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# *Never mind the gap: Comparison in political history*

INAUGURAL SPEECH BY PROF. DR. WIM VAN MEURS

*in au  
gurele  
redo*

*change perspective*

Radboud Universiteit



## INAUGURAL SPEECH

PROF. DR. WIM VAN MEURS



Historians and political scientists share ‘politics’ as a research object, with both academic disciplines complementing each other. However, in the public debate and in policy advice, historians are less visible. In the media, the political debate that takes place in The Hague and certainly in Brussels is

increasingly reduced to a power game and the call for more participation and control by citizens. Historians have provided added value in the matter-of-fact analysis of the always-controversial electoral tightrope, other forms of participation and advocacy, policymaking, institutions and political strategy. Historical research offers insight into the shifts in this balance (as well as their causes and/or motives) instead of simple solutions or pointing to democratic deficits. Comparisons with other countries and analyses of policies and their implementation as the result and goal of politics deserve greater attention, both in academia and in the public debate.

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NEVER MIND THE GAP:  
COMPARISON IN POLITICAL HISTORY



## **Never mind the gap: Comparison in political history**

*Inaugural speech delivered at the acceptance of the post of Professor of European Political History at the Radboud University Faculty of Arts, on Friday 16 March 2018*

**by prof. dr. Wim van Meurs**

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## INTRODUCTION

- “You dare call that ‘science’?! What you’re doing is just storytelling! No theory, just wordy speculation!” [the political scientist exclaimed]
- “How dare you! Reducing everything to a handful of arbitrary, ‘quantifiable’ criteria to suit your ‘theory’ ... Is this the kind of ‘knowledge’ we really need?” [the political historian shouted back]

What I’ve re-enacted for you here is the precise moment that an “interdisciplinary” conference devolved right back into a “*multidisciplinary*” gathering. The falling out of two esteemed colleagues took me by surprise; I was taken aback by the sheer crudeness of the altercation. And yet, classical stereotypes so often determine the course of communication between historians and political scientists. These colleagues felt slightly uncomfortable because of the raised voices; they were not at all uncomfortable with the “arguments” employed. Most conference participants were indeed in agreement that political science and history as disciplines are better kept apart.

And so the first of the three “gaps” that I would like to address in my lecture today is this schism, between political science and political history. Political scientists and historians share three interests: politics (or decision making), policies (those decisions’ implementation) and polities (the organised societies in which all this takes place). But at most universities their “*political studies*” are carried out in different schools – the social sciences and the humanities, respectively. Academics largely ignore their colleagues on the other side of campus, and only reluctantly make use of each other’s concepts and results.

Meanwhile, open-minded *reflections* on the compatibility and complementarity of the two disciplines are few and far between. Most are contrastive: theory versus narrative, quantitative versus qualitative, prescriptive versus descriptive, etc. One reflection on the gap between political history and political science that I found employs an elegant metaphor that likens history to Machiavelli and political science to Hobbes.<sup>1</sup> Hobbes was determined to identify structural patterns in politics as the basis for predictions, whereas Machiavelli acknowledged the mercurial character of politics that favours experience over inflexible rules or lessons. This same paper goes on to argue that the size of the gap between the two disciplines has varied over time. Historians have not changed course much, but in political science the strong belief in quantification and determinism has gone in and out of fashion; in moments of strong belief, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century or in the fifties, for instance, its distance from history grew. But if we see the discrepancies between nomothetic political science, which seeks to uncover the laws of political behaviour, and idiosyncratic history, committed to fully understanding a unique case, as basically fundamental, these variations in distance are ultimately irrelevant.



Arguably, comparative politics long ago toned down its scientific ambitions. Middle-range theories have replaced grand, universal ones. Since the eighties, neo-institutionalism and the unwritten rules of the political game have brought “bounded rationalities” to the table. Further, political scientists have discarded the mechanical, ahistorical concepts of “path dependency” and “historical legacy.” In historical institutionalism, “critical junctions” identify episodes of crisis and we accept that their outcomes may be either system consolidation or radical change.

Giving up on determinism makes *political scientists* much more sympathetic to historians, who shy away from predictions of any kind, even when they concern the past. Political scientists have also introduced “process tracing” as part of their qualitative toolbox which, unlike the determinism of causation, allows for variation and uncertainty in causal effect. Some naïve historians have argued that this technique – of tracing ideas, factors and agents – is nothing more than a version with a fancy name of what historians have been doing for centuries. And they’re absolutely right!

For this *lecture*, I will identify two lessons for historians from political science and vice versa. I use two published books of mine and two new projects to make my case: an older book on the building of state institutions in the Balkans and a brand new textbook on the history of European integration. One work in progress is a book on the role of peasant parties in eastern Europe in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The other is a book on two centuries of nature conservation and environmentalism in the Netherlands. I am fully aware of the commitment inherent in what I just said in that last sentence; the director of research is sitting right behind me, taking mental notes.

