

Lecture by prof. dr. Anton Hemerijck, director WRR
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DETOUR AHEAD

When I was asked to return to my Alma Mater in Tilburg, where I studied economics in the late 1970s and the first half of the 1980s, I was of course honoured to speak before so many talented students and their parents, friends and partners. But “why me?” I asked in hesitation to Luc Jeurissen, who approached me for today’s ceremony. Luc reassured me that, from the looks of my CV, I have had an interesting international academic career since leaving Tilburg for Oxford, and subsequent travels to Cambridge Massachusetts, Cologne and Florence. And now that I was the executive director of the Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR), he said, I could be something of a role model for excellent scholarship students. Within less than five minutes, I was flattered into an offer I could not refuse.

Still, I really do not think that I am a role model to emulate. The reason for this is simple: I have a habit of making detours or roundabouts rather than taking the quickest route to achieve pre-defined objectives. I am not a one-trick pony. In the Michelin guide, two expressions are often used with respect to quality restaurants: “vaut le voyage” and “mérite le détour”, meaning, respectively, ‘you have to go’ and ‘it’s worth making a detour’. The reason I prefer the detour option is that, first of all, it suggests that you already are on the right course, and, secondly, that you have to be flexible, ready to make contingent roundabouts when interesting alternatives present themselves.

What I would like to reflect upon today is the question of what I learned since my days at Tilburg University for? other parts of the world, in the hope of instilling a little enthusiasm in you for making international academic detours (if only for a couple of months), but also to let you know of the risks and pitfalls of not keeping track of time and direction. In short, I advocate to take detours seriously, but not to take them too far. It is a bit of a personal story.

While at Tilburg, I was an extremely excited but very erratic student. Full dedication to a singular discipline had no hold on me. I signed up for economics, but spent most of my time reading philosophy. Registering for philosophy, alongside economics after my *kandidaats*, I was soon bored by logical positivism and I couldn’t really sit still to digest Heidegger. To rest my heavy book-strained eyes I played lots of sports and worked in a record store to keep up with new directions in music. Still working my way through the economics department, but frustrated with philosophy, I shifted my attention to the comparative sociology of Max Weber. Ultimately, I did receive a cum laude for my degree in economics, but it took me far too long. This was also because I was given the opportunity to edit a book with fellow students on the work ethic against the background of levels of mass unemployment not seen since the 1930s. I have always been dissatisfied with how we economists model labour markets in analogy to product markets and how we view work as a disutility, a cost, something we would rather not do. Taking heed from Weber, I came to view jobs and labour markets as socially embedded institutions. This insight triggered the desire to continue my education and to write a Phd on the subject. However, in the mid-1980s, Dutch universities were basically broke for research. The AIO system was not yet firmly established. It was my sociology professor Anton Zijderveld who pushed me to broaden my horizon. He himself had done graduate research at the New School for Social Research in New York. Eventually I was accepted at Oxford University, Balliol College, with a Foreign and Commonwealth scholarship from the British Council. In line with my “detourist” inclination, although this was a very difficult step to make, I decided to continue my studies in the field of political science, so as to be able analyse the institutional constraints and resources shaping the politics of modern day social and economic decision-making.

Oxford surely was (and still is) a place of many distractions and possible detours. The joint seminar of Amartya Sen, Derek Parfitt, Ronald Dworkin, we called “Star Wars”, was not to be missed. I taught modern social institutions to undergraduates so as to keep ends meet. Playing tennis on a real lawn, like Wimbledon, became a favourite pastime over the summer. After three years I managed to have a rough draft of the dissertation, but I needed another year to streamline the argument. To no avail, I tried to get something of a visiting fellowship at a Dutch university. Contacts between my Oxford college and Harvard helped me to a Fulbright stipendium to write up my dissertation at MIT across the Atlantic Ocean. When I told my parents of my plan to spend a year, possibly two, on the East Coast of the United States, my mother was disappointed in her son. She was convinced that I was running away from the mundane responsibility of finding a decent job. So much for my work ethic!? In did however return to the motherland and finished the dissertation.

