

Panel 1: Administrative history in the Netherlands: the State of the Art?

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Introduction

The Greek mythological figure of Procrustes had an iron bed into which he invited every passerby to lie down. If the guest proved too tall, he would amputate the excess length; victims who were too short were stretched on the rack until they were long enough. Nobody ever fit because the bed was secretly adjustable: Procrustes would stretch or shrink it upon sizing his victims from afar. A "Procrustean solution" can, accordingly, be described as the undesirable practice of tailoring data to fit its container. Max Weber already noticed how the story of Procrustes exemplifies the way in which historians and social scientists often confront each other. In a similar vein of Weberian pragmatism, Vincent Wright also once commented on the use of models in the fields of history and public administration and inherently came to discuss the so-called gap between social scientists and historians. Countering the accusation that models in history function as a Procrustes bed, he argued how the use of models and the search for generalizations:

"is not a plea for writing history backwards, for structuring history in the light of current preoccupations. It is merely a reminder that, perhaps, social scientists and historians [...] are locked into interdependency, and that inherent tensions should not prevent interaction" (op cit Raadschelders 1998: 38).

Luckily, many historians and social/political scientists have taken Wright's advice to heart, as becomes clear from the impressive amount of research on administrative history that combines in-depth historical work with social scientific models and 'middle-range' theories (cf. Raadschelders 1998; Mahoney & Reuschmeyer 2003; Pierson 2003; Skocpol & Somers 1980). Much, however, can still be achieved by focusing on interdependency and exchange. This is the central assumption of this panel.

The panel: what do we aim for?

With a panel on Administrative History we had two main goals in mind. First, we aimed to get an overview of the "State of the Art" of present-day work done by scholars in the Netherlands on administrative history (cf. Van der Meer & Raadschelders 1991). Administrative history is a discipline which borders on many academic fields of research such as public administration, (political) history and philosophy. While different departments of different Universities across the Netherlands are actively working on many aspects of Administrative History, much can be done to improve knowledge of each others' work.

Work that is being done includes historical research in Leiden and Amsterdam on corruption and values of public administration in historical perspective (<http://www.corruptionproject.nl>); research on early modern political and administrative history at the Erasmus Center for Early Modern Studies (<http://www.erasmus.org/index.cfm>); historical research into the foundations of Dutch democracy at the University of Amsterdam (<http://www.geschiedenis-uva.nl/index.php?m=studenten&cat=onderzoek>) and work at the University of Leiden on civil services and urban communities in historical perspective (<http://www.hum.leiden.edu/history/csuc/>).

What, we wished to know from this panel, are people working on? Which questions are being asked? Which themes are being addressed? What methods are being developed? What conclusions are being drawn and can we draw from interdisciplinary approaches? The panel thus aimed to promote interdependency and explore possibilities for enriching our way of conducting research.

The second aim of the panel was to increase our knowledge of public administration and politics in the Netherlands in past and present. Possible questions could have been: what are the origins of our present-day institutions? Where do issues of citizenship, citizen engagement or citizen participation originate? Can we increase our understanding of broad but slow-moving processes of democratization or bureaucratization? Can we see wider developments in thinking on ethics or correct public official behavior? Can we make sense of a public – private divide from a historical perspective? How do public services develop and are civil service systems shaped in the course of history?

A call for papers

Papers should ideally follow the aforementioned two basic aims of the panel. This, firstly, means that we especially welcomed contributions on methods of (comparative) historical research; interdisciplinary theoretical approaches and papers that might lead to discussions on the strengths and limitations of interdisciplinary approaches in administrative history and the current state of affairs within the discipline. Second, it means that we were especially welcoming papers on 'administrative history proper', defined as "the study on origins or evolution of administrative ideas, institutions and practices (Caldwell, 1955: 455) or as "the study of structures and processes in and ideas about government as they have existed or have been desired in the past and the actual and ideal place of public functionaries therein (Raadschelders 1998: 7). This broad definition, in our view, offers plenty of possibilities for a wide variety of papers with an emphasis on structures and processes, organizations and institutions and individuals within public administration and politics.

Linkage to NIG research program sub-themes

The types of questions raised above are (or should be) obviously closely related to the general themes within the NIG research program. In principle, any understanding of present-day issues and questions stated in any of the three research themes can benefit much from a historical, comparative approach. For example, theme one's emphasis on citizens and governance wants researchers to delve into changing relationships between citizens and public organizations. A historical comparative approach might just be the way to get a detailed view on such long term changes. As for assessing the "future of the nation state" (theme 2), this might benefit much from having knowledge of its past first. After all, issues such as centralization and regionalization have a long and complex history which (partly) accounts for the way in which they are being dealt with today.

References

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