#### LESSONS FOR THE POLITICAL SCIENTIST

The two issues where political scientists may take a note from historians concern contextualisation and historiography. Contextualisation refers to embedding ideas and institutions in a broader frame of societal and political development, as every political thinker and actor is shaped by his time. From the historian’s perspective, absolutely nothing should escape the rigors of contextualisation, including the historian himself. Political scientists, conversely, use universal definitions as a rubric, uniform and impervious to time, in which to compare political systems and policies. To them, context is a distraction to be minimised rather than focused upon. If there is an essential gap between the two disciplines, it is not the absence of theory in history, but rather the epistemological status of theory “above history” for political scientists. For a historian, “theories” are but the works of other academics that have “aged well.”

In our recent textbook on the history of European integration, each chapter, which are ordered chronologically, includes a section on the dominant integration theory of that

particular decade; neo-functionalism in the fifties, constructivism in the nineties, etc. Political science textbooks have offered much more sophisticated and elaborate overviews of theory building. But these overviews fail to contextualise the theorists, with the possible exception of the link between Jean Monnet's functionalist strategy and Ernst Haas's neo-functional theory. And tying theories to political realities can help students tremendously in understanding where these ideas came from.<sup>2</sup>

Where a political scientist applauds timeless and "well-defined concepts," a historian may discern an *anachronistic* and thus normative use of concepts. For instance, political scientists studying European democracy and Europe's democratic deficit invariably take 1979, the year of the first direct elections to the European Parliament, as their starting point. In doing so they ignore highly relevant pre-existing forms of citizen participation and interest representation on the European level as well as the dynamics of representative claims by European institutions.<sup>3</sup> Anachronism may constitute a serious methodological flaw, but may also turn out to be productive. Driven by today's surge in referendums and ever-closer civic control over politicians, historians have revisited the early stages of European integration. Some have done so merely with the aim of proving that the European project has been undemocratic from the start. Others have revealed new insights into ideals and practices of representation, despite the anachronistic origins of the research question.

On to the second lesson for the political scientist. To my mind (and I know many of my colleagues will fiercely disagree), the true mastery of the historian lies in historiography, that is, his command of the work of other *historians*. A historian takes his clues from the most recent celebrated studies in his field, but also from academic texts that are twenty or fifty years old or from partisan contemporaries. Thus, the distinction between primary sources from archives and secondary literature from libraries is largely fictitious. The transition from contemporary and eyewitness to hindsight, from political involvement to academic distance, is a gradual one. Political science is defined by the quintessential gap between abstract theories and empirical data, but the historian's toolbox is far more versatile in research design thanks to this continuum, from primary sources to academic literature and theory.

For political scientists (and for many undergraduates in history) *historiography*, the coming to terms with this overwhelming and disorganised pile of old and new books, multilingual articles and untraceable papers, is a genuine ordeal. For the hard-pressed political scientist testing a theory for a dozen countries or more, the writings of historians – the result of countless hours sifting through and verifying information from archives, newspapers, websites, etc. – constitutes an indispensable source. For his study to be based on more than quantitative data sets, he has simply to rely on the ground-work laid by historians. Of course, history is not the objective mirror image of past re-

alities and historians hold different views. Therefore, the political scientist will always be able to find a historian who neatly fits his theory. But how to ascertain that this historian is not a historiographic “outlier”? The most reliable view of history is not the mean average of all available opinions in the field.<sup>4</sup> Finding one’s bearings in historiography is indeed an art.

My current book project, for instance, is based on a *critical review* of historiography and no archival or other fieldwork. It will integrate the history of nature conservation in the Netherlands since the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the interwar utopian projects of land reclamation in the former Zuiderzee and the environmental activism of the seventies. The study links Jac. P. Thijssen to the rewilding of the Oostvaardersplassen. It also compares Staatsbosbeheer and the Ministry of the Environment to developments in neighbouring countries. Why? Simply because existing histories tend to carefully separate these narratives. Partisan literature on the social movement against nuclear power and industrial pollution in favour of sustainability and biodiversity since the early 1970s has all but eclipsed the story of older conservationist activism and environmental policies by national governments and intergovernmental organisations.

#### LESSONS FOR THE POLITICAL HISTORIAN

Our first lesson for historians concerns public relevance. Historians often envy political science for its *high-profile* presence in the public debate. To my mind, however, historians have only themselves to blame for neglecting two topics of public and political relevance and visibility: European integration and policy studies.

