspirations of providing some (supplementary) livelihood. The wages for temporary labour in the "North Sea system" were relatively high,⁴⁶ and most would-be workers appear to have succeeded in finding employment when on the move long enough. Likewise, the pursuance of small-scale hawking, "artistic activities" and begging on short-distance rounds, may well have constituted an essential and purposeful survival strategy in overcoming the structural vulnerabilities in the life- and labour-cycles of the eighteenth-century poor. Against a general "push" background of macroprocesses of societal transformation, then, more variable dynamics at the meso- and microlevel, like local custom, family status, sex, age, and schooling, are likely to have interacted with variable knowledge of "pull" factors in structuring the precise nature and direction of the mobility of detainees from the "proximate core area".

General macro push factors, such as increased pressure on land, were also evidently at work in the regions of origin of the Auvergnat and Alpine migrants during the period under consideration, increasing the overall incidence of movement from these areas throughout the second half of the eighteenth century. Yet, among those arrested in Brabant by the *drossaard*, the mobility of these "long-distance" migrants appears closest to resulting from something like a "positive choice". Such mobile activities appear to

46. Lucassen, *Migrant Labour*, pp. 28, 144-145.

have been executed on a more permanent, stable, and remunerative basis, and we might suggest that factors at the meso- and microlevels, especially long-standing local traditions of migrant labour specialization, sex, age, and schooling, were probably determinant over general macro push factors in directing the movements of these specific relative “elites” among the people arrested for vagrancy in Brabant.

Under close observation, then, none of the varied social profiles and migration patterns that characterized the people arrested and often convicted for vagrancy in Brabant in the years up to 1776 appears to correspond to the stereotypical image of the footloose vagabond, imbued with an aura of criminality, permanent wandering, directionlessness, or marginality. For one thing, heterogeneousness among detainees was undoubtedly as great as any differences vis-à-vis and among “normal migrants”. Of course, most of the *drossaard*’s prisoners were poor, and many were affected by some of the uprooting dynamics of societal transformation, but in this they did not differ from the majority of the population and migrants of the time. Most of their migration experiences fit intelligibly and meaningfully with patterns exposed and analysed on a wider basis in “regular” migration studies, and appear to have been guided by the same complex interplay of expectations, motivations, information, constraints, and opportunities. For most detainees, their mobility constituted a temporary and conscious income-pooling strategy, embarked upon from a sedentary basis, that probably constituted an important safety valve in coping with the increased – often cyclical – vulnerability wrought by the many destabilizing macroprocesses of societal transformation. Those on the move for longer periods were typically relatively well-off ambulant salesmen and tradesmen from the Auvergne and Alpine regions, who often also had a temporary abode in the area. Even those who had “exclusively begged” during their travels, most easily interpreted as a sign of utter despair and misery, defy any classic “vagrant” interpretation, in that they were typically on the move for only days or weeks at most, and that such “begging” figured as part of a purposeful survival strategy and/or general modus of downmarket travelling.

All in all, even with a lot of goodwill (or bad), hardly a fraction of the *drossaard*’s detainees can be fitted to the frightening or marginal image of vagrants that haunted contemporary elites and characterizes much of the historiography on the matter. Likewise, the evidence on popular support mechanisms towards travellers indicates that at least part of the populace had a more benign attitude, that is at odds with increasing elite stigmatization and with the classic thesis on declining hospitality throughout the early modern period.⁴⁷ Of course, the specific institutional

47. Rousseaux in any case does remark that the criminalization of vagrancy in Brabant appears to have been a process that was clearly initiated and directed top-down from the sixteenth century onwards: Rousseaux, “L’incrimination”, pp. 163–164.

conditions of the *drossaard* activity during the years studied spread a very wide net for potential “vagrants”. It is well possible that in periods of less activity, not boosted by bounties, arrests were more targeted on “criminals” – but whether these would on the whole have more resembled stereotypical “vagrants” remains doubtful.⁴⁸ Indeed, one might question whether typical vagrancy images *ever* corresponded to social reality, when even peak arrest activity in a period thought to be characterized by “floods” of vagrants yielded such meagre results.⁴⁹ But if not, or if only to a very partial extent, then why were such images so potent throughout early modern Europe, and the measures based on them so vigorously enforced?

