



‘The Netherlands and the Polder Model’ - ‘Nederland en het poldermodel’

Endless rounds of meetings are not everybody’s ideal of efficient decision-making: but in the Netherlands since a hallmark event, the 1982 tripartite agreement on macro-economic policy between the Dutch government, employers’ organisations and the labour unions, institutionalised talks are considered the warp and the weft of the country’s social fabric and the key to its economic success. The Wassenaar Accord has come to represent a supposedly typical Dutch way of dealing with major issues confronting society through slow processes of consensus building in which parties learn to give and take. In a curious transposition of a stereotype formerly favoured only by tourists, the terms ‘polderen’ or ‘poldermodel’ for such processes betray their presumed origin, the need to weld very different social groups together in the country’s running battle against flooding.

A decade or so ago the term started to attract academic attention with projects designed less to test the poldermodel concept than to apply it to social processes in the past. With the new textbook (*Nederland en het poldermodel* [The Netherlands and the Polder Model]) by Utrecht History Professors Maarten Prak and Jan Luiten van Zanden the polder model may be said to have achieved full academic respectability. Asked to compress 1,000 years of Dutch economic and social history into a single 300-page volume targeted at a popular audience, the authors chose to do so by analysing the country’s ups-and-downs entirely in terms of its peculiar type of organisation, the polder model’s presumed strengths and weaknesses.

Such a conceptual approach to history offers the obvious advantage of providing an interpretative framework structuring the choice of what to tell, how to tell it, and what to leave out. The downside however, is the risk of the frame turning out to be a one-size-fits-all Procrustean one, a risk increasing with the time span that a concept is being made to cover. What place do we

assign to chance and change if a given society retains particular characteristics over centuries? Surely Dutch society today is not unique in suffering from too much talk. If it was so in the past, how do we explain others catching up? Then specific concepts can be problematic. In this case, the return to a geographically inspired concept to analyse a society's peculiarities might not appear to be the self-evident way forward.

This is all the more reason for organising a debate about Prak and Van Zanden's new book. The *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review* editors asked four experts in the social and economic history of the Low Countries, Karel Davids and Marjolein 't Hart (VU Amsterdam/Huygens ING), Jan de Vries (Berkeley), and Bert De Munck (University of Antwerp) to review it, paying particular attention to what the conceptual approach adds to our understanding of the country's marked economic fluctuations during the past millennium. Historians have always struggled to provide satisfactory overall explanations of why the Netherlands did well in one period and badly during another, the splendid success of the Golden Age and the lacklustre eighteenth century performance for instance, or the Netherlands' late industrialisation tied to a subsequent rapid growth of multinational corporations. As often as not cultural factors served to paper over such cracks, which did little more than shift the discussion to what caused mentalities to change. Some twenty years ago Jan de Vries and Ad van der Woude presented a radically different interpretation by hailing the Republic's seventeenth century heyday as the dawn of modern economic growth, but critics considered their explanation for the subsequent protracted period of relative stagnation not to be entirely satisfactory either. Meanwhile new insights have gained ground in suggesting that the economy did not perform all that badly during the eighteenth century, while Prak and Van Zanden's approach rooting economic performance in society's peculiar organisation tied to the time span of a millennium provides the debate with an entirely new dimension. How successful is this? We leave it to our readers to decide.

On behalf of the Editorial Board,

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