



Provincialism, Not Exceptionalism is the *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review’s* Chief Challenge

105

JAMES KENNEDY

James Kennedy resonates to a large extent with the praise and critique that Benjamin Schmidt offers. Kennedy sees little of Dutch exceptionalism, however, in the journal’s contributions, but does recognize its often limited international scope. That has chiefly to do with the journal’s focus on Dutch-Belgian balance and the contribution of specialists who often avoid more expansive comparisons. He hopes that the journal can find ways to enter into wider historiographical currents.

James Kennedy is het in belangrijke mate eens met de lof en kritiek van Benjamin Schmidt. Hoewel Kennedy weinig Nederlandse exceptionalisme in de verschillende artikelen ziet, erkent hij dat de internationale reikwijdte van het tijdschrift beperkt is. Dit heeft vooral te maken met de focus van het tijdschrift op een Nederlands-Belgische balans en met de bijdragen van specialisten die bredere vergelijkingen mijden. Kennedy hoopt dat het tijdschrift een manier kan vinden om deel te nemen aan bredere historiografische discussies.

I find myself, as an American writing about Dutch history, to a large extent in sympathy with the reflections offered by Benjamin Schmidt. In contrast to him, though, I can always account for my interest in Dutch history by revealing to the querying party that I have a Dutch mother. Although my convoluted path toward specializing in Dutch history is actually more complicated than simply being half-Dutch, I find that stating my pedigree invariably satisfies every Dutch person who wants to know why I am now professor of Dutch history. I can, then, feel with him the annoyance at the suggestion that only one's ethnicity could reasonably account for why one would study Dutch history. I can further corroborate Schmidt's experience as a fellow Fulbright recipient in the early 1990s, when he had to deal as a graduate student with a supercilious distaste of various Dutch historians for his doctoral supervisor Simon Schama. (It is, though, interesting to note that the critical 1989 review in the *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* [hereafter *BMGN*] of Schama's *Embarrassment of Riches* was not of Dutch origin but penned by the Hull historian J.L. Price). That was the first and not the only time that I perceived a certain Dutch smugness about foreigners writing something about their own history, although I do think things have improved in the last quarter century.

More important, I embrace Schmidt's call 'that narrating the history of the Low Countries [should be] part of a more far-reaching narrative of European history', and breaking through a kind of parochialism that does not sufficiently value wider perspectives that might link Netherlandish history more productively with European and indeed world history.

At the same time, as erstwhile editor of the *Low Countries Historical Review*, I cannot claim, as he can, to be a relative 'outsider' to the journal. On the contrary, I have been, if in a modest way, co-responsible for content and the policy of the journal between 2009 and 2015. For that reason, too, I am deeply appreciative of Schmidt's very generous and gracious sketch of the journal's many strengths. I am also thankful for the occasion that he has offered to briefly reflect on the critique and on the challenge he offers us. What I now write is to a large extent based on my own personal recollections and reflections of those years as an editor of the *LCHR*. While I am not unmindful or unconcerned about the parochialism of the region's historical communities that Schmidt outlines, I would describe the reasons and motivations for it somewhat differently than he does. And I do so in the knowledge that the editors of the journal with whom I worked are deeply sensitive and sympathetic as well to aims that Schmidt seeks.

That the *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* (*BMGN*) is a journal that is about Dutch history for the Dutch is deeply engrained by the fact that it is the journal of the Dutch royal society *KNHG*. The meetings of the *KNHG* have historically been very Dutch, speaking to a relatively wide range of Dutch-speaking high school teachers, academicians, heritage sector workers, students and amateur historians who typically were

interested in in-depth topic articles on an interesting aspect of Dutch or Netherlandish history. Many members furthermore were used to, expected and wanted the articles to be in the Dutch language, the language of the society. The *BMGN* was their club magazine, after all, and they looked forward to the specialized treatments of their own history. Some of these members viewed the increasing number of English-language articles and (to a lesser extent) a more internationally-minded approach with an increasing degree of estrangement, and one of my tasks as editor was to remonstrate with readers who just had or were about to end their subscriptions and memberships.

