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**The humanities in the Netherlands.
The role of the Research Council NWO**

It is generally accepted that the revolt of the Netherlands against the Spanish regime started with the beheading of two members of the high nobility of the Netherlands in the market square of Brussels, Count Egmond and Count Horne, both governors of the king of Spain — who had inherited these countries — and the subsequent Battle of Heiligerlee. These events of 1568 set in motion a sequence of political actions and reactions, leading to what would be the remarkable creation and rise of the Dutch Republic, one of the great powers of Europe. The first twenty years of the war were, however, not very successful and there were moments when there was ample reason for doubt about the soundness of the enterprise. One must have all the more admiration for the courage and endurance of the Dutch people of that time.

Several cities that had declared themselves for the Prince of Orange were besieged by the Spanish troops, some were lost for a while, like Zutphen and Naarden, which suffered atrocious massacres, and Haarlem also had to surrender. The climax of the struggle was the great siege in 1574 of Leiden, gloriously ending with the withdrawal of the Spanish army. The siege of Leiden was without any doubt the most exhausting in the history of the Netherlands. Stories about the starving inhabitants — 6000 of them died — and the courageous mayor who offered his body as food, are still told today. The offer was refused, by the way, and the mayor survived the siege, that was finally lifted because the wind turned and became a storm,

pushing the high water through the dikes which had been cut by the troops of the Prince of Orange in order to inundate the country around the town.

The Prince of Orange, as motor of the revolt, visited the town immediately after this victory, all towns of Holland contributed generously to relieve the citizens and — most important of all — the town of Leiden was offered a university.

The establishment of the university of Leiden in 1575 was a new step towards the independence of the northern Netherlands. According to the official fiction it was founded by the king of Spain, since the revolt was still declared to be against his advisors and governor-general. It was the first university in Holland — up till then the only university in these regions was that of Louvain (1425). Thus the States of Holland, the legislature, created the possibility of educating sons of regents and nobility to become professional office holders, staffing the emerging state. Equally important, however, was the fact that this university was the first protestant institution of higher learning. The university had not only a faculty of law for its civil servants, but also a faculty of theology for its ministers. It also offered humanist studies in the faculty of arts, as well as history and mathematics and medicine in the other faculties.

The university was founded on a humanist classical ideal and the faculty of theology was set up as a place for biblical studies, averse to dogmatism. The first year of the curriculum was devoted to humanist studies, regardless in which faculty students had enrolled. There was a certain freedom of choice, but the main course consisted of classical philology and philosophy.

Other provinces that had joined in the alliance against Spain — the Union of Utrecht of 1579, which was in fact the constitution of the Dutch Republic — followed the example of Holland and founded universities: in 1585 Franeker for the province of Friesland, in 1614 Groningen for the province of the same name, in 1636 Utrecht and finally in 1648, the year of the Treaty of Münster, the university of Harderwijk was founded on behalf of the province of Gelderland. Of these five universities, three still exist. Since then ten others have been added.

In order to give you an impression of the significance of the humanities in the Netherlands, and in order to draw lines from the dawn of the golden age to present day science policy, I will limit myself for a moment mainly to the developments at Leiden University.

In its first years it was a rather fragile construction. There were not many students, and the Board of Governors had to search Europe for great humanists to hire. With the turn of the political events, greatly due to the wreck of the Spanish Armada in 1588, and the growing confidence in the chances of the Dutch Republic, the position of the university improved considerably. Its rise was based, among other things, on the eminent protestant library. So it happened that in the early 17th century Leiden became one of the biggest European universities and the most prominent international protestant university. Students were attracted from all over Europe, but especially from

Northern Europe: Germans, Scandinavians, French, Poles and Hungarians made up an important part of the 50 percent of the university population who were foreigners (in 1590: 100, in 1640: over 500 a year).