The apparent contradiction between image, repression, and reality concerning vagrants exposed by the empirical findings of the present study, raises many substantial and intricate questions that may challenge some of our historiographical conceptions of social reality and social policy in early modern Europe. However, the “why” of social policy and vagrancy repression falls (far) beyond the scope of the present article. Possibly, sensational examples of the infamous “bandits” who *were* active in the Low Countries (as elsewhere) incited authorities’ concern out of proportion.⁵⁰ More generally, the heightened mobility and shifting labour demands of the closing decades of the eighteenth century may have interacted with local and general concerns – both old and new – about social control, labour market regulation and relief organization to stir a generally repressive attitude among various interest groups.⁵¹ However,

48. Cf. Goubert’s research on arrests by the French *maréchaussée* in the departments of Brie and Bicêtre, which shows how the installation of a bounty system in 1764 and 1767 not only boosted arrest numbers but also changed the dominant profile of those arrested: whereas “mere beggars” made up the majority under the bounty system, previously much more limited arrest activity had predominantly concerned deserters and petty thieves: Goubert, *Clio*, p. 266.

49. Comparison with the findings of other “vagrant studies” is difficult, as many were conducted within a very divergent methodological or theoretical framework, yet, where possible, most suggest that also at other periods in other areas most people arrested for vagrancy in reality constituted people “on the road” for “functional reasons”, most typically work related. Especially Beier, “Vagrants and the Social Order”; *idem*, *Masterless Men*, also Liris, “Mendicité et vagabondage”, pp. 76-77; Gutton, *La société et les pauvres*, pp. 123-211; Boucheron, “La montée”, pp. 71-75; Gutton, *L’état et la mendicité*, pp. 178-200.

50. See, for instance, Egmond, *Underworlds*; Erwin Steegen, “Kinderen van vagebonden in plattelandsbenden tijdens de eerste helft van de achttiende eeuw”, in Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly (eds), *Tussen dader en slachtoffer. Jongeren en criminaliteit in historisch perspectief* (Brussels, 2001), pp. 143-167.

51. On the complex concerns and motivations behind vagrancy and mobility legislation, see for instance Lis and Soly, “Policing”; Lucassen, “Eternal Vagrants?”; Anne Winter, “Divided Interests, Divided Migrants: The Rationales of Policies Regarding Labour Mobility in Western Europe, ca. 1550-1914” (M.Sc. thesis, London School of Economics, 2002). On the local mechanisms of exclusion of “outsiders”, see for instance Maarten Prak, *Republikeinse veelheid, democratisch enkelvoud: Sociale verandering in het Revolutietijdvak, ’s-Hertogenbosch 1770-1820* (Nijmegen, 1999), pp. 33-47, 121-131. An interesting perspective focusing on the interrelationships between repression towards mobile groups, police professionalization, and

only a profound comparative study of image, reality, policy, and practice concerning vagrants may begin to gauge the real meanings and motivations of the omnipresent vagrancy legislation in early modern Europe through space and time.

In any case, the circumstances and motivations of arrest practice and the heterogeneous social profile of those arrested in the Duchy of Brabant in the late eighteenth century clearly illustrate the inherent elasticity and semantic looseness of the term vagrancy. The crucial observation here remains that none of the characteristics of the “vagabonds” studied, other than their label, justifies their being considered as a distinct social category, let alone as a criminal or marginal “underworld”. The evident importance of contingent institutional conditions as ultimate determinants of arrest activity should caution us against any inferences about social reality from the nature, incidence, and intensity of repressive action against “vagrants”. Let us not forget that “vagrant” did not constitute a status that one *had*, but a status by which one was *labelled*. For centuries, this labelling constituted the crux of the various ways in which elite groups viewed, problematized, structured, intervened in, and tried to make sense of complex social dynamics of their time, distorted by power relations, interests, fear, and the limits of their understanding. Its interpretative elasticity made it pliable to various specific needs and preoccupations – not only those of various elite groups, but extending also to those of their personnel “in the field”. A concept so inherently biased and elastic as “vagrancy”, then, may indeed not constitute the best guide to historical insight into the complex social realities of migration.

Historical categorizations that explicitly or implicitly rely on the semantic assumptions of “vagrancy” as a meaningful social concept, therefore, not only run the danger of reiterating the prejudices and distortions of a dominant elite perspective, but are indeed also very likely to “obscure more than [they] enlighten”.⁵² Instead of an *a priori* dismissal and stereotyping of certain categories on the basis of an elite label, it appears a more fruitful approach to try consistently and consciously to situate and understand any form of mobility in its proper social context of limits, possibilities, aims, and expectations, and to integrate analysis of migration in a unifying theoretical framework that considers the role of mobility an “adaptation strategy”, however limited or wide its options and goals.

