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Boekbespreking van: Lokale democratie in Nederland

Castenmiller, P.

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S.A.H. Denters and P.A.Th.M. Geurts (eds.), *Lokale Democratie in Nederland: Burgers en hun Gemeentebestuur (Local Democracy in the Netherlands: Civilians and their Municipality)*. Couthino, Bussum 1998, ISBN 90-6283-053-6, f 44.50

Many social scientists and citizens alike feel that the quality of a democratic system is best expressed at the local level. Almond and Verba, in their famous book *The Civic Culture*, gave a number of reasons why they thought that local democracy provided a good context for their study: "The local community seemed a good place to begin, since political and governmental problems tend to be more understandable, the organs of the government less distant, the chances of effective participation for the individual citizen greater on the local level than on the level of national government. It has, in fact, often been argued that effective participation for the individual citizen rests on the ability of the individual to participate locally, for it is only here that he can develop some sense of mastery over local affairs."

If, however, local politics and the attitudes of citizens about this government tier really form the object of scientific study, the researcher regularly tends to become somewhat gloomy. The results are often disappointing. Sometimes this disappointment fosters a feeling of crisis about the functioning of local democracy. This was the case in the Netherlands after the local elections of 1990. The turnout in these elections dropped to an all-time low of 64%. The search for explanations was led by a group of Dutch scholars from various universities. In 1991 they published their report, that is usually referred to as the "Tops-report", after the coordinator of this group.

The empirical basis of this report consisted of a number of interviews that were held in seven of the largest Dutch municipalities including Amsterdam. The results did not indicate that there was much cause for alarm regarding the low turnout. However, the authors were pessimistic about the attitudes of many citizens concerning the functioning of Dutch local democracy.

This report had an enormous impact in the Netherlands. In view of certain shortcomings in the study, this effect is amazing. The analyses conducted were rather superficial. The empirical data were gathered in a very limited number of large municipalities. Because of their size, the results from these municipalities cannot be considered valid for most of the other, much smaller Dutch municipalities.

The researchers themselves were well aware of these shortcomings. Therefore, they conducted new research in 1993. This time, more than 1,500 Dutch citizens were questioned. These persons were selected in a much larger number of municipalities, including many small ones. Furthermore, persons living in municipalities where at least one locally-based political party was represented in the municipal council, had a higher probability of being included in the survey. These are called *communalistic municipalities*.

Many questions listed in the questionnaire were similar to those in the 1991 research project. But because more people, from a variety of municipalities, were involved in the new survey, the results had a much broader scope.

The report has now been published. In many ways it is a very impressive report. It just might become a classic on Dutch local politics. The central topic of the book is the scale of local government. What differences are there between smaller and bigger municipalities, and what does that mean for the quality and the 'ideal scale' of democracy in general? The authors seem to favour the smaller scale, and the empirical findings frequently tend to support their preference.

Denters and Geurts – who both work at the University of Twente – are the editors of this report. In their own contributions, they adopt a very thorough approach to answer the central questions. Whereas most of the Dutch studies about Dutch local government exclusively refer to other Dutch studies, Denters and Geurts frequently make use of international literature. This is not surprising, since the questions they try to answer are also relevant in other countries. Yet, this approach is quite uncommon in studying Dutch local politics. By adopting this approach, their work addresses general questions concerning local democracy. At least some of the answers to these questions might be found in the Dutch context.

In their own contributions to the book, Denters and Geurts adopt a strict scientific approach. At the outset they provide the readers with a summary of both Dutch and international literature about the topic at hand. They point out what is still unclear and therefore needs to be studied more thoroughly. Then they make a start on this more thorough exploration. To conclude, they point out which questions they have answered and which questions are left unsolved. In doing so, their contributions to this book might be considered as a real renewal of various insights and hypotheses concerning the functioning of Dutch local democracy. And, furthermore, they make some relevant contributions to the international discussion about the optimal size of democracy.

One of their topics is the satisfaction with the functioning of local government. They point out that some people seem to believe that everything should be bigger and faster, including government. It is only by being bigger that government can cope with modern problems. This might be called a modernization model.

On the other hand, they mention the existence of the political community model. According to this model, the scale of government should be the same as the scale of a social community. When this is the case, government is able to do a good job for its citizens. It is assumed that people like their community to be small. Therefore, the scale of government should also be small.

Denters and Geurts single out various assumptions in both models. These assumptions are then tested. The results are puzzling; it appears that neither model can explain the assumptions satisfactorily.

In another chapter the well-known concept of political efficacy is the central topic. Denters and Geurts point out that this concept is at least two-dimensional. First of all, political efficacy contains certain aspects that draw upon individual traits and attitudes. This might be called political competence. In the second place, the concept of political efficacy also contains certain aspects that derive from an evaluation of the functioning of the political system itself. This might be called political responsiveness.