The United Provinces rank together with France and England as one of the three chief centres of European thought from the end of the sixteenth century down to the early eighteenth century. Great humanist scholars populated the universities: Lipsius, Drusius and Scaliger at the end of the sixteenth century. Their outstanding accomplishment in classical philology was paired with an excellence in Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, Arabic, Coptic and Ethiopic. The mastering of languages as a necessary condition for critical knowledge in general — a feature that very much survives in parts of the faculties of arts of today — was regarded as a prerequisite to scientific development.

Why were these languages so important? It should be remembered that the scientific tradition had been in the hands of the Greeks and the Romans and was subsequently passed to the Arabs, and that the most important knowledge of mathematics, medicine, botany and astronomy came into our possession through Arab sources. Philology was a necessity for obtaining correct texts and the most plausible interpretation. Moreover, theology depended on biblical research, which made knowledge of Hebrew, Syriac and other Near Eastern languages obligatory. The protestant ministers received an excellent philological training and were able to conduct independent research.

The successor of Scaliger at Leiden, Erpenius, wrote a famous *Grammatica Arabica* (1613) — he had acquired his

proficiency in Arabic in Paris, where he had an Egyptian tutor. After his stay in France he had made a grand tour through Europe and met the famous scholars of his time. Erpenius's successor Golius became in his turn famous because of his *Lexicon Arabicum* (1654) that remained in use for two centuries.

I want to dwell a moment on the activities of Golius, as they are most illustrative of a development that continues until the 20th century. The university professors were often asked by the States to translate letters from Morocco or Turkey. Good relations with North African rulers were essential in the war against Spain; there was also the permanent threat of North African pirates — the Republic was very concerned to have ports of refuge for its ships on the Moroccan coast. In 1622 Golius was added to an embassy sent by the States General to Morocco to enquire about these possibilities. He remained in Morocco for two years, where he did lexical field work for Erpenius and bought a collection of manuscripts that is still in the University Library at Leiden. Not long after he was appointed the successor of Erpenius, Golius obtained paid leave of absence to go to Aleppo for a year and a half — he remained there eventually three years — and got almost a free hand in purchasing manuscripts: the Governors of the university gave him an allowance of more than 3000 guilders — six times his annual salary as a professor, an extremely generous sum for those days. In this way, and in others, the university library obtained in the seventeenth century a vast and rare collection of manuscripts in Near Eastern languages, which has ensured the university until this very day a prominent position in oriental studies.

The transition from an Aristotelian concept of science to a mechanistic view under the influence of René Descartes, who at the time was working in the Republic but not attached to a university,

brought deep differences of opinion into the intellectual world. The force of Descartes' philosophy was to integrate mechanistic insights into a philosophical system, but the various faculties of theology all protested. They opposed the Cartesian claim that parts of the scripture should not be construed literally, but interpreted figuratively and in terms of their historical context. The university of Leiden ordered that only Aristotelian philosophy should be taught. The *raadpensionaris* Johan de Witt had to intervene, and eventually it was decided that the university would teach Cartesian philosophy only in so far as the faculties of theology would not be damaged; explicit references to Descartes and problematic references to the bible were to be avoided. The conflict surrounding Cartesian philosophy very much resembled earlier problems that had arisen about the acceptance of the Copernican view of the universe. Even after philosophy had freed itself from its tutelage to theology, relations between them remained strained, and even today the two do not go together without difficulties.

One would expect that the commercial settlements of the East Indies Company in South and Southeast Asia would have had a direct impact on the programme of the universities in the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century. This, however, was not the case. The communication with the population of India, Ceylon and Indonesia remained for centuries a practical affair without consequences for research (there was occasionally some individual biological research). Even the unique and privileged position of the Dutch in Japan, where they were the only foreigners in a closed country, occupying the artificial island of Deshima in the bay of Nagasaki, did not give rise to a

chair for Japanese language and culture. The Dutch communicated with the Japanese officials through Japanese interpreters who mastered Dutch. It was not until the 19th century that a scientific interest became apparent. In Japan it was the German doctor Von Siebold, a member of the Dutch settlement, who took the initiative of starting a very interesting collection of whatever he could lay his hands on. This collection formed the nucleus of the Museum for Anthropology in Leiden and was also the incentive for the establishment of a chair in Japanese in 1855. In 1877 followed new chairs for Chinese, Javanese, Malay, Sundanese and Batak.