I recently asked an audience of more than a hundred political historians: which among them would consider him or herself a “dedicated historian” of *European integration*. Only a handful came forward. For political scientists, European integration is a recognised field of study, on par with comparative politics, international relations and political theory. In history, European integration hovers between national history and diplomatic history. From the beginning, historians have been *reluctant* to embrace European integration as a research topic. For decades they could blame the lack of access to primary sources for neglecting the evolution of the Paris and Rome treaties. Today, however, the source problem has been turned on its head: too many member states, too many archives and too many languages. The academic literature on politics, politics and policies of the European Union is expanding exponentially, but the historians’ share remains disproportionately small.<sup>5</sup> One of the primary reasons for these reservations amongst historians is certainly a preference for high politics, representative institutions and political ideas over low politics, multi-layered governance and the dissemination and implementation of policies. In this way, European integration is closely linked to the historian’s second neglected topic, *policy fields*, as Brussels is all about processes and policy fields, governance rather than politics.

The second lesson for historians rests on the undeniable fact that political scientists pay far more attention to comparative research *design*: MSSD/MDSD, representativeness, variables, hypotheses, etc. Here, before I continue, an *apology* is in order. Years ago, I participated in a German seminar for PhD students in history. One presented his project, a comparison of six cities in four different countries. His conclusions boiled down to the reassuring confirmation that each of these cities has a history all its own and that they were thus incomparable. Only differences stood out in his descriptions. I asked, somewhat naïvely, what exactly was the added value of the comparative approach for his project. He gave me a rather condescending smile and said: “Well, of course, comparison identifies similarities and differences.” I responded with a cold stare and said nothing. „Transnationaler Forschungsansatz“ ... „komparative Gegenüberstellung“ ... „Verflechtungsgeschichte,“ he ploughed on, if less smugly. „Es tut mir leid, Karlheinz, es tut mir wirklich leid!“ The lesson here is that comparison is not a virtue in and of itself. A comparison of case studies with the vague aim of finding “similarities and differences” will yield mostly differences. Only accepting a degree of reductionism in the process and never minding the gaps between cases will reveal generic patterns if any are to be found. Ideally, the case studies ought to be secondary to the variable driving the comparison – an institution, an aspect or a policy dilemma. Such a “*tertium comparationis*” is conducive to “bold” and open-ended comparisons, looking for the generic rather than the unique.<sup>6</sup>

Still, even a poorly designed comparison is better than no comparison at all. Let me give you a deterrent example. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, each east European country witnessed the rise of one or more *peasant parties*, some of them radical-anarchist, others conservative, others liberal. A long-term favourite project of mine is comparing the intellectual roots, political organisation and repertoires of the modern peasant parties in Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Romania and Poland in the interwar period. For each of these parties a modern institutional history and biographies of key figures have already been written. But the possibility of transnational comparison, even one based on historiography, has not crossed the mind of most historians. One study did collect portrayals of several dozen peasant parties, but its ambition was little more than what German academics respectfully call a *Buchbindersynthese*.<sup>7</sup> It explained why no viable peasant parties had emerged in Western Europe, but had little to say on generic patterns among the national peasant parties in the East.

Crossing the border, and looking for transfers and comparisons with neighbouring West European countries is but one step, and it is a relatively modest one. It is an unfortunate state of affairs that comparative transnational studies rarely traverse the old *Iron Curtain*, even three decades after the end of the Cold War. This East-West divide in post-war European history may seem a no-brainer as far as politics and politics are

concerned. As for policies, however, comparisons may yield numerous insights – some of them complementary, others iconoclastic. In policy fields related to structural processes of modernisation, contrast in political systems is not an excuse to not try comparisons, with post-1989 hindsight.

The post-material *environmentalism* of the seventies is one of these iconoclastic East-West comparisons. Common wisdom has it that the rise of environmental activism in Western democracies came out of a new affluent post-war generation.<sup>8</sup> Political historians and political scientists were quick to embrace these youth protests and the idealism of new social movements as essential parts of Western democracy. In the fifties, however, local public outcry prompted reluctant authorities and companies to remedy the worst threats to public health from factory pollution near residential areas: in Rotterdam, but also in Bitterfeld in the GDR. More importantly, broader environmentalist movements in the West in the seventies had counterparts in Eastern Europe and the Soviet republics in the eighties. Post-material ideals were remarkably similar and, on both sides of the Iron Curtain, environmentalism was a vehicle for anti-establishment mobilisation.<sup>9</sup> In sum, the claim of the unique phenomenon of Western democracy needs qualification.

