

On the joy of reading history sideways

On words of praise

When the best post-war novelist of the Netherlands, Willem Frederik Hermans, was told that his latest book had been reviewed very favorably in a leading newspaper, his devastating reaction was that being lifted up by a dwarf didn't really amount to much. I was reminded of this recalcitrant reply when invited to comment on Arland Thornton's book: 'Reading History Sideways'. I had already glanced through it and had come to the conclusion that it was a book researched and written in the best scholarly traditions of the Western World. After having read the book I'm no longer sure that this is the best way of formulating my praise, but what I wanted to express is that the book is so original in its approach and so meticulously researched that few social scientists could ever hope to match it in breadth and historical depth. This is not an edited volume of seminar papers, hastily thrown together by overworked editors, and with nothing more in common than too brief a period of gestation and an enumerative foreword. No, it is a carefully constructed, well-argued, monument of a book that will in no time become a classic in the social sciences. It demonstrates the limits of the developmental paradigm in inimitable fashion. I place the work at the level of that of Edward Said's evaluation and critique of the set of beliefs commonly known as Orientalism. In my view Thornton does for demography and population studies what Said did for the study of the Orient. But enough of that, at least for the moment, for I have not solely come to praise Arland Thornton but to meet him as a commentator and, to a lesser extent, a critic. So, let's try to do that.

On the value of frameworks for research

I found Arland Thornton's book profoundly disturbing. For, although it deals with the family, it has, as he is well aware, much wider implications (pag. 134). The central idea of the book is that by adhering to a developmental paradigm and by reading history sideways all sorts of world-famous scholars have come to conclusions about the past of the Northwest European family and society that cannot possibly be sustained in the light of new empirical research. They followed a research frame work that had a dual dimension. The first is that developments in societies are unidirectional: all societies move along the same trajectory but at any given date are likely to have reached a different stage along that route. And, from their vantage point it was evident that Northwest Europe represented the highest stage of development. The second dimension follows immediately from the first. It is that one can get to know and understand the history of one's own society by comparing it in cross-sectional fashion with others that, supposedly, are at an earlier stage of development than one's own. Observations documented for such societies, and thus read 'sideways', then serve as proxy for the missing historical information for one's own society.

As a framework for research this developmental paradigm is almost impossible to beat. Just as any other framework for research it gives meaning to observations that would otherwise remain unclear. For it allows one to fit 'facts' and findings into a coherent conceptual pattern that, in this case, is valuable from both a historical and a future oriented perspective. For

Westerners the paradigm has the immense attraction of placing the societies of the developed world at the pinnacle of the developmental process. They already have achieved to what others aspire. However, it is attractive for many others as well. For this particular research paradigm has the additional advantage of being tremendously valuable as common ground for national and international policymaking. As Thornton rightly argues, a very persuasive set of propositions - that he calls developmental idealism - grew out of it. He distinguishes four of these. The crucial one, in my view, is that the good life is attainable for all, irrespective of color, religion, ethnic origin, or geographical location. The direction to go is not in doubt; time is on our side. If we pull together all countries and nations will soon experience the standard of living reached in the Western World. It is an overwhelmingly attractive meta-narrative that gives a degree of cohesion to the world that could probably not be attained by any other means. A whole industry has sprung up around it; it gives a life's work to many a politician and, for that matter, demographer. I find Thornton's book as admirable as disturbing because I shudder at the thought of what might happen to the world if, at some time in the future, we might have to do without that alluring meta-narrative. What if the population at large loses its faith in it?

Thornton himself is remarkably reticent about this aspect. As he writes on page 240 his goal was not to evaluate whether the propositions of developmental idealism were 'good or bad, helpful or hurtful, true or false', but to show how powerful they have been in changing family life around the world. No doubt, for a scholar that is the right attitude. A commentator should, however, fail in his task if he did not highlight the tremendous impact the book he just read may have on the future of international development co-operation and the relation between the various regions of the world. I am well aware that this is more a comment than a critique. So let me ask very simply whether Arland Thornton feels I'm too easily worried. Should I see the conclusion he formulates on page 160 that '... developmental idealism may provide a directionality to history that was not previously present' as reassuring in that regard? Does that imply it can continue to exert a beneficial influence even if it is no longer believed? And, why precisely was that directionality not previously present?

On reflexive modernity

If I were asked to place Thornton's work in a specific research tradition, my first reaction would be to say that the book could only have been written at this day and age. But while it may be recent, it is not 'modern'. As far as I am aware studies questioning the narrative underpinnings of the society from which they emanate are best characterized as being 'reflexive' modern. Perhaps Arland Thornton will be upset if I place his book in that relatively recent tradition because the concept may be appreciated differently in the USA and Europe. If so, he will no doubt make that clear. But let me list the arguments I have for it. In Europe reflexive modernity is commonly understood to be a late or high stage of modernity. In fact, advanced industrial societies are seen as the driving force behind their own transformation. And rather than further modernization within the limits of industrial society its proponents, the most prominent of which is the German sociologist Ulrich Beck, see it as involving a modernization of the principles of modern society. These reflexive modern principles are characterized by a critical attitude towards every starting assumption one may care to make, towards the idea of continued progress through the accumulation of knowledge, towards exclusivist liberal humanism and, by implication, towards developmental hierarchies. To refer to Lyotard's famous phrase which a few years ago I quoted *in extenso* in a paper on fertility preferences (Van de Kaa, 2001), when simplified to the extreme it can be defined as

‘incredulity to meta-narratives’. Every starting point should be questioned and that principle has to be applied to ‘modernity’ as well. After having read his book there is no doubt in my mind that Thornton does indeed in a very meticulous and careful way question one of the most central ideas about the development of the Western family, namely that as an institution it is now more advanced and modern than in the past and in other parts of the world.