Although the government now needed Japanese translators, Chinese became at least as important because of the large Chinese population of the Netherlands East Indies. Gustaaf Schlegel (1840-1903), the first holder of the chair for Chinese in Leiden, had been sent as a 14-year boy to Amoy to improve his knowledge of the language, after which he was appointed translator at the Court of Justice in Batavia. There he started his scientific work, culminating in a Dutch-Chinese dictionary in 4 volumes (1882). The Netherlands Indies remained the stepping stone to China: his successor De Groot had also studied in Amoy and worked in the Indies. Ethnographic studies and language studies went hand in hand. He not only conducted research into rituals of the Bataks and the matrimonial system of the Minangkabau of Sumatra, but published also in 1910 *The Religious System of China*, a gigantic work in 6 volumes.

Just like the orientalist of the seventeenth century, Schlegel and De Groot started to invest in collections and the purchasing of books. The Chinese library of Leiden University is one of the most important in the world and counts among other things the library of the author and ambassador Van Gulik, donated after his death in 1968.

The development of these studies also made faculties of arts an excellent breeding place for comparative linguistics. Not without reason, different universities introduced Sanskrit as a basis for historical and comparative research.

The Dutch colonies became an extremely fertile field for the humanities; the studies of the languages of Indonesia reached a very high level and were stimulated again by rich collections of manuscripts. Scientific interest was here interwoven with practical considerations: the government badly needed knowledge of the languages and cultures of its territories overseas. Once the training of civil servants for the Netherlands Indies had become an academic task, scientific research was stimulated also from that side. Especially in Leiden the study of Indonesian law (*adat*) was a focal point. Religious studies such as Islamic studies were just as important.

Archaeology, which in the Netherlands had its roots in classical studies, also found new fields to explore in Indonesia and deepened the cultural and religious studies of this area.

Thus, in the nineteenth century, the faculty of arts acquired the rudimentary shape of the institution that it has become today. The study of Dutch literature and rhetoric and history, surviving from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, along with classical philology and near eastern languages, were the backbone of the humanities, to which far-eastern languages and linguistics were added. The study of modern European languages at the universities was introduced only in our century.

This history is of course very incomplete, but I hope I have given an impression of the basis

for the development of the humanities in the Netherlands.

Directly after the second world war the government, confronted with universities in which research had stagnated for many years and an industry that had to be built up again and that was in urgent need of scientists, decided to strengthen the infrastructure of scientific research by setting up a central organization that would coordinate forces and give a financial impulse where that should be most fruitful. This organization was to be the research council ZWO, later (in 1986) transformed into NWO by adding to its fundamental programme engineering and applied research.

The sciences, especially physics, had organised themselves very quickly after the war and had set up a foundation called FOM, that had arranged for special government funding for well selected and controlled research through a network of working groups in the universities. FOM was integrated into ZWO and, in that position, not only was the backbone of the research council, but also set an example in its way of organising the learned society. With a number of institutes for nuclear, high energy and plasma physics, FOM took the greater part of ZWO's budget.

In the following years it became clear that the researchers who had organised themselves into so-called foundations were able to present plans for the future and in doing so, could make large scale financial claims. The humanities remained a field where individual scholars worked on what were often long-term projects. So things remained until the middle of the seventies. If the humanities wanted to survive in the ever sharper struggle for funding, they had to unite.

And here we reach a difficult point. In contrast with the sciences, the humanities, although

covered by the same denomination, are far less unified than the sciences. Ever since Snow spoke about the "Two Cultures" there has been a permanent debate on the nature of the humanities. That they study quite different phenomena from science is evident. But many claim that the nature of the research itself is not so very different. Choice of theme, hypothesis, isolation of the subject of research, verification, adjustment of hypothesis: this is an accepted scientific method in all fields of research. However, quantitative methods have a very restricted significance in the humanities compared to science, and this gives room for a greater diversity of theories in the humanities. On the one hand, the fact that there are so many competing theories renders the humanities most interesting, but on the other hand it makes them extremely difficult to organise.

