

Profit and Loss

The Current Relevance of Historical Migration Research

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In recent years the debate about migration and integration has come prominently to the fore in many European countries, but has possibly created the most commotion in the Netherlands. In *Winnaars en verliezers* [Winners and losers], Leo and Jan Lucassen take a critical look at the thesis of 'integration pessimism', and set out to evaluate the 'winners' and 'losers' of migrations to the Netherlands in the last five centuries. This discussion raises some methodological and interpretation problems that are inherent in the concepts of profit and loss and examines the limits and possibilities of similar research in Belgium.

In recent years the debate about migration and integration has come prominently to the fore in many European countries, but has possibly created the most commotion in the Netherlands. There the tone of the debate is generally acrimonious, heavily loaded and pessimistic. In *Winnaars en verliezers* [Winners and losers]¹, Leo and Jan Lucassen take a critical look at three ideas that have been put forward by the 'integration pessimists': 1) that there has been massive immigration into the post-war Netherlands as a result of a left-wing secret agenda, 2) that the resulting social problems have been systematically swept under the carpet by politicians and others in responsible positions who live in a dream world of cultural relativism, and 3) that the integration of the post-war newcomers has been a failure.

The authors, respectively Professor of Social History at Leiden University and Special Professor at the Amsterdam Vrije Universiteit and senior researcher at the International Institute for Social History (IISH - IISG), set out to examine these generally unsupported claims on a scholarly basis. As regards the third supposition at least, the authors point out that it is both necessary and useful to maintain a long-term perspective since the 'failure' of current immigrants is generally either implicitly or explicitly compared to

what is claimed to have been the success of their counterparts from previous eras such as the Dutch ‘Golden Age’. Here, however, the criteria are often inconsistent: ‘For earlier periods, we see only the successful, “good” migrants, while for the present day we focus on the problematical, “bad” newcomers’ (18). In order to redraw this picture the authors of this book set out to identify in the migrations that have characterised the Netherlands in the last five centuries ‘who *won* and who *lost*, economically, socially and culturally, as well as politically’ (18). In this way they hope to provide ‘a scientifically balanced contribution to the needlessly antagonistic debate about integration, Islam and populism’ (10).

Two central themes

The result of this intention is that in fact the book covers two subjects. On the one hand it aims to reconstruct and evaluate half a century of political discourse and decision-making that have shaped post-war migration to the Netherlands – in order to test the first two claims of the integration pessimists. On the other hand, the book also tries to evaluate profit and loss in the migratory movements that have taken place over the last five centuries – an attempt in which an evaluation of the integration pessimists’ third claim takes centre stage. The book also uses a ‘reversed’ chronological perspective, in which succeeding chapters look further back in time. In this way, in the first three chapters the post-war period predominates, while the periods from 1850 to 1945 and from 1550 to 1850 are each dealt with in a chapter of their own.

In the analysis of political discourse and decision-making with regard to migration since World War II, Leo and Jan Lucassen have to their credit a number of important recent works, by themselves or with close collaborators like Saskia Bonjour and Annemarie Cottaar. They make use not only of historical studies, but also primarily the sociological, political and anthropological literature, as well as statistical material. Taken together these invalidate the first two claims of the integration pessimists: in recent years there has been no question of massive immigration of the groups that are generally regarded as problematical; post-war immigration policy has been shaped more by the political right than by the left; the large-scale re-uniting of families in a period of marked unemployment after 1975 was mainly a coincidental result of previously acquired rights together with new restrictions on immigration; and Dutch ‘minorities policy’ in practice was not at all geared to multicultural aims.

1 Leo Lucassen and Jan Lucassen, *Winnaars en verliezers. Een nuchtere balans van vijfhonderd jaar immigratie* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2011, 304 pp., ISBN 978 90 351 3643 4).

Also as regards the book's second main theme – the question of who gained or lost by the different waves of migration throughout history – the authors can call into play a rich collection of previous studies, often carried out or instigated by themselves. In a certain sense then, this new book can be read as a condensed and updated version of the earlier overview, *Nieuwkomers. Immigranten en hun nakomelingen* [Newcomers: Immigrants and their descendants] by Jan Lucassen and Rinus Penninx, which was first published in 1985. At the same time, in raising the question of profit and loss the authors intend to go much further than a general survey of the who, when, how and why of immigration to the Netherlands in the last 500 years and to dig deeper than the statement that throughout this period there has always been immigration – and often more so than at present.

A difficult question on virgin ground

The existence of prior studies does not detract from the fact that the central question is extremely difficult to answer simply: profit or loss might vary enormously, for example in the light of the social aspects considered (economic, social, cultural etc.), relative social standing (employers, workers, students etc.) and temporal perspective (short or long term). Moreover, an answer to this question to a certain extent always involves a *counterfactual* element, a comparison with a situation in which the migration concerned did *not* take place, with all the attendant difficulties. Although the authors are aware of the different possibilities of interpretation that their basic question implies – hence their emphasis on winners and losers rather than profit and loss – in a book intended for the general public there remains relatively little room to debate questions of methodology. Since the basic question is one that is seldom raised in historical research on migration, possibly as a result of a certain scholarly reticence, the authors here are obliged to approach largely virgin ground.

