

Introduction

The Paradox of Prosperity

This book looks at the operations of power in the Dutch republic through the eyes one group, the booksellers of Leiden and through the study of one important practice, the book auction. The case of the development of book auctions highlights a central paradox in early modern economic development, i.e. the development of new market strategies in the context of the traditional organization of work. In Leiden, the booksellers' guild negotiated a unique situation—this industrial town was the only place where booksellers successfully retained the right to auction books; a privilege that would have significant consequences for the expansion of book markets. Their efforts provide an interesting window into the machinations of power and the politics of consensus in Europe's leading republic, a paradoxical statement itself.

The book is a project of early modern history that does not, at first glance, appear to be a work of cultural history. This may seem paradoxical because the hallmark of early modern historiography has been the cultivation of cultural history. Several of the greatest historians of the twentieth century—Natalie Davis and Robert Darnton, to name just two, were early modernists who pioneered new and exciting approaches by delving into archives as well as the toolkits of anthropologists, sociologists, and literary critics. This book, on the other hand, seems to be a work of economic history, which has traditionally been almost antithetical to cultural history.