Nevertheless, the example of the sciences was followed and a foundation for linguistic research was set up. Because of theoretical differences within this area, not all linguists were represented; the institution aimed at generative grammar and experimental linguistics, like phonetics. After a while the foundation, with its working groups, was recognised by ZWO as forming part of the research organisation. From then on, humanities were no longer completely dependent on the uncertain outcome of individual applications, for a process was started through which claims could be made on the basis of plans accepted at least by a part of the scientific community. The foundation for linguistic research was broadened with researchers from fields with different paradigms, like descriptive linguistics and sociolinguistics. This unification caused great internal tension that erupted into several conflicts.

The establishment of the foundation for linguistic research happened to occur at a moment when the government, for political reasons, wanted to promote the humanities in the country. The board of ZWO was only too happy to be able to point to the latest developments and rewarded the recent planning of the linguistic association. This, of course, was an encouragement for others to follow suit.

Negotiations took place with historians and with literary researchers, that eventually resulted in the setting up of foundations recognised by ZWO for these fields, with scholars assembled in working groups according to their specialisation. Between 1975 and 1985 seven foundations in the field of humanities were created: for linguistics, history, literary research, theology, archaeology, history of art and finally philosophy. This set was completed with a working group for near-eastern studies.

Each year all the working groups had meetings to discuss plans and applications for projects, which the project leaders had to defend in public. On the whole the success of the enterprise was greater than one would have expected given the differences in theoretical background of the participants. In this respect the humanities had an enormous handicap compared to the sciences: theoretical differences were minimal in science and the claims by scientists were seldom contested; plans were usually unanimously judged good or bad. The plans of the humanities, on the contrary, were often severely attacked by their own scholars on theoretical grounds. It is hardly surprising that the scientists on the General Board of the organisation sometimes wondered what the real value of the planning in the humanities was. Nevertheless, the scholars in the different fields of humanities went through the difficult process of learning to collaborate, strengthening their ties and arranging programmes by which they could compete with the other areas in the research

organisation.

The process was stimulated by a science policy developed by the directorate general for science policy of the Ministry of Science and Education. This section had a scientific foundation laid by the science policy unit of Sussex University. This science of science developed a firm belief in the possibility of shaping the future of the scientific world. The promotion of the steering of scientific development required an organisational infrastructure, which the humanities foundations of ZWO could provide. The bottom up process was to make way for a top down approach. At the same time more attention was to be paid to the relationship between university research and societal demands.

In the meantime, the universities were struggling with the government for their future. From the eighties onwards there were several operations to cut their budget. These turned out to be quite damaging for the humanities; indeed, every measure seemed to be exclusively designed to endanger the further existence of these disciplines. This situation has provoked a flow of reports on the state of the humanities until this very day. Among other things, the system used by the ministry to calculate its annual financial contribution to the universities was mainly based on the number of students enrolled. This was an incentive for the universities to start major new sections that would attract many students, like European studies or cultural studies. These majors were for a while quite popular (and so brought with them badly needed funds), but majors who had always lived on a very limited number of students, because of their predominantly scientific character, suffered. In the course of

the years many universities lost or diminished their loss-making departments: oriental studies, history of Asian art, classical languages, historical linguistics. The reports I mentioned analysed the situation and made recommendations to alter the situation, warning of an important cultural loss.

At the same time the government started to implement its science policy by making disciplinary investigations into the condition, organisation and planning of the humanities: for theology, philosophy, modern languages, classical languages, history of art, oriental studies, and very recently Dutch language and literature. These investigations were usually made by international committees, and their final report contains recommendations that are discussed in different kinds of sessions. Last month I organised such a strategic conference in connection with the report on Dutch language and literature, which involved not only scholars from different universities, but also prominent persons in Dutch society who in some way or another are supposed to make use of the results of Dutch studies.