Denters and Geurts show that individual traits like age and education are very important in explaining the level of political competence of individuals. The size of the political system is of hardly any influence. But it does make a difference for political responsiveness.

In yet another chapter Denters and Geurts focus their attention on political participation. They point out why and how political participation on a local level might be different from political participation on the national level. Furthermore, they show that political participation differs according to the size of the municipality. It is not just the amount of political participation that differs. The same applies to the social background of the participators.

The strongly 'academic' approach of Denters and Geurts has certain drawbacks. The reader is confronted with a huge number of hypotheses and sub-hypotheses that are all patiently and thoroughly tested. In their own chapters they tackle a number of empirical and analytical problems. They describe extensively how these problems have been solved and which analytical techniques they used to do so. For some readers this might not be a problem – they might even enjoy it – but it might prevent the book from becoming popular with the general public.

The other chapters in this book, written by different authors, are somewhat disappointing. In most of these chapters well-known results are reported, but now based on new empirical data. These chapters fail to provide the reader with new insights and new hypotheses. The authors of these chapters only seldomly make use of non-Dutch literature.

Tops and Depla once again show that the outcome of Dutch local elections is very much determined by national politics. This is the same for all municipalities, regardless of differences in size. Leijenaar and Niemöller establish that on the local level differences between men and women in their political behaviour are small.

A more serious limitation of the book lies in the time it took to publish it. Since the data was gathered two new local elections have taken place, in 1994 and in 1998. Some of the authors make some references to the outcome of the elections in 1994. But the elections of 1998 remain unnoticed. In 1998 the turnout was even lower than in 1990. Furthermore, in the elections of 1994 the results of many locally-based parties were remarkable. Traditionally, these parties had been strong only in the southern provinces of the Netherlands. During the local elections of 1994, they were also successful in other provinces. In 1998, they managed to remain strong, though they seem to be on the way out in a small number of municipalities. The mechanisms behind these processes have yet to be unravelled. Regarding the strength of locally-based parties in Dutch municipalities, the book was, as a result, already outmoded at the time of publication.

All chapters address questions concerning the quality and scale of local government. For years to come, the book will be seen to contain the ultimate proof that "small is beautiful". Those who oppose municipal amalgamations will use the findings of this book to support their case.

However, I myself am not convinced. The evidence is often very weak. Sometimes it took the authors a long time to find any evidence at all. In a few cases, the authors mention some relations that suggest that local democracy prospers within smaller municipalities. In the following sentences, however, they remark that these relations proved to be statistically insignificant. I feel that in that case the authors should have refrained from mentioning these relations at all.

All in all, the report is of great significance for the small number of Dutch scholars who have shown a genuine interest in the functioning of Dutch local democracy. The book also contains interesting material for political scientists who deal with questions concerning the scale of political systems. Yet, it is a pity that not all of the chapters are of the same quality. The lack of balance in the book is disappointing. The book might be characterized, therefore, as a missed opportunity to publish a really remarkable 'classic'.

Peter Castenmiller

Alena V. Ledeneva, *Russia's Economy of Favours. "Blat". Networking and Informal Exchange*. Cambridge U.P., Cambridge 1998, ISBN 0-521-62734-5.

Alena Ledeneva has written a fine book about a most important feature of the Soviet Union's real-life economics: *blat*. "*Blat* is the use of personal networks and informal contacts to obtain goods and services in short supply and to find your way around formal procedures." (p.1) A central argument of her book is that, "*blat* should be considered as the 'reverse side' of an overcontrolling centre, a reaction of ordinary people to the structural constraints of the socialist system of distribution – a series of practices which enabled the Soviet system to function and made it tolerable, but also subverted it." (p.3) Ledeneva concentrates her analysis, "on how *blat* merged with the Soviet system as seen from the perspective of ordinary people – that is how people dealt with policies and ideological demands of the state and how the realities of social life shaped their experiences and actions." (p.10) Her study is to a large extent based on information gathered in 56 in-depth interviews. Ledeneva (p.3): "The book contributes to the debate among social historians about the self-subversive nature of the Soviet system [...], seeking to transcend the totalitarian concept of the Soviet system. I argue that the phenomenon of *blat* – aimed at acquiring desired commodities, arranging jobs and the outcome of decisions, as well as solving all kinds of every day problems – became a pervasive feature of public life." Ledeneva's reference to "public life" in this summary statement of her argument is, in my opinion, somewhat misleading in that the informal character of *blat*, and the personal networks bound up with *blat* precludes placing *blat* in the public sphere. *Blat*'s place, in my view, is in the 'interface' of public and private. *Blat* is (was) a complex of ways – other than the market – by which (parts of) what was supposedly public was being (and is being) privatized. In her last chapter,