While this may again seem to be more a comment than a critique, it results in a question I found difficult to answer and should, therefore, like to address to Arland Thornton. Does he after so much reading and research find that there is a parallel between the way large sections of the population now question long held values and beliefs about the sanctity of marriage, the relation between marriage and sexuality, and the rights of individuals in many such matters (abortion, IVF, etc.) and his own challenging study about the origins of the Western family? Put more plainly, does he see a relation between the nature and focus of the research reported in this book and the phenomena that Lesthaeghe and I have, not very cleverly as it turns out, characterized as together constituting a second demographic transition?

On cognitive economy

An interesting question Thornton poses is why the development paradigm and the method of reading history sideways became so well accepted. He presents a sensible series of arguments for it but misses, in my view, one important aspect; that of cognitive economy. I should like to have his reaction to the following proposition. To increase efficiency of communication people employ perceptive or semantic categorization. Two principles appear to underlie this process: the first is that the world comes to us as structured information; the second is that of cognitive economy. We have to be able to extract a maximum amount of information from a set of data with the least possible cognitive effort. For that purpose, so I gather from the work of psychologists working in this research field, we construct prototypes and stereotypes. A meaningful average of a number of variables is assumed to coincide with an existing object: a prototype. Moreover, objects of the world are perceived to possess a high correlational structure rather than to have arbitrary or unpredictable attributes: we construct stereotypes. Hence cognitive economy is best achieved if categories map the perceived world structure as closely as possible (Rosch, 1978:28). In fact, we would probably find life unbearable if these principles were not there to help us. Imagine, for example, how difficult our life would be if each time we called a person a typical ‘European’ we would have to describe that person’s features, characteristics, and region of origin carefully before being able to continue the conversation. Imagine also the difficulties and sensitivities we would encounter if each time we used the term ‘developing’ or ‘developed’ we would have to specify precisely what we meant. It would seem to me that the developmental paradigm and the idea of reading history sideways meet the principles of providing structured information and allowing cognitive economy very elegantly and comprehensively. Does Thornton agree that the eager acceptance of these twin strategies in the Western world derives in large part from their cognitive economy? Together they present such an easily understood structure of the world that even the least educated cannot fail to grasp it. And if he agrees, does he also agree that this force must have been at work from the earliest time on?

On the fallacy of paradigms

Of course, the ready acceptance of a specific paradigm and of the prototypical and stereotypical generalizations associated with it does not imply that the paradigm is correct. Let me give two examples of paradigms once adhered to and now considered fallacious.

Until about the 1920s environmental determinism dominated American geography. Its basic assumption was that natural selective conditions would bring out the best or worst in humans and would lead to superior and inferior cultures, respectively. On the whole the temperate climatic zones where the authors lived and worked were, of course, considered to be ideal and, consequently, to be the most highly developed. Now even the memory of that paradigm has faded although Thornton may well have encountered it during his extensive reading.

Much more recently the late Edward Said, a world famous Palestinian scholar has argued with regard to Orientalism that the image of the Orient as a system of thought and scholarship applicable to a vast, heterogeneous region is more a representation framed by Western learning and power than reality. He argues that the Orient is constructed in comparison with and in relation to the West which makes it inferior and conquerable. The idea that the Orient is static, backward and passive is a Western construct. To depict the stereotypical Oriental as unreliable, dangerous, but also weak and feminine is, in his view, a further fallacy of that paradigm of thought.

I see similarities between Said's discussion of Orientalism and Thornton's discussion of the fallacy of the developmental paradigm. For in the second part of his book Arland Thornton exposes a peculiar consequence of Western paradigmatic thinking. He carefully develops the argument that the idea of a major transformation in family structures and relationship imputed to the Northwest European past has no basis in fact. In his view it is a construct that Western scholars of the 18th and 19th centuries built up in their search for the origins of the institutions of Northwestern European societies. Through reading history sideways they concluded that at some time in the past a great family transition must have taken place that gave Northwest Europe its unique and superior system of family life characterized by nuclear families, late marriage, remarkable equality between marriage partners, little parental authority, early independence of the young, individual selection of marriage partners, and lots of love and affection. Could I ask Thornton whether he was inspired by the examples I have sketched and does he agree that important similarities exist?