Most of these reports have had a clear impact. One of them was the report *Baby Krishna*, written by an international committee chaired by Frits Staal, a logician and orientalist from Berkeley, that made an analysis of the situation of the oriental and so called 'small' languages. The committee warned that because of the financing scheme used by the ministry of science and education, the old tradition and still existing expert knowledge of the field of oriental studies in the Netherlands might be lost. In the universities of Utrecht, Groningen and Amsterdam, irreparable loss was already a fact. The University of Leiden very clearly had maintained its position, although for instance Indology and Sanskrit studies, in which the Netherlands had occupied such an eminent international position, had almost entirely dwindled away. The minister took this report to heart; after all, knowledge of oriental languages and cultures is still also of economic importance to

the country. Additional funding was given through contracts with the universities and the research council in order to keep these disciplines on a safe level. Not only could existing positions in the universities be safeguarded, even new ones could be created here and there. This action was quite unique.

The question arose, and still is not answered, what the right volume of the humanities should be, as the financing on the basis of student numbers can have catastrophic consequences (the system has been altered somewhat in the meantime and is connected now with the success rate of the enrolled students, but the problems remain more or less the same). The government, under the constant flow of warning reports, including some from the Royal Academy, was aware of the dangers. It formed a committee chaired by the Governor of the Province of Groningen, H.J.L. Vonhoff, to which several persons from industry and commerce were appointed, together with some well known scholars. Their report *Men weegt Kaneel bij 't lood* (derived from a poem by Staring and referring to the fact that exquisite things are weighed on a very light, precise scale) appeared in February last year. It is not possible to go here into any detail of the conclusions of the report (which was also published in English); however, the main recommendation should certainly be mentioned, which is that the humanities should indicate a core domain that could not be touched without harming the discipline as such. Financing of this domain should be guaranteed. This was in fact asking formally the question of the right volume of the humanities.

The minister put the question to the assembly of deans of the literary faculties, who came up by the end of last year with a plan that nominated 240 out of about 280 official chairs in the literary faculties as protected

areas. Each chair should have a certain volume of full, associate and assistant professors. The minister consulted the boards of the universities, who were not unanimous in their reaction. Some claimed that in other faculties comparable problems existed and that by the proposed measure other fields could be harmed. In June this year the minister and the boards of five universities signed an agreement to maintain a broad and stable pattern of provisions for the humanities. Moreover, these universities agreed to consult each other whenever changes in chairs in the literary faculties were going to be considered. On the other hand the minister promised to change the financing system in order to make the literary faculties less dependent on the ever changing numbers of students.

I return now to the research council ZWO and its network of foundations and working groups. The government for a long time had problems with the research council, which was very reluctant to follow the science policy developed by the Ministry of Science and Education in consultation with the science policy department of Sussex University. The government saw new tasks for the research council and therefore felt that the law under which it was operating should be altered. This finally happened in February 1986 and ZWO changed into NWO, as I mentioned before. Under the umbrella of the new, small governing board (the representation of the universities on the most prominent governing body had been abolished), six research councils were set up, roughly corresponding to the former advisory committees. These councils were to play a far more active role, steering university research in the right direction through new financing schemes. So the research council for humanities took its place, with the seven foundations and the working group for near-eastern studies reporting to it. It was to be foreseen that this construction, which relied so heavily on a bottom up process and was rather

laborious, would not survive. In 1993 the governing board intervened; the operating bodies of the humanities council (and others) were abolished and replaced in January 1994 by four new foundations that were to function without the mass of working groups: the Foundation for historical research, the Foundation for literary, music and drama research, the Foundation for philosophy and theology, and the Foundation for language, speech and logic.