In some cases, questions of methodological principle have prevented historians from designing and implementing comparative studies. Around the turn of the last century, a rather tense debate erupted on the compatibility of comparative and transnational or transfer approaches. Among French, and in particular among German historians, the dispute has been all about methodological dogma and fundamental flaws. True enough, a comparison of case studies in the natural sciences presupposes that the agents involved in one case are unaware of and isolated from agents in the others. But in political studies and the humanities, this precondition is obviously never met. French and German experts in modern history have spent most of the last decade in a protracted debate on the relative merits and (in)compatibility of transfer and comparison. And yet political scientists and Anglo-Saxon historians have ignored these almost philosophical qualms and blissfully experimented in combining comparative and *transfer* approaches.<sup>10</sup>

A decade ago, I was fortunate to be part of such an experiment. Each author in our team had the daunting task of using a combination of transfers and comparisons to discern patterns in a policy field or political institution as it emerged in the Balkans in its transition from Ottoman and Habsburg rule to independent statehood around 1900. Topics included systems of local administration, taxation, church-state relations, media, organized violence and citizenship.<sup>11</sup> Even today, I am not aware of many such transnational studies in Western Europe, integrating up to five countries. Of course, such a de-

manding experiment takes its toll: The quotes with which I opened this lecture were taken from feuding collaborators on the very same project!

#### THE WAY FORWARD: POLICY FIELDS

Where do we go from here? Political history certainly has an image problem, unlike political science or cultural history. It has absorbed all the “turns” that have come its way, be they cultural, visual, post-colonial, spatial or performative. And yet, the reputation of the old-fashioned discipline dedicated to *high politics* persists. Well aware of this predicament, political historians have recently revisited E.H. Carr’s century-old question: “What is political history (now)?”<sup>12</sup> Most attempts to define it end up identifying topics or aspects that are *not* political history. It seems to me that both in the academic and in the public debate, the position that the social does not end where the political begins is far more productive.

Over the past two decades, the *cultural turn* has been the main innovation in political history. The cultures and conventions of key representative institutions have been studied and institutional biographies written, compellingly making the case that political culture is much more than just the façade of power politics.<sup>13</sup> And this has effectively eclipsed the study of classic statecraft politics and old institutionalism. In one respect, however, the cultural turn is both revolution and restoration. As a renowned Bielefeld historian recently admitted, despite all these innovations, “governments, monarchs, parties, or parliaments, and the activities directed towards influencing these agents (...), still get the bulk of attention in many new political histories”.<sup>14</sup> The study of political culture is typically focused on one specific high-political institution and is often non-comparative. Thus, it implicitly reconfirms the perceived gap between society and high politics. Now, the cultural turn will have to prove its added value in concrete studies focussing on a policy field or variable instead of an institutional case.

Today, students of political institutions and high politics find themselves crowded out of a highly polarised public debate and are regarded with suspicion, both as academics and as “system” apologists. Conversely, the *study of policy fields* examines the realities of government-citizen interactions, channels of participation and interest articulation. Such low-politics examples may indeed get the message across that there is no dichotomy of political versus civil society. More importantly, unlike grand treatises on democracy and political legitimacy, policy studies reveal the practical realities of citizen participation and forms of representation beyond the key democratic institutions. Speech acts and political deed by all actors are “read” against the grain, looking for unspoken and un-reflected notions of citizen-politics relations.<sup>15</sup>

Its diachronic *analyses* of both ideas and practice are relevant for today's actors in a given policy field as well. Here, historians and political scientists should join forces, either to elucidate the status quo for today's actors or to help anchor innovation in well-designed processes of gradual change. Academically, policy studies prefer holistic studies of an entire policy field and its players over biographies of individual persons or institutions. Unless, of course, such a well-funded government institution or civil society organisation is about to celebrate its centennial (as many will in the upcoming years) ...

In sum, let us reflect on the *three gaps*. The methodological gap between history and political science is real, but it should not be abused as a *cordón sanitaire*. There are lessons to be learned both ways. And the comparative gap: Only bold comparisons over temporal, ideological and national borders have genuine exploratory potential. In case-based comparisons, differences tend to stand out more than patterns. Therefore, I hope these examples have offered "variable-based" comparisons as a viable alternative, in particular in combination with the historian's asset of historiography. And, as a dedicated historian of both the European Union and the Balkans, I myself *do* mind the tenacity of the third gap: An agenda of European integration ought to include the integration of East European cases to enrich the tableau for transnational comparative research.

Let me conclude with one word of caution for political scientists, for those of you who have been persuaded by my talk and are eager now to begin collaborative projects with political historians. *Absenteeism* will be a problem. At some point, in the implementation phase of your project the historian will either look dreamily out the window (a.k.a., mild absenteeism) or not show up altogether. Because of the compartmentalised nature of the interdisciplinary project and the rigid theoretical frameworks, he longs for a monograph and the solitude of an individual study: immersing himself in long-forgotten archives, re-reading patinaed historical studies in various languages and from different contexts. He also craves the guilty pleasure of committing his results to paper in a carefully crafted narrative, complete with original metaphors and craftily chosen portrayals. No regression analysis for sure, no impact factors, no explicit hypotheses or fixed criteria either – just the way it should be for a historian. Thank you.

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