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## The state of the Delta. Waterworks. Waterworks, urban development and nation building in the Netherlands

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Han Meyer, *De staat van de Delta. Waterwerken, stadsontwikkeling en natievorming in Nederland* (Nijmegen: Vantilt 2016, 237 pp., ISBN 978 946 004 269 0).

The central thesis of this book is that the political history of the Dutch state is closely intertwined with the control over the sea and the estuaries of the rivers Rhine and Meuse. This is of course not a very original thought, ‘polderen’ is generally seen as a second nature of Dutch politics, and the continuity in the structure of the polder districts over the centuries, and its impact on Dutch public administration is unprecedented in the western world.

In this book Han Meyer, professor in town planning at the University of Delft, does not take the governance of water control as a point of departure. Rather he concentrates on the physical and economic incentives that should explain the emergence and the success of the Dutch nation-state. His primary interest lies with the hydraulic infrastructure that protects a large part of the Netherlands against flooding and, in the form of waterways and harbours, enables the flourishing of Dutch economy. He argues that the creation of Dutch cities and the Dutch state and the formation of the Dutch nation-state were driven by the sheer physical necessity to control the sea and the rivers. In fact Meyer explicitly refers to Braudel’s *longue durée* as an all-encompassing model of explanation. The result is rather disappointing, if only because Meyer has completely ignored the by far most important recent book in which the Dutch economic *longue durée* is related to the political history of the country: Prak and Van Zanden’s *Nederland en het poldermodel* (2013).

In the first two chapters Meyer retells the well-known story of the human effort to shape the Dutch landscape and the birth of a modern city-based economy. Meyer consistently relates the development of political institutions to the natural or artificial changes in the estuary. He argues that the rise and decline of cities depended largely on physical conditions, that could only very partially be mastered by human intervention. Of course this highly simplifies Dutch political history by ignoring foreign influence, the dynamics of the economy, human agency, etcetera.

In chapter three Meyer argues that from the eighteenth century onwards the Dutch civil engineers gained control over the rivers and the sea and started to develop some kind of planning doctrine: a more or less coherent set of ideas about the development of the physical environment. Meyer links this to burgeoning feelings of national superiority with regard to moral values and technical and scientific skills, but his main interest remains with the way the Dutch face the physical challenges of living in an estuary. Only scant attention is paid to the formation of the Netherlands as a constitutional

monarchy. Of course the proverbial role of King William I in the digging of canals is sketched, but Thorbecke, by far the most important statesman of the nineteenth century, is only mentioned with regard to plans for the development of Dutch harbours.

Meyer abandons his effort to link state- and nationbuilding to planning and hydraulic engineering in his chapter on the twentieth century in which he again almost completely ignores recent historiography, on nationbuilding and Dutch politics. The main part of this chapter consists of a summary of the history of the Zuiderzee land reclamations and of the Delta Works after the flooding disaster of 1953. The chapter offers some references to national identity but does not offer any new insights. In chapter 5 Meyer embarks on what appears to be the ultimate goal of this book: a detailed study of the recent planning doctrines with regard to the Rotterdam metropolitan area, embedded in an interesting, complicated and detailed discourse on the relation between planning doctrines and technological innovation. Meyer has published widely on this topic and it appears as if he has written this book to add a politico-historical dimension to his scientific work on the development of planning doctrines in the Dutch delta. The result is a well written and beautifully illustrated, but poorly documented book, with no added value outside the confines of planning history.

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