



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Boekbespreking van: Mosterd bij de maaltijd

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Citation

Kolk, H. van der. (1998). Boekbespreking van: Mosterd bij de maaltijd. *Acta Politica*, 33: 1998(3), 317-319.

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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Book reviews

Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid, *Mosterd bij de Maaltijd, 20/25 jaar Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid, (Not too late in the day, 20/25 years Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy)*, WRR, Den Haag 1997

The "Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy" (WRR) is a think-tank closely related to but formally independent of the Dutch government. It was founded in 1972 and established by law in 1977. Therefore, in 1997 it celebrated both its 20th and its 25th anniversaries. This event was commemorated, not with a memorial volume, but, according to the introduction, with "a thematic study about the functions of organizations like the WRR (that) tries to fill in the gaps in the perception of how such organizations operate." From a typographic point of view the book is a beauty containing, among other things, a series of marvellous photographic portraits illustrating the interviews with some well-known (former) politicians, social scientists and representatives of established pressure groups in the second part of the book.

The contents of the book fall into three parts. The part with the interviews is preceded by four reflections upon the functioning of the Council. These articles are (co-) authored by members of the WRR. The third part provides information about other think-tanks all over the world, a list of Council publications and a list of (former) members of the Council. Much of the information contained in this part of the book can also be found on the website of the WRR: <http://www.xs4all.nl/~wrrhome/>.

Both the first and second parts of the book are dedicated to the difficult and changing relationships and potential conflicts between governmental policies and the social sciences. Can social science contribute to policy? How close or how distant should social scientists be in order to keep their independence without becoming politically, socially or scientifically irrelevant? Does politics (mis)use science? Should a think-tank under the responsibility of the government assume the critical role that is usually associated with 'science'?

The establishment of the WRR was a result of two things. First, politicians' great expectations about the ability of the social sciences to provide tools for social engineering. Second, the willingness of representatives of the relatively new social sciences to present themselves as a useful and indispensable part of society. Both politicians and scientists shared the opinion that the social sciences would become as

successful as the technical sciences in solving social problems. Although some of the proponents of the WRR even tried to charge it with the task of becoming a truly technocratic institute "offering policies for the future", the prime minister of that time, Den Uyl, stated clearly in 1976, that the "WRR has to present the material – systemized knowledge, documented knowledge – as objectively as possible, but the choice of these is a political one." According to the founders of the WRR, social scientists had to predict the future and determine the effect of alternative policies. Politicians had to choose from these policies. Scientists describe what is and will be, while politicians determine what ought to happen.

Fairly soon, however, this simple scheme proved to be too naive. The predictive powers of the social sciences appeared to be limited. The WRR produced an integral study about the future of topics like crime, economy, politics, unemployment, etcetera in the Netherlands. According to C.J.M. Schuyt, professor of sociology and a former member of the WRR: "Ten years later, all the predictions made in this report were outdated." As a consequence, forecasting became a less important part of the WRR's work and instead it focused on in-depth analyses of existing social problems and governmental policies. A good example is the report about Dutch industry, published in 1980. According to some of those interviewed in the second part of the book, this report was one of the first to stress the importance of Dutch industry with respect to its contribution to employment and economic growth. Following the anti-capitalist 70s, the WRR made industry fashionable again in the political discourse by stating that industry contributes to higher levels of employment.

Despite the original scheme whereby scientists provide knowledge and politicians make a choice, the work of the WRR is not restricted to positive analysis. Reality is too complex to use the fundamental gulf between *is* and *ought* for an institutional division of tasks. It became clear that political goals were often too vague and often merely defined in terms of symptoms. Therefore, the WRR also discusses questions originally assigned to the realm of politics. A good example is the analysis of the word "unemployment" as used by politicians and civil servants. The WRR established that some policies intended to reduce the level of unemployment were merely causing a shift of persons from one category (unemployed) to another (disabled, early retired). In a few instances, these policies also reduced the number of employed persons. Therefore, the WRR proposed using the term "labour participation" in order to define the problem anew. Clearly, this proposal has political and normative consequences.

How is the work of the WRR evaluated by 'outsiders'? In order to answer this question, W. Breedveld, journalist, interviewed nine well-known (former) politicians, scientists and representatives of established pressure groups. Most of them are mildly positive about the work of the WRR, although it is considered by most interviewees to be a bit boring. As the mayor of Utrecht, I.W. Opstelten says: "I never caught myself being at all nervous about the things the WRR might say." Some of the interviewees attribute this to the difficult balance between, on the one hand, staying close to day to

day politics, and therefore running the risk of being superfluous or politically controversial, and, on the other hand, being too abstract and detached, and running the risk of being useless. According to most 'outsiders', the WRR would lose respectability and independence if it became too 'applied', but it would also lose relevance if it became too 'scientific'.

All interviewees agree that the WRR is an agenda setter, contributing to the public debate. As A.H.G. Rinnooy Kan, former chairman of the Dutch employers association, says: "The least we can say is that the WRR has made some tricky questions debatable." As an agenda setter, it is of course partly subordinate to the government, because the government can decide what will be analysed. However, most of the studies were initiated by the WRR itself. The topics chosen by the WRR, and by implication its contribution to the public debate, are also mildly criticized. For example, P. Winsemius, the former minister for Public Health, Town and Country Planning and the Environment, says that in 1982 he was astonished to hear that the WRR had not written about Town and Country Planning or the Environment since 1974. This did not improve until after 1990. A cause of this is mentioned by, again, Rinnooy Kan. According to him, the Council is not challenged enough by other scientific institutions.

How can that be in a country overgrown with commercial research institutes, scientific institutes of political parties and ... universities? G. Schutte, member of parliament for the Orthodox Christian Party GPV, thinks that "Universities are often too compartmentalized or dependent on commercial money. As a consequence, they serve the foundation of only one specific policy sector." Hirsch Ballin, former Minister of Justice, agrees: "Of course one could give the work of the Council to universities. However, despite the fact that there is no doubt about their independence or scientific integrity, this would lead to crumbling and a lack of coherence. This reinforces the support of existing policies." All of this means that, according to some at least, a think-tank closely related to the Dutch government is more able to stimulate public debate and more able to give an overall critique of existing governmental policies than the social science departments at the Dutch universities. So, having not redeemed their promise of becoming a predictive science, the social sciences also seem to have lost, at least in the eyes of some, their critical function as a consequence of their strong departmentalization. Let us hope that this critique does not come too late in the day.

Henk van der Kolk