What can I say by way of looking back on my experience abroad on how I have come to view higher education, professional scholarship, academic culture and the internationalization of research? Six observations stand out.

1. What is most important to emphasize is that I stood my ground both at Oxford and at MIT. For me, this implied that the quality of Dutch secondary education and the opportunities for academic learning at Tilburg University were of the highest standards. An educational trampoline, if there ever was one - something to be proud of and to hold on to. I lived in the US for two years, and I am aware that I am making a gross generalization when say that the US educational system *in toto* can be characterized as “islands of excellence in a sea of ignorance”. Just look at the PISA scores and you know what I mean. Wonderful if you have the opportunity to partake in excellence, as I did, but what if you are born on the wrong side – metaphorically speaking - of the Charles river?

2. Teachers are extremely important. The best teachers are more often than not also the best researchers for the simple reason that they are, first of all, curious, eager to seek new insights. Once novel insights gained, secondly, they have to be able to communicate new ideas to environments which are not ready for them. Without Anton Zijderveld, I would not have dared to cross the channel; without Colin Crouch at Oxford, I would not have developed a keen eye for the importance of history in contemporary policy making; without Suzanne Berger at MIT, I would surely not have been able to make my arguments more explicit; without Fritz Scharpf at the Max Planck Institute in Cologne, I would not have come to focus on the dynamics, rather than the inertia, of policy; and, finally, without Gosta Esping-Andersen from Florence and Barcelona, I would not have been pushed far enough to think through the policy implications of my empirical research. Most inspiring, at an earlier stage, was my father, who as an autodidact economist for Phillips, joined me, when I was still at high school, in an evening studium generale program on Marxist economics, at the Eindhoven Technical University.

3. Peers, fellow students, are equally important. If there is one thing you discover when you go abroad, it is that you are not alone! There is a multitude of you making detours, and this leads to friendships, which in turn can lead to research collaborations at a later stage, even marriage. Academic peers are both more supportive as friends and more critical because they are on top of the literature. Always make sure to let fellow students read drafts of papers and vice versa. Moreover, the best way to discover new places is with (and through the eyes of) your non-native fellow students. With my South-African friends at Oxford, I went to jazz-joints in London native English would not dare to go to.

4. There are two things I particularly love about teaching in the Anglo-Saxon academic environment. First of all, there are no rules and restrictions with respect to the numbers of pages to be read for next week’s tutorial. A thousands pages of reading a week is not uncommon. Second, and more important, it is not the page numbers that count, but the quality of the essays that students hand in the day before the tutorial. Writing essays, I have learnt, is the best guarantee to digest the literature, to continuously upkeep writing skills, to develop your own research interests, academic ideas and to find your style of argumentation.

5. There are, nonetheless, important differences between British and North-American academic cultures. Oxford abides by the ethos of the amateur scholar who is highly intelligent, a bit snobbish, and who essentially writes for his peers in the Oxbridge college community. My Oxford supervisor liked the implicit argument I developed in my dissertation. Before I left for the US, he said to me that all I needed was a stapler (*nietmachientje*) to hold my thesis together. American academic culture, by contrast, abides by the ethos of the professional. In graduate school you are basically trained to become a university professor. No more, no less. Your dissertation, which is your first contribution to academia, should stand out by making your argument stand out. This is best done by presenting received scholarship as a straw man, a foil for claiming intellectual superiority. An important trick of the trade, but sometimes when you read American academic articles, you get the feeling that the author is insulting your intelligence, by boldly stating he or she just supplied you with this or that proof to the puzzle set out at the beginning of the paper. Should not the reader be the judge of whether the author succeeded in making his or her case? In my own writing, I am still struggling to combine the best of both worlds of Oxbridge high level amateurism and American professionalism, trying not to insult intelligent readers.

6. What I especially like about American university education is the consumerist attitude of students, demanding value for money for teaching. Graduate students are very much aware that they, their parents, or the department, are making serious financial sacrifices for future career opportunities. Even brilliant professors who are continuously late for classes receive low grades in student assessments. Of course, with tuition fees in my times at MIT of about 20.000 dollars, even if they are paid by university grants or other sources of funding, enforce a culture of quality control, transparent monitoring and active feedback on the part of students. This we still lack on the European continent, although things are getting better.