On the emergence of the developmental paradigm

A certain branch of history is in Western Europe usually called *Begriffsgeschichte*. This because the idea to research the 'history of concepts' originated in Germany. The scholar mainly associated with it is the historian Reinhart Koselleck who died last year. It concerns itself with the historical semantics of concepts, with their origin, the changes in their meaning, and their significance as a basis for their current use in our language, culture, and conceptual apparatus. I would like to suggest to Arland Thornton that this approach could possibly help in acquiring greater certainty about the emergence of the developmental paradigm and of the idea of a great family transformation sometime in Northwest Europe's past. If a great family transition ever occurred in Northwest Europe, so Thornton argues, it must have been before 1300. Judging from Thornton's book the developmental paradigm pre-dates the idea of the great family transformation. On page 35 he notes that as '...early as the 1500s some

Europeans believed that some populations outside Europe were so different from those in Europe that they could have advanced only very little, if any, since their creation ...’ And further, that certain societies were so close to the origins of humanity ‘...that they could be used as indicators of what life was like all over the world at or near the beginning of time’. Historians frequently remark that the past is a foreign country as ‘they do things differently there!’ Presumably the distinction between a geographical distance and a distance in time did not play an important role in the minds of authors in the 1500s; in both cases things happened far away. I would like to submit that they didn’t need to have any precise information about the past or of distant regions in the world in order to position their own region, Northwest Europe, at the pinnacle of a development trajectory. That idea must have existed long, very long before in the 19th century Tylor constructed his development ladder and appears to be universal. Even today many a political leader cannot resist stating solemnly that his is the ‘greatest country in the world’

Does not Thornton agree that *Begriffgeschichte* should have a place in the research program he sketches at the end of his book? If it could be established, for example, that the idea of a great family transformation sometime in the past of Northwest Europe arose well before the Age of Discoveries - before the beginning of the 17th century, say - it was, just as the developmental paradigm, probably based on some vague notion about the natural state of affairs at the time of creation. Alternatively, some information on the eastern parts of Europe may have given rise to that assumption. It should be appreciated that Northwest Europe is best considered as a peninsula of an enormous continent stretching to the East as far as Vladivostok. It has not been populated and re-populated from the West but from the East. Presumably the latecomers still reside there. Amongst the South Slavs of Bulgaria and Serbia village communities based on family bonds and called ‘*zadruga*’ existed from about the 8th to the 20th century and these could perhaps have been a source of inspiration.

On the naming of periods

As will be readily understood I was delighted to see (pag.106) Arland Thornton agree with my view that the choice of the term demographic *transition* may have been a serious mistake. That alone would, of course, have given me plenty of reason to praise his book profusely. Unfortunately he spoils my pleasure a little by arguing a few sentences later that we should resort to neutral terms such as ‘mortality reduction’ with non-developmental modifiers as tremendous or substantial added. Aside from its detrimental effect on the readability of textbooks and the attractiveness of our discipline, my objection against that solution is that it does not do justice to the observation that demographic regimes tend to succeed each other. In the German demographic literature I have encountered the term *Bevölkerungsweise* to indicate more vivid than ‘regime’ that each specific period is characterized by a certain way in which population and society are interrelated. While one regime is bound to follow, and has followed, another they are sufficiently distinct to give them a name that is not suggestive of the developmental paradigm would still meet our need for cognitive economy. For example, if we were to call the period with which Thornton mainly deals as having a ‘modern demographic regime’, we could use the term ‘reflexive modern’ to describe the demographic regime currently characteristic of most of Europe. According to Lesthaeghe it is also becoming established in parts of the United States, but out of fear of reading history too much sideways I will not now suggest that the rest of the US is also bound to follow Europe’s example!

On the moving target of developmental idealism

My first job as a demographer brought me to West New Guinea, now part of Indonesia. One day I was rowed across an estuary by an elderly Papuan in a narrow dugout canoe. He had a big hole in the septum of his nose where once he wore an ornament of shell or bone through. He explained to me that when eating someone else I should go for the tastiest part: the mouse of the hand. I could easily imagine that under the right circumstances nibbling at the mouse of the 'right' hand might be extremely pleasant. Nevertheless, it confirmed my feeling that we did well to bring 'civilization' to that area and the regard for human rights associated with it. I must admit that the concept of human rights I then had didn't go much beyond the right not to be eaten against one's will and the right to use all means of contraception.

Developments since then have extended the content of the concept 'basic human rights' enormously. The degree of freedom granted to individuals has also been expanded beyond my wildest expectations. Thornton writes that in his view the victory of developmental idealism is '... still far from complete. This can be seen in the continuing inequalities across racial and gender groups [...]. It is also evident in continuing restrictions on sexual expression and childbearing outside marriage and the rights of homosexual couples to marry and raise children.' To this may be added the recent demand that persons who feel neither male nor female, or consider themselves to be both male and female, should have the right not to have a sex mentioned in their passport, certain sexual rights, and whatever other novel ideas have sprung up. It would seem, so I should like to suggest to Arland Thornton, that the goals of development idealism are a moving target. Does he have any idea as to where it may end? And, does he share my fear that ultimately it may reduce the attractiveness of developmental idealism to such an extent that it can no longer function as common ground, and as an important cohesive element in the relation between nations?

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