

Robin de Bruin, *Elastisch Europa. De integratie van Europa en de Nederlandse politiek, 1947-1968* (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 2014, 318 pp., ISBN 9789028423756).

European integration is not fashionable. This not only holds true for current public opinion in Europe, but also for historiography in most European countries. In spite of historians' current-day predilection for transnational approaches, they tend to leave aside what is arguably the most durable transnational collaboration of the postwar world. Arguably, this is because transnationalism is most often seen as an alternative to precisely Eurocentrism. Moreover, European integration is often understood as an institutional and technical process that does not sit well with the widely held assumption that true transnationalism is based on cultural transfers and entanglements.

At first sight, therefore, Robin de Bruin's book *Elastisch Europa* appears to be an exception to this historiographical bias. Although the book is less about European integration as such than about the Dutch political parties' reaction to that process, De Bruin does try to contribute to a fundamental discussion among historians of European integration: was it built on ideals of transnational brotherhood, or was it – in the famous words of Alan Milward – driven by the attempts of political leaders to 'rescue the nation-state'? On the basis of a wide array of Dutch sources, De Bruin develops the central thesis that – certainly until halfway the 1950s – transnational ideals did matter. The way these ideals were articulated and promoted, however, were deeply influenced by the national ambitions and ideals of the political actors involved. As such, the different political parties (and different groups within these parties) embraced European integration for divergent – sometimes even mutually opposing – reasons. Whereas most Socialists supported a greater European unity as a means to extend the welfare state, Catholics and even more the orthodox Protestants of the Anti-Revolutionaire Partij embraced that same process because they hoped it would blunt the impact of the state on citizens' life.

Another innovative contribution is De Bruin's assertion that Dutch politics, in its turn, were deeply influenced by European politics. Forms of interparty collaboration that seemed impossible within The Netherlands did materialize when the same actors met outside the Netherlands in the context of European meetings. Or, to put it in De Bruin's own words: 'Political discussions between representatives of national parties evolved more smoothly outside of the cheese dome of The Hague' (183, transl.

Marnix Beyen). The Catholic-Socialist government of 1956, for example, was apparently forged during a meeting of the Committee-Monnet in Paris. More importantly, Dutch Catholics and Dutch Orthodox-Protestants, according to De Bruin, grew closer to each other behind the scenes of European politics. Their common struggle against exaggerated state interventionism at the European level formed the breeding ground of the political cartel they created in 1980 (the Christen-Democratisch Appél, CDA), but also made the Orthodox-Protestants less fundamentalist in their anti-statism. European integration, therefore, was a crucial factor for the de-pillarization of Dutch politics. De Bruin's book, in other words, is not only about the elasticity of Europe, it also shows how Europe made the Netherlands – or at least Dutch politics – more 'elastic'.

If these results make *Elastisch Europa* into an important book, they also reveal the difficulty of writing about European integration in an attractive way. While a common public sphere was lacking, debates about Europe were held at different levels and in diverse places. Even if De Bruin only follows the Dutch participants in these debates, the image he depicts can only be highly fragmented. While having perused the archives of different political parties to reconstruct the variety of positions within the Netherlands, De Bruin does not offer a clear-cut methodological discussion. As a result, the reader is bounced back and forth between different places, between general observations and anecdotes, between public discourses and personal animosities behind the screens. Among all these gems scattered throughout the book, the larger narrative only pops up irregularly. After reading the book, the reader will have learned a lot about European and even more about Dutch history (and about mutual influences between both) – but she or he will probably not have become impassioned by the historiography of European integration.

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