Symptomatic of the difficulties of interpretation that can arise here is the observation that 'without their arrival [...] wages would have risen even more' is regarded as a positive contribution from immigrant workers in the period from 1956 to 1973 (57), while this would probably be interpreted differently from the point of view of wage-earners than from that of employers. Migrants' contribution to Dutch competitiveness (57) or seen as an antidote to problems arising from increased longevity (46) also imply a view of economic development that is debatable. The same is true of the statement that migrants' presence provided 'double profits for the traditional sectors', the viability of which could be extended thanks to the employment of cheap immigrant workers (147), while at the same time this constituted a disincentive to modernisation, so that these sectors were badly affected in the 1970s when the global crisis hit home (63). In other words, what

was an advantage at a given moment in time would subsequently become a disadvantage. It is precisely the importance of this temporal element in the general appreciation that makes diachronic comparisons of profit and loss so difficult: the balance-sheet of the migration movements during the Golden Age by definition can be drawn up from a long-term view, while this is not yet possible for more recent immigration.

On the other hand, the fact that a question is difficult to answer is no reason for it not to be asked, certainly when it will otherwise become the property of relatively unfounded and unsubtle opinions in the current debate on integration. The authors therefore deserve emulation in the lines of approach that they have set out in this book – their advocacy of an extensive historical perspective in the analysis of current questions on migration and integration, the drawing-up of a complex balance-sheet of profit and loss in a historical perspective, and their appeal to a broader audience than that of only historians or academics – which as far as we can gauge from its impact in the media has certainly been the case with *Winnaars en verliezers*. In this respect, the book must be situated within a multifaceted and ambitious scientific project that enables Leo and Jan Lucassen to exert influence on the migration debate both within the academic community and for a wider audience. With publications such as *Nieuwkomers* [Newcomers] in 1985 and *Gelijkheid en onbehagen* [Equality and dissatisfaction] (2006), this project can best be described as one of bridge-building – between social scientists and historians from different national traditions, with comparative studies like *The Immigrant Threat* (2005), and between academics on the one hand and politicians and the general public on the other.

A view from Belgium

From a Belgian point of view, it is noteworthy that historians can successfully impose their views on the current migration debate, including both a critical analysis of post-war migration policy and a long-term perspective on the migratory movements of the last five hundred years. Although in Belgium there is a corpus of important critical literature with regard to post-war migration policy and the integration debate, involving sociologists, political scientists and cultural philosophers such as Jan Blommaert, Andre Rea and Dirk Jacobs, whose important contributions have had a wide public response, these have seldom, if ever, been placed in a historical perspective. Important steps towards introducing a long-term perspective into current debates in fact were provided by the historian Anne Morelli in her *Geschiedenis van het eigen volk* [History of our own people] in 1993, but these remained largely without emulation. Recent initiatives and publications such as those on Flemish migration to Wallonia (1850-2000) from the KADOC Documentation and Research Centre for Religion, Culture and Society under impulse



Four Moroccan miners in working clothes. Postcard with on the reverse the text: 40 ans de présence marocaine en Belgique. De l'immigration à la citoyenneté, février 2004 [40 years of Moroccan presence in Belgium. From immigration to citizenship, February 2004].

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from Idesbald Goddeeris reveal a renewed ambition on the part of Belgian historians to link up with current issues, but it is significant that the most influential contribution in recent years – *Arm Wallonië* [Poor Wallonia], Pascal Verbeken's 2007 book that was later turned into a TV-documentary – was written by a journalist.

This difference between the Netherlands and Belgium might reflect the absence of a 'national' historiographical tradition: what in fact was the meaning of 'foreigner' or 'immigrant' in the context of the pronounced regional or local diversity and the particularities that were characteristic of present-day Belgium in the Early Modern Period? This could explain why historical research into migration in Belgium itself is largely split into two separate circuits: Mediaeval and Early-Modern historians tend to study migration movements and migration policy mainly at the local level, while historians of the contemporary period concentrate on migration movements and migration policy at the (inter)national level. The result of this separation is the implicit assumption of a major break between the *ancien régime* and the nineteenth century, while it is precisely research into possible continuities with regard to patterns of migration and migration policy at both the local and the 'national' level that should be able to provide new insights. On the other hand, it may legitimately be asked to what extent the 'national' perspective of *Winnaars en verliezers* can be used retroactively over a long term, and whether the systematic integration of 'local' and 'regional' dimensions might not provide an extra differentiation in the assessment of 'profit and loss'.

This is an important book, a must-read for everyone interested in migration, not only because it makes insights from recent historical studies in connection with a current issue available to a broader public, but also because it gives rise to new questions that are relevant both from a historical and from a contemporary perspective. It challenges opinion-makers to consider the historical dimensions of current issues and obliges historians to think about the current relevance of their research. We can only hope that both sides will take up the challenge. ◀

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