Moreover, historical “discrimination” of and against “vagrants” also leads to the ignoring of a corpus of qualitative source material. The present

state formation is offered by Leo Lucassen, *Zigeuner. Die Geschichte eines polizeilichen Ordnungsbegriffes in Deutschland, 1700–1945* (Cologne [etc.], 1996); Leo Lucassen, “Harmful Tramps: Police Professionalization and Gypsies in Germany, 1700–1945”, *Crime, History and Societies*, 1 (1997), pp. 29–50.

52. Lucassen and Lucassen, “Migration”, p. 20.

study has demonstrated how the rich and individual evidence contained in court cases against “vagrants” can provide insightful information on the “how” and “why” of patterns of mobility. To the often quantitative and post-factum nature of evidence typically figuring in migration studies, studies like this one add a qualitative view of actual movements, in the “blind spot” between departure and arrival. The overall findings of this study, in turn, illustrate just one of the many possibilities of analysis of the rich information contained in the sources of the *drossaard* tribunal. Priority has been given to a limited fleshing out of the overall macropatterns, but a more detailed approach that focuses more on qualitative individual evidence on the meso- and microlevels of mobility is also sure to provide interesting insights.

APPENDIX: A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

Sample, extrapolation, totals and representativity

A quarter of cases relating to men (2,012) and one-half of those relating to women (529) were selected according to the chronological order of prosecution. As this selection was resumed each new calendar year, 776 cases (507 men, 269 women) eventually made up the sample. To counter the female bias, the sample was then weighted for sex (men x 4, women x 2) in the extrapolation.

All analysis regarding institutional aspects of the tribunal relates to the total sample of court cases. “Social” analysis regarding the detainees themselves has been corrected for “double counts” (persons prosecuted more than once), leaving an extrapolated total of 2,474 different persons: 1,964 men and 510 women.

In the analysis of aspects relating to “mobile life”, a specific subgroup of ex-soldiers (8 per cent) was left out, as their prosecution and the relevant part of their interrogation on that matter were of a very different nature and quality from those of the other detainees. The soldiers’ specific motives for their mobility (mostly desertion), singled them out as a specific subgroup of detainees for which insightful analysis requires a separate study. As another 72 interrogations in the sample did not contain any usable information about the mobile experience, mostly due to institutional reasons, the findings on “mobile life” are based on a sample made up of 641 interrogations, which can still be regarded as representative of the mobile experience of all detainees, excluding the soldiers.

To avoid confusion as regards the different totals, the findings are represented in percentage points instead of extrapolated numbers. These relate to the total of cases in the relevant sample for which relevant information is available, as sporadic absence of standard information was typically due to formal institutional reasons, and such “missing data” did

not hinder overall indicative representativity by a disproportionate selectivity of the available information. Where relevant, the extent of available information is mentioned. Cross-correlations have sometimes been carefully extrapolated to correct for cumulated selectivity.

The operational method of “mobile phases”

The information about “mobile life” itself has been processed via the virtual concept of “mobile phases”. Such a “mobile phase” consists of six dimensions: (1) nature of movement (journey, “roaming”, or temporary abode; with or without a specific destination and/or aim in view); (2) length of time; (3) geographical area; (4) livelihood; (5) motivation, if differing from (4); and (6) company. A change in (1) nature, and/or (3) geographical area in principle introduced a new phase. This operational method served to retain most qualitative details while allowing collective comparison and aggregation of the available evidence. Aggregate results (e.g. overall sources of livelihood involved) were based on the presence of certain characteristics over the whole of the information (all the “phases”) regarding “mobile life” (most typically via dummy-variables), while some of the other more detailed and specific information (regarding one or more “phases”) was brought in when “fleshing out” the mobile patterns.

Starting point of “mobile life”

One of the most essential yet tricky aspects in the overall analysis of “mobile life” was the “starting point”. In principle this should consist of the transition from sedentary to mobile life, but this was impossible to establish unambiguously, not least because insight into the real sedentary status was hindered by the judicial preoccupations of the interrogators (see n. 23), but also because some forms of temporary “sedentarity” constituted part of “mobile life” itself (as with seasonal labour). To avoid arbitrary choices, I eventually kept the “act of departure” as it was presented in the interrogations, even when clearly some temporary abode had been had since then. Sometimes, mostly in busy periods, such explicit references to “departure” are moreover absent, and information is given only about recent whereabouts. For reasons of comparability, the time dimension was calculated only when explicit references to a departure from what was considered “home” were made (70 per cent). The period “on the move” thus takes the widest definition of “mobile period” possible together with the available evidence, and should therefore not be taken too literally – as is evident from further analysis.