While the editors of the journal sought to maintain these old ties and purposes, they could not stand by reactively, and fail to respond to important shifts that have taken place in the last decade. Although membership in the society was already in slow decline – rather typical for this type of organization – the advent of Open Access further changed the relationship with the traditional constituency, as the link between membership and readership became attenuated. Important, too, is the subsequent rise of English rather than Dutch-language articles, to the ire of some older members. Contributors – indeed nearly all native speakers of Dutch – had the training, the confidence, and the strategic sense to publish more and more in English, though the quality of the English not infrequently proved a challenge for the editors. The increased number of English-language thematic issues went hand-in-hand with an increased eye by the contributors to wider historiographical issues that went beyond the Low Countries alone. These shifts, though, have been incomplete, and largely dependent on what its (heavily Dutch) authors send in. What the *BMGN* in recent years has become is part the result of an intention to further internationalize – and to attract non-Dutch talent – but it remains a hybrid journal, with roots in the Dutch-language community on which it was built. And that makes it hard to steer very precisely in the way that Schmidt would have us go.

This challenge is compounded by another complication that Schmidt was polite enough not to mention: the journal represents in many ways not a single regional community of historians but two: Dutch and Flemish. One of the natural advantages of this union is that the editorial board is most decidedly *not* unreflectively national in its mindset; it has to think about crossing beaches and borders all the time. The rule of thumb has been that about two-thirds of the editorial board are Dutch, and one-third Flemish (I believe that the current ratio is 5:3, and there are rumors that a Walloon is being sought to join the team). Every third meeting accordingly is held in Belgium, the other two in the Netherlands at the offices of the journal. The peer-review process sometimes tries to find one Belgian and one Dutch national specialist per article, though – thankfully – experts from beyond the Low Countries are also often consulted. Most tellingly, finding authors and finding peer reviewers are largely conducted through national pipelines, where editors from one nation depend heavily on the networks of the other.

Given this working relationship, though, it is perhaps not surprising that the most frequent form of systematic comparison is along the Dutch-Belgian axis, since it is precisely these comparisons that give the journal a greater integrative coherence than would naturally appear in a journal where two rather different national historiographies mostly just co-exist alongside each other. From my experiences as a former editor, then, I don't view the journal so much as the embodiment of a monolithic Dutch insularity but as an amicable but messy Belgian-Dutch collaboration. In sum, it's the complexities of this cooperation that defined largely, if not completely, how we have thought about comparisons and borders and topical balance. In fact, I wonder if we wouldn't have emulated Schmidt's envisaged model better if the journal had been univocally national, Flemish *or* Dutch, as European or broader vistas would then more easily come to the fore. I remain emotionally wedded to the current union, but perhaps we are, in this respect, paying a price for it.

It is these separate national networks that tend to determine who submits possible articles and who gets asked to participate in the creation of thematic numbers. That was also the path of least resistance; the editorial board, as I recall, received few unsolicited writers from outside the Low Countries – would that we did! – and the guest editors in charge of a particular thematic issue often also selected people physically closer to home, often people with whom they had collaborated in the past. Unsolicited and solicited contributors thus strongly tended to be cast of the same mould: specialists from the Low Countries, and often, though not always, of relatively junior rank, who seem the most eager and would more clearly gain from a publication in an INT 1 journal. There was never any resistance to including scholars from outside of the Netherlands – I think for example of Mark Mazower's commentary on Martin Conway's *Sorrows of Belgium* – and any historian from abroad who came with a pitch would have been eagerly and seriously entertained. These proposals, however, were far and few between, and the working assumption was that 'foreign' senior scholars who had done work on the Netherlands were likely to be engaged with other things. An international advisory board had as its intent to gently ask such luminaries for tips about new authors and contributions, the assumption being that these senior scholars themselves would not likely contribute.

Schmidt links Dutch parochialism with Dutch exceptionalism, but I see the problem as clearly the former and not really the latter. *The International Relevance of Dutch History* (to which I contributed) did at moments, as he has suggested, posit a kind of *Sonderweg* (though I actively undermine that in my own contribution with Jan Zwemer, I think) but such assertions of exceptionalism, explicit or implicit, are relatively rare in the pages of the journal. The difficulty is not so much that the Dutch (or the Belgian) authors imagine their country to be unique but rather that they don't dare to take on wider comparative perspectives that places their own work in a wider perspective. They are clearly and systematically inspired and informed, to be

sure, by European and global themes and stimulating historiography. But as rather narrowly-trained specialists, they apply this only to their specialized work, whether situated in Belgium or the Netherlands. This is by no means true of all contributors, but of many. In summary, the problem is not that the denizens here patrol the boundaries of the Low Countries against outsiders. It's actually worse than that. It's about the inability of many historians to more deeply connect their own work in comparative ways with histories outside the Netherlands.