There are also risks and pitfalls involved in making a sequence of (too many) detours. When my two years at MIT were over, Suzanne Berger, my supervisor, tried to persuade me to apply for an assistant professorship at Berkeley, California. In a snap second nightmare I saw myself leaving Eindhoven for Tilburg, Tilburg for Oxford, Oxford for Cambridge on the East Coast, Berkeley on West Coast, to end up as a middle aged associate professor at the University of Hawaii, reading European economic and politics in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. "No thank you, it was time to go home!" Fellow Dutch academics at the Harvard Center for European Studies thought I was crazy. One of them confronted me with the following scenario: "You are now essentially a policy analyst, with no network in that field of study in the Netherlands. If you go back to economics, you won't be taken seriously." These warnings all turned out to be true at first. Although I was establishing a bit of a name internationally, back in the Netherlands I felt like an academic orphan. Tilburg welcomed me as a lost son to the economics departments, but eventually I was more at ease in Rotterdam because the Erasmus University allowed me to partake, as senior researcher at the Max Planck Institute in Cologne, in a large comparative research project on welfare state change in advanced democracies. Of course the Max Planck Gesellschaft paid the Erasmus University a fair sum for my work in Cologne. Academically, in the end I was saved by the further internationalization of scholarship I myself was now a product of.

Having made such large investments in the field of comparative social policy studies, I increasingly saw less reason why I, as a scholar, should remain silent as a policy commentator. Upon the success of the collaborative work at the Max Planck Institute, a number of us got together at the European University Institute in Fiesole, near Florence, to write policy orientated reports for respectively the Portuguese and Belgian presidencies in 2000 and 2001. We all, enthusiastically, threw ourselves behind the Lisbon strategy, seeking out its social policy consequences for domestic and EU policy making. I still believe in this effort.

From counselling the EU to become deputy director of the WRR in 2001 was not such a big step, although I was rather surprised that I was approached for this unmistakably *Dutch* job. From a comparative perspective, the Scientific Council is a very special institution; it is trans-sectoral, cross-disciplinary and has a long term policy orientation. But its most important feature is this. A very good friend of mine from MIT, David Miliband, who is now a cabinet minister for the environment in the Blair government once asked me: "what exactly is your institute's relationship

to the government?" I said: "David, it's very simple: we don't have to listen to the prime-minister; but: the prime-minister has to listen to us." In awe, he replied: "That cannot be true!" But it is: we are mandated by law to advice the government on long term policy issues. In turn, the government, again by law, has the obligation to write a response to our findings and conclusions which is open to public scrutiny and parliamentary debate.

Since two weeks I hold a part-time professorship in comparative European social policy, next to my primary responsibility as the director of the WRR (and secretary of the Council). It is a dream come true. Re-engaging with teaching and student supervision, I find myself speculating about the future of higher education in particular in the Netherlands and Europe.

Today, all European universities with a name aspire to become centres of excellence. Many university boards wish to emulate Harvard, Princeton, and Stanford. I think we should be realistic. It is better to build on the path-dependent learning effects and successes rather than to start to compete on a very narrow turf with a historical disadvantage vis-à-vis Oxbridge and the Ivy League universities in the United States. Why not make it easier for Dutch students to go to Oxford, Cambridge and Princeton, while in the meantime making the intellectual environment at Dutch universities so stimulating that there are massive incentives for ex-pat students to come back to their Alma Maters once they have finished their dissertations abroad. This is the philosophy of the excellence scholarships of the University of Tilburg as I see it. Coming back they will naturally bring along their international networks of excellence. Hereby network externalities will in due course become more solidly anchored on this side of the channel and Atlantic.

