

Erasmus on money, war and princes

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

Erasmus wrote extensively on the duties of rulers. His views on taxation, coinage and war are directly relevant to the history of public finance. His *Institutio principis christiani*, the *Education of a Christian Prince*, published by Froben in 1516 and dedicated to the young Charles, contains a chapter on taxation that sets out principles which remain surprisingly modern.¹

Erasmus argued that a good prince should impose as few taxes as possible, that he should balance his accounts through frugality and avoid new levies, and that taxes should fall on luxuries and foreign goods consumed by the rich, sparing the necessities consumed by the poor. He condemned the debasement of the coinage as a form of theft from the people and demanded that the prince maintain the value of money. He criticised the sale of offices, the expense of courts and the waste of resources on war. His ideal was a prince who lived modestly, governed for the benefit of his people and regarded public revenues as a trust.

Erasmus's condemnation of war was one of the constant themes of his work. In his adage *Dulce bellum inexpertis*, "war is sweet to those who have not experienced it", and in his *Querela pacis*, the *Complaint of Peace*, printed by Froben in 1517, he denounced the wars of Christian princes as contrary to the gospel, destructive of prosperity and motivated by vanity and greed. He pointed out that war consumed the resources of states, ruined commerce and agriculture, and enriched only mercenaries and war profiteers.²

These views were written in a city that was a member of a Confederation whose economy depended in part on the mercenary trade. Erasmus knew the Swiss mercenaries and did not admire them. His pacifism anticipated, in a moral register, the argument that later made neutrality a pillar of Swiss prosperity: that peace is the condition of trade and wealth, and that a state that avoids war can devote its resources to productive activities. The Bank for International Settlements, whose founding purpose included the

settlement of the reparations imposed after the First World War and which today promotes cooperation among central banks, stands in a tradition of seeking economic arrangements that prevent conflict.

Erasmus's principles of taxation also deserve comparison with modern Swiss fiscal practice. The Swiss tax system, with its relatively moderate rates, its reliance on direct democracy for the approval of tax increases and its constitutional debt brake, reflects in its own way the Erasmian ideal of a frugal state that taxes with the consent of its citizens.³ Whether Erasmus would have approved of the use of low taxation to attract foreign wealth, a practice that has made Switzerland prosperous and controversial, is a question that his writings do not answer.

1 Notes

1. Erasmus, *Institutio principis christiani*, Basel: Froben, 1516, chapter on taxes and tributes (*De vectigalibus et exactionibus*). To be verified. ↩
2. Erasmus, adage *Dulce bellum inexpertis* (in the *Adagia*, expanded version 1515) and *Querela pacis*, Basel: Froben, 1517. To be verified. ↩
3. The federal debt brake (*Schuldenbremse*) is anchored in Art. 126 of the Federal Constitution (SR 101), approved by popular vote in 2001 and applied since 2003. To be verified. ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/basel-erasmus-on-money-war-and-princes