It goes without saying that the change did not take place without a great deal of discussion, especially about the question of which foundations were going to merge. The new system, using advisory committees that change quite frequently, functions fairly well. There is still some uneasiness about the merging of philosophy and theology — I mentioned the old feud over Cartesianism in the seventeenth century — and about the fact that logic has shifted to language and speech, but these are ripples in the water, I hope.

Some months ago, an international evaluation committee was appointed by the minister to assess the first seven years of NWO. In June its report was presented to the government. One of the recommendations holds that the four foundations in the field of humanities should disappear in order to increase the steering power of the research council.

Now, will the humanities lose their organisational structure that they needed so much in order to come forward with plans for the future? I don't think so. The picture that I have been drawing is not yet complete. At the beginning of the nineties, about five years ago, the government decided to set up graduate schools. These were to serve two purposes: to provide for Ph.D. training,

which did not formally exist in the Netherlands, and to create research centres of excellence.

The research council for the Humanities saw new possibilities for the development of a structure of the field, even though the working groups of the foundations still existed. It decided to support the plans for graduate schools on condition that they should have in general a national character. In this way the number of graduate schools could be limited, and given the size of the country, it was necessary to unite as much as possible the efforts of the researchers in the thirteen different universities. Finally about 12 graduate schools received the imprimatur of the Royal Academy. A few others are in the process of formation. Eight of them received a grant of a million guilders from NWO in their first year, that they could use in a period of two years. These years have passed for most of them. The research council for the Humanities has therefore developed a new financing programme that aims at intensifying the international collaboration of the centres. For instance, the graduate school for ethics has close ties with the University of Toronto on the basis of this programme. With this new structure the humanities will have sufficient supporting power for generating research programmes, investment plans and other demanding activities.

Traditionally the humanities made themselves visible in rather individual research projects, as I mentioned before. NWO, in the need to put its money on big programmes in the expectation that the impact of its research will be in accordance with this funding, invited the research council for the Humanities to follow the general lines: more programmes and less individual Ph.D. research, more strategic and less basic research. Science policy also demands that the research council should be aware of the needs of society. For the humanities this is a problematic assignment: the results of research in the humanities can be found

throughout society, but they are diffuse, used by everybody and difficult to identify. In the priority programmes of the governing board, the humanities managed to acquire 10 million guilders for an important programme called *The Dutch culture in a European context*. It is a blueprint for a united Europe, in which the national cultures should not be allowed to disappear. The programme will generate two series of books: a scientific one of about 35 monographs and another of 5 volumes for a broader public. This series will appear in 1998; an English edition will follow. The publishing of the volumes will be accompanied by a television series of 13 programmes on Dutch culture. A large staff of scholars is presently working on this enterprise. Four volumes of the scholarly series have already been published. The writing of the 5-volume series is in the hands of 8 authors.

Another success in the priority programme was the acquisition of 5 million guilders for the development of an automatic travel information system. This project in the field of language and speech technology is executed with the assistance of research divisions of Philips and KPN (Royal PTT Netherlands) and brought a collaboration between universities and industry.

Another example of fruitful interaction between research and society is the programme on Ethics and Policies — in which several ministries participate and which gives answers to questions in Parliament with regard to ethical issues of genetic manipulation, the admission policy for foreigners, or medical care. In addition to this overall programme, individual projects are chosen because of the excellence of the scholar.

A special programme provides only one, sometimes two scholars in the humanities with a grant of 1½ to 2 million guilders and a maximum freedom of spending on a research project of innovative character. The programme, called PIONEER, has 12 projects by now: 2 have been taken over by the universities. They include subjects like Himalayan languages, The neurological basis of language, Dutch literature and culture of the Middle Ages, Reconstruction of national accounts, Verbal art in audio-visual media of Indonesia. But I don't think that I should give you a full inventory of what the Research Council for Humanities is involved in at the moment, nationally and internationally.

There is a deep concern about the future of the humanities, in spite of the generally acclaimed results of the work in the universities. But with united powers we aim at improving the conditions of what has always been a magnificent and proud Dutch tradition.

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