When we think of greater Boston, we think of Harvard and MIT, but once we are prepared to broaden our horizon and make a detour across New England, we come along thousands of high quality colleges and universities in Massachusetts, Maine en Vermont. Why not make the Rijn-Schelde delta, from Cologne to Rotterdam, from Leuven to Brussels and Antwerp, from Maastricht to Nijmegen and Tilburg, the New England of the European Union, with Oxford, LSE and Cambridge as our fore posts.

In the Netherlands today there is a lot of debate about pensions in the face of ageing. The best pension policy, I believe, is to invest in the productive capacity of human capital, both in quality and quantity, i.e. to invest in children. By having concentrated quite narrowly on the sustainability of social insurance (and especially pensions) over the past two decades, most European countries have crowded out important investments in family services and education. A countervailing policy reorientation is called for. The good news of population ageing is that we are very likely to return relatively soon to some form of full employment. The employment rate of people with higher education is already about 80% throughout Europe, far above the Lisbon target. In this respect, there is hardly any difference between Sweden and Italy, except that in Italy educated couples have no kids because of rigid labour markets and the absence of quality day care. When everyone with a degree in higher education has a good job, there is a case to be made for asking students in tertiary education to contribute themselves more financially to their educational investments from which they are sure to profit later on. This would surely raise the quality of the institutions higher education in the Rijn-Schelde delta, making it attractive to build on the positive externalities of returning scholars from Oxbridge and the Ivy League universities. To smooth the transformation towards more private contributions to higher education, it is perhaps advisable to transform the Dutch system of mortgage rate subsidization towards a far more *productive* system of study loan interest deduction or *studierenteaftrek*.

Beyond this, Europe should be very careful in up-keeping their relatively solid systems of public primary and secondary education. We should not fall into the trap of building 'islands of excellence' in higher learning at the expense of letting primary and secondary education slip-slide into the 'sea of ignorance'.

I come to a conclusion. Last weekend I participated in a conference at Bocconi University in Milan. On Thursday, I first worked with my Italian colleague and friend Maurizio Ferrera on a book about the Future of Social Europe that we hope to publish with Oxford University Press in the fall of 2007. Friday was my turn to chair a workshop at the EGPA conference on public

sector reform. It was extremely hot and muggy in metropolitan Milan. This is why I decided on Saturday to go to Bergamo. Bergamo, which is about a 45 minute train ride from Milan, is divided up in a lower town and a mediaeval citadel up the hill, connected by a *funicolare*, a cable cart that takes you up there. It was a perfect sunny day to wonder around the alleyways and quarters of Bergamo and to have lunch outside in the central piazza. Enjoying the sun most of the afternoon allowed me to sit down and think about what I could say next week, which is today at this prestigious ceremony today. After lunch, I discovered that there was second *funicolare* that took me even higher up outside of Bergamo. Although I had dinner plans with friends in Milan, I could not resist continuing my walks in the Bergamo hillside. The scenery was staggering and I could have walked on for hours, but by four it was time to return to Milan. I walked back into the direction of the *funicolare* that would take me back to Bergamo *alta*. But on my right I came across a steep path that could possibly help me to descent the Bergamo hills straight into the lower town. Very likely this would take me, I reckoned, another hour. More likely, however, I would get completely lost in the hills of Lombardy. But I just could not resist taking this spectacular detour. I barely made it for dinner in Milan.

Higher learning is the seed from which much of my adult life grew, and I am extremely grateful for the opportunities the university as a modern institution has given me. My broad academic upbringing, however, has not led to a life fully dedicated to the world of learning, the temple of reason. I never viewed the university as a shelter from the “outer world” of modern society, politics and policy making. Life in a strictly academic village would have been a torment for me. Neither have my detours made me satisfactorily street-wise to make it as an international businessman or a national politician. My “detourist” inclination ultimately drove me towards an intermediary position in between academic analysis and policy advice.

I am of course extremely curious what many of you have to say, twenty years from now, of how the seeds of higher learning have worked their way through your adult career paths - or *detours* for that matter.

Thanks for inviting me to speak before you all at this memorable occasion!

Information about prof. Hemerijck, see:
<http://www.wrr.nl/english/content.jsp?objectid=1709>