This still leaves the puzzle why the likes of the recently deceased Lisa Jardine and other foreigners Schmidt mentions have received so little attention and so little appreciation in the pages of the this journal, either in book reviews, discussion dossiers or regular articles in past decades. Since ignoring such figures is not a shared and stated policy of the journal – in fact, I can only imagine that the editors would love to cultivate contacts with international scholars – I will offer a couple of conjectures. Sometimes historians from here regard works from abroad as 'ephemeral', but then in two senses of the word. The first is that historians like Jonathan Israel, Jardine and Schama offer sweeping interpretations of Dutch history, sometimes so popularly written that they even get sold in airports. There really is no correspondingly robust tradition among Low Countries academic historians, either in the Netherlands or Belgium, at least not in recent decades. I know many Dutch historians to be public-minded but I don't know too many who write popular books offering comprehensive or radical visions of Dutch history (and beyond), which seem to Netherlands historians dubious at best, dangerously one-sided and distorted at worst, and in any event not substantial enough to stand the test of time in the way their own academically solid tomes would. Dutch historians venturing in the same direction get the same treatment, I think. Most historians here, though, are much too cautious for that kind of thing – the number of Dutch or Flemish historians demonstrating the international virtuosity of the profession's wide-ranging and expansive scholars is not great after all. That it is typically foreigners, then, who are guilty of such sins may confirm Netherlandic prejudices, but it is not a suspicion of foreigners as such; more academically restrained foreigners who play by the rules of the art – as recognized and practiced locally – will find a considerably warmer embrace.

I also use the word 'ephemeral' in another sense. Schmidt makes a strong case for the virtues of historians who have slipped in and out of Dutch history in the course of their careers, and I think he is absolutely right about this. But this raises questions about their availability and commitment to the field. Scholars working outside of the Low Countries, even in an age of frequent airline travel and social media, always have an disadvantage of being treated as outliers, to be brought in for special occasions but not for the everyday work of the profession over here, including journal work. But especially for scholars abroad whose time in Dutch history seems ephemeral,

transitory, and thus at some remove from Low Countries history and its historical community, which tends, as suggested above, to take lifelong commitment to one's own niche as evidence of one's professional reliability.

I wonder if there isn't something else underlying much of this phenomenon. The parochialism discussed above may be fed by a kind of small-country bashfulness that has prompted at least Dutch historians to be easily dismissive of their own national past. For some authors (and readers), there is still the assumption that what is read in the *BMGN* will only be read by people who live here, which fits into why people ask Schmidt and me why we would be possibly interested in Dutch history. Or for, in the thematic numbers, that the journal profitably can be used to highlight 'the Dutch case' (whether unique or not unique) but not in any serious way to challenge historiographies *outside* of the Low Countries, or to create a wider European or global research agenda based on a more interesting set of questions. And this bashfulness may also manifest itself in not being very aggressive in seeking the active collaboration of, as Schmidt puts it, 'historians whose work happens to embrace the history of the Dutch'.

In hindsight, I might chide myself that as an editor I did not work hard enough at drawing Netherlandic history in wider comparative histories, employing historians with the skills and visions to accomplish this in stimulating and creative ways. I always thought, naturally enough, that this regional journal should be about the Low Countries, and I resisted very occasional proposals to create a thematic issue that made the Low Countries only one small part of a larger picture. But a more assertive editorial attempt to tie the Low Countries into wider parameters is something that I would encourage the current editors of the journal to undertake. That might include a more expansive book review policy, guidelines to authors that encouraged a broader comparative sweep, and the structuring thematic issue that draws in these 'foreign' authors and forges a stronger comparative component. Particularly in reference to the last aim, it would be a great new chapter in the journal's illustrious history if Benjamin Schmidt would offer to this journal his services in the creation of a thematic issue that teases out new possibilities for Dutch history's interaction with wider historical vistas.

James Kennedy (1963) is Dean of University College Utrecht (UCU) and Professor of Dutch History since the Middle Ages at Utrecht University. His expertise is postwar history, in the first instance the Netherlands but also with an eye to transnational and comparative perspectives. The general focus is on the intersection of political, social and cultural history of this period, with a particular interest in the ethical dimensions of policy and its relationship to society. This has translated into books and grants into the following themes: the cultural change of "the Sixties", the history of euthanasia, changes in civil society and citizenship, anticorruption strategies, church-state relations and the history of drugs policy. Email: J.C.Kennedy@uu.nl.