



Comparing Dutch and German business systems in the 20th century. Utrecht: BINT project, Utrecht University, 10.05.2007-12.05.2007.

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What is the relevance of the nation state for the formation of business styles and business cultures in the age of globalization? To what extent and at what pace do national business systems change? Does a homogenization of world markets also lead to a homogenization of corporate mentalities? What are the criteria for the comparison of national economies that differ in size and historical development? Do the same economic laws apply to small and large national economies? The Dutch-German workshop on business systems approached these and more questions in five sections in which Dutch and German scholars presented and discussed their research results.

In his introduction, Werner Plumpe (Frankfurt am Main) emphasized the close interconnection of the Dutch and German economies. Their comparison promised to be very yielding in spite of their quite different sizes. Plumpe warned against a historiography that applied simple schemata to the richly varied business landscape and relations of the past. In particular, Chandler's ideas of modernization and backwardness has been refuted by empirical historical research. Rather, he pleaded for a business history that understands enterprises not only as factor-allocating organisations, but as historically grown cultural entities. Studies in business history therefore should focus on the social and cultural particularities that shaped entrepreneurial behaviour and scope for decision.

The first session dealt with the social background and recruiting of entrepreneurs. Dieter Ziegler (Bochum) and Ferry de Goey (Rotterdam) presented results from empirical research. Whereas Ziegler showed that the Ger-

man business elite remained relatively homogeneous and closed to upstarts, de Goey looked at a broader sample, comprising several hundred self-employed persons and was more interested in the social structure of the *ântrepreneursâ* than the recruiting mechanism of the business elite. The Dutch *ântrepreneursâ* showed a remarkably high proportion of persons without university education and relied on the family for recruiting new members.

The second session's topic was cartelization and concentration. Whereas after World War II, cartelization was abolished and regarded as nefarious in West Germany, the Dutch economy knew hundreds of cartels until the 1980s. Alfred Reckendrees (Cologne) sketched Germany's development from the *âland of the cartelsâ* to the *âland of competition policyâ* after 1945. Reckendrees argued that two factors were equally responsible for Germany's pronounced cartelization until 1945: first, the dominance of heavy industry which meant costly long-term investments, and second, the state's role that encouraged or enforced cartels. Bram Bouwens and Joost Dankers (Utrecht) asked for the sequence in collusive practices in the Netherlands. They showed that before the mid-1930s, the Dutch economy was run as a self-regulated networked economy with a minimum of state interference, but afterwards the state increasingly turned to protectionist measures and developed a positive attitude towards cartelization. After the co-ordinated markets of World War II, the Dutch post-war economy acquired the reputation of being a *âcartel paradiseâ*. This referred to the law in the first place. In actual practice,

the number of registered cartels decreased sharply in the 1970s, although it can be safely assumed that numerous cartels worked clandestinely.

In the third session on business culture, the papers by Werner Plumpe and Mark Jakob (Frankfurt am Main) and Erik Nijhoff (Utrecht) took different perspectives on the same topic. Plumpe and Jakob presented a bird's eye view on the development of the German business landscape since the 1870s. Taking into account the fundamental partition into major corporations and small and medium-sized companies, they emphasized the evolution of business structures adapted to splintered and heterogeneous markets in the late 19th century that remained typical well into the 20th century. The major caesura appears to have taken place in the 1970s, when the changing rules of international markets did not allow to continue traditional business forms, but led to structural uncertainties that in many cases remain unresolved to the present. Nijhoff focused on the creation of pension schemes in various business sectors before World War II. Nijhoff's detailed examination of pension funds in various branches revealed a strong connection of the peculiarities of certain trades (e. g., occupational hazards, staff structure) with the form that pension schemes took. Employers had mixed motives to erect pension funds, and did not proceed according to preconceived plans, but had to learn their lessons in establishing a pension scheme by trial and error.

Hein Klemann (Rotterdam) somewhat provocatively titled his key note speech: "Warum gibt es die Niederlande eigentlich noch?" (Why do the Netherlands still exist?). His starting point was a portrayal of the discussions about an annexation of the Netherlands by the German Empire. He pointed out that historians so far had neglected economic reasons that spoke for an independent state of the Netherlands. In order to corroborate statements in his sources that explicitly argued for Dutch independence out of economic necessity, he presented statistical evidence for a close relationship of economic development in both countries.

The fourth session dealt with innovation and technology. In her presentation, Mila Davids (Eindhoven) explored the mechanisms of knowledge transfer and innovation processes within companies. By comparing three different branches and times (the apple juice manufacturer Hero from the 1930s, Philips in the 1950s, and the printing firm Budde in the 1980s), she showed how the particular ways of dealing with innovation impulses and international competition were dependent on the knowl-

edge intensity of production processes as well as the institutional organization of innovation cultures. Christian Kleinschmidt (Dortmund) described the connexion of technology and innovation in post-war West Germany. West Germany's orientation towards the USA was crucial for closing the technology gap. The USA became the model for German enterprise not only because it was technologically advanced, but also because of its methods for management and business organization, which were adapted by major German firms during the 1960s. In the national context, German innovation networks persisted as well, as Kleinschmidt showed for the iron and steel industry and its co-operation with the Max Planck Gesellschaft.

The last section on 'business and state' began with Jan-Otmar Hesse's (Frankfurt am Main) paper. He showed the increasing state influence in Germany in the 20th century by highlighting the ratio of government expenditure to GDP and the traditionally strong position of state-owned companies. By using data about state subsidies, he raised the question how to evaluate the business influence on the state. Willem Camphuis (Nijmegen) contributed a presentation on the Dutch state's role in economic development. He focused on the "Social Economic Council" founded in the 1950s, an advisory committee designed to make suggestions for a corporatist re-organization of the economy, and especially this council's reaction to the socio-economic changes of the 1960s. Camphuis found that the radicalization of the trade unions and the hefty increases of wages and inflation rates showed a tendency to destroy the co-operative climate for negotiations.

In her conclusive speech, Keetie Sluyterman (Utrecht) summarized the comparison between the Dutch and the German business system in the light of the recent discussion on 'Varieties of Capitalism'. Although the sectoral structures of the two economies are quite different, the similarities seem to be more pronounced in the end. She cited the co-operative character of industrial relations, the stakeholder orientation, and the competitive order as examples.

The workshop left the impression that far more questions had been thrown up than answered. The participants addressed the problems of economic mentalities (a strong bias for trade in the Netherlands and for industry in Germany), the influence of US economic policy after World War II, traditions of economics in both countries, etc., without finding consensual answers to all of them. The conference showed the difficulty of finding suitable

criteria for a comparison of such a complex phenomenon will proceed with the inquiries after a promising start at such as business systems. A similar event is therefore Utrecht. planned for next year, then probably in Germany, that

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