

OUDE NIJHUIS, DENNIE. *Religion, Class, and the Postwar Development of the Dutch Welfare State*. Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2018. 340 pp. € 105.00.

As the title suggests, *Religion, Class, and the Postwar Development of the Dutch Welfare State* offers a comprehensive and detailed look at the development of the Dutch welfare state during the post-war years. It goes beyond existing volumes by providing key insights into the role of Christian Democratic parties and the social partners (centrally organized trade union confederations and employer organizations). Oude Nijhuis sets out to critically analyse previously often unchallenged claims about post-war welfare state development. He primarily focuses on refuting the claim that welfare state expansion resulted from a mix of favourable economic conditions and class politics. It is traditionally argued that the concurrent strength of trade unions and leftist political parties represented the interests of lower- and middle-class workers, allowing for welfare state expansion. Oude Nijhuis successfully challenges this idea for the Netherlands. On the one hand, he links welfare state development to the goals of solidarity and social justice among Christian Democratic parties. On the other, his analysis points to the particular sectoral organization of Dutch trade unions, combined with their willingness to share risks across sectors and different groups of workers. The empirical contributions of the book, which provide the foundation for countering the dominant welfare state literature, are at times too detailed for the non-historian. However, this same detail allows the author to outline convincingly the views of all actors involved. It also provides an even more comprehensive account of the development of Dutch welfare programmes than seminal works by authors such as De Swaan and Visser and Hemerijck.¹ A further advantage of this book is Oude Nijhuis's attention for welfare state programmes beyond social security (e.g. social care, housing). In that regard, the analysis provided offers a truly comprehensive perspective on welfare state development in the Netherlands.

The book is organized in four sections. Section one, simply titled "History and Theory", sets out an interesting puzzle, questioning long-standing claims about the solidarity among workers in the post-war period and assumptions about the preferences of Christian Democratic parties. At times fragmented, the author nevertheless succeeds in presenting a convincing argument that existing welfare state claims should be questioned, and that delving into the history of post-war development is necessary to understand the current challenges facing the Dutch welfare state (and many others).

The author outlines his empirical arguments about post-war development in Part two of the book, which focuses on welfare state expansion. Chapters deal successively with the immediate aftermath of World War II, highlighting the gradual and minor reforms carried out in the Netherlands. There was too much conflict about who should be covered by social insurance and the role of the social partners in administering social insurance for greater reforms or expansion to occur. In Chapters four to six, however, the author shows how initially slow progress gave way to more remarkable expansion in the Netherlands. Expansion of welfare state policies became possible as the link between individual effort (i.e. personal responsibility) and benefit entitlement weakened, particularly among Christian Democratic

1. A. de Swaan, *In Care of the State: Health Care, Education and Welfare in Europe and the USA in the Modern Era* (Cambridge, 1988); J. Visser and A. Hemerijck, *A Dutch Miracle: Job Growth, Welfare Reform and Corporatism in the Netherlands* (Amsterdam, 1997).

parties. This shift towards a focus on solidarity and social justice is demonstrated through the detailed account of the development of old age insurance. At the same time, welfare state benefits were increasingly seen as deferred wages, which eased opposition by trade union confederations. Further expansion, for example for social assistance and unemployment, were buoyed by these changes as well as by the favourable economic climate and historically low unemployment levels.

While the welfare state expanded, the generosity of Dutch social insurance took longer to develop, as demonstrated in Chapter six. Debate about what constituted a “social minimum”, initially with regard to pensions (old age insurance) and later applied to other social insurance programmes, resulted in an increasingly generous and inclusive welfare state. In sum, in the second part of the book, Oude Nijhuis weaves together a story of political debate and a shift towards a politics of solidarity and social justice. This story takes place in a climate of economic growth, against the backdrop of Dutch corporatism and wage policy, with trade unions in a relatively powerful position to push for welfare state expansion, which they did despite the sectoral organization of unions.

If the post-war expansion of the Dutch welfare state into one of the most generous in the industrialized world is surprising, then so too is the period of reform and retrenchment that commenced in the 1970s. In Section three, Oude Nijhuis provides a rich historical account of the developments in unemployment and disability insurance together with the emergence of early retirement schemes. In doing so, the author clearly delineates the problems of the Dutch welfare state emerging at the time, and how the Dutch welfare state became characterized by “welfare without work”. A major political response to this “inactivity crisis” (Chapter eight) was a shift back to the conservative voices of Christian Democratic parties, leading to a re-strengthening of the link between individual effort and benefit entitlement that had been weakened decades before. Consequently, Oude Nijhuis argues, the internal struggles and shift towards more conservative factions in the party led to the Christian Democrats becoming some of “the most vocal advocates of harsh benefit cuts” (p. 238) in the 1980s and beyond.

On the one hand, this and other evidence provided by Oude Nijhuis in Section three is convincing in its argument that in the Netherlands, more so than in other welfare states, political partisanship was key in shaping reforms. The dynamic nature of political preferences (i.e. changing political and social partner preferences) and the shift towards more conservative voices in the Christian Democratic Party allowed significant reforms to be carried out. On the other hand, blame avoidance was not entirely absent, as Oude Nijhuis’s analysis attempts to suggest. As argued by other welfare state and corporatist scholars, political parties in the Netherlands were able to share the blame for reforms with the social partners at various points throughout this period, a point not refuted by the analysis presented here. A key contribution of Oude Nijhuis’s analysis of welfare state reform in this section is the focus on recent reforms, integrating developments not always included in discussions of social insurance reform in the Netherlands, such as extensive health care reform and far-reaching decentralization efforts in social care services. Section four concludes the book, tying together the key arguments presented in earlier chapters and outlining key challenges for the future.

I appreciate the novelty of the book and its attention to empirical detail, but at times this same detail is a barrier to discovering key messages within a chapter. Consequently, some messages might be missed by the casual reader. Additionally, I am sceptical of Oude Nijhuis’s overly optimistic opening characterization of the Dutch welfare state. Oude Nijhuis suggests that “high levels of financial solidarity in the Netherlands still assure that

all citizens are entitled to adequate levels of protection against labour market risks such as unemployment, sickness, disability, and old-age” (p. 19), citing the high labour market participation rate as contributing to the ability of the Netherlands to deal with modern-day challenges such as population ageing. Yet, behind this façade of welfare state success lies the highest percentage of part-time work in the industrialized world and high levels of gender inequality, not to mention the precarious position of many temporary and flexible workers, or the growing number of migrants, and self-employed, who are not always entitled to the same welfare state protection. All these things challenge the underlying fabric of solidarity. Oude Nijhuis acknowledges some of these challenges later in the book, but to my mind underestimates the presence of “insider/outsider” differences in social protection. Despite these criticisms, the book is of great value to welfare state scholars both inside and outside the Netherlands.

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