



# NIAS AND THE PASSAGE OF TIME

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People sometimes ask me why I chose demography as the discipline to devote my working life to. For an open, but at heart somewhat private person, little inclined to baring his soul, that simple question can be quite embarrassing. I usually react with a smile saying: 'It is a good example of academic foresight. When in the 1950's I read studies published by the League of Nations on population issues, I was quick to see that the growth and control of the world's population would be one of the central issues of my time and that it could provide me with the intellectual challenge I sought and the income I would need.'

Now that I have matured enough to do so, I should perhaps admit that my real interest lay in the passage of time and the succession of generations this entailed. Birth cohorts seemed to follow each other in endless repetition. Why did we all have to learn so much only to see it go to waste at the end of our lives? How long would it continue and, more importantly, how long could it possibly continue? Where would it ultimately lead to? Would current growth rates persist and would as a result, as Ansley Coale once calculated, in about 6,500 years 'the descendants of the world's population (...) form a solid sphere of live bodies expanding with a radial velocity that, neglecting relativity, would equal the velocity of light' (Coale, 1959)? Or would at that time a quite small, but highly sophisticated, tolerant and cultured population enjoy the beauty of the earth in a paradisaic state?

I am now resigned to the fact that I shall never know the answer and that questions posed in one's 'Sturm und Drang' – years are at best of fleeting interest. Nevertheless, the passage of time still fascinates me. And, NIAS is a place where the succession of generations goes faster than anywhere else. Every 1st of September a new cohort of fellows comes to walk under the majestic beech trees with their heads full of plans and the secret ambition to seek immortality through another widely acclaimed book, paper or essay.

I have seen six cohorts come or go, and I am more than ever aware of the fact that each cohort only has 10 months to complete its full life cycle. In that short time

span they should enjoy the freshness and wonderment that new surroundings bring, vibrate with the excitement of intellectual achievement, experience the doubts of mid-life and the satisfaction of seeing a selfset, too ambitious task virtually completed. At the end of this stay and after great exertion they should be able to echo Saint Gregory the Great's *in labore requies* ('you gave me rest through work'). This obviously can only be made to happen if fellows and staff work closely together and if the longer life cycle of the staff can be made to undulate in harmony with the shorter cycle of a fellowship.

As long as that is assured, NIAS will fulfil its basic function well. It is a precondition for its continued existence, but not necessarily a sufficient one. With the passage of time the environment in which an institute operates changes. Timely consideration of such changes is necessary to anticipate new possibilities and functions and to keep the institute responsive to scholarly, academic and societal needs. This requires a pro-active attitude of the directorate and a willingness to list strengths and weaknesses with merciless frankness. Such an exercise is, therefore, best done in the privacy of one's mind. But no harm will result if some important considerations are reviewed in a commemorative Liber Amicorum for the institute and some conclusions are drawn from that. After all, as an American baseball coach once said: 'If you do not know where you are going, you are lucky to get there'.

Under current conditions in the Netherlands policies with a time horizon of more than five years are likely to be overtaken by events. This leads to the conclusion that one should be careful not to look too far ahead and be somewhat sceptical of other people's plans in that regard. Nevertheless long-term perspectives deserve some consideration. For NIAS three tendencies seem to be of particular relevance.

The first is the increased competition Europe will experience from developing countries and, in particular, from countries in the Pacific Rim, the Near East and North Africa. Europe's economic strength will be eroded. The second is the increased emphasis in the

European setting on the knowledge infrastructure of countries and on international competition based on knowledge. The wish to 'capture' the results of research for economic purposes will probably grow. The third is the delayed effect of Europe's Second Demographic Transition, that is of the decline in the birth rate and the increase in migration, and the consequences this will have on the size and composition of cohorts entering universities. The reduction in student numbers will bring pressure to bear on the staff of faculties.

All three tendencies are likely to reduce the scope and resources for free academic research at the universities. This will make an institute such as NIAS even more important than it is now, provided it can survive the squeeze.

In the medium term and with a narrower geographical focus the following tendencies have to be considered. The emergence of a 'New Europe', free of a major ideological rift. This will enable increased scientific collaboration and division of labour within Europe. For NIAS this implies the need to strengthen contact with the immediate neighbours and the need to broaden the institute's resource base.

The way the universities develop is also highly important. Will the 'vocational' drift in the universities and the 'academic' drift in vocational colleges continue? Will the binary system disappear? Alternatively, will the

universities become small and more beautiful to work in? Further, how will the emerging system of post-graduate schools develop in the Netherlands. Will such research schools ultimately dominate in the humanities and social sciences? How strong will their international orientation be? To what extent will they be able to facilitate the participation of their senior staff in international research efforts?

A further point of great importance is that revolutionary changes in information technology will permeate instruction and research. Keeping up-to-date in this field is likely to require considerable investment. A final aspect to be referred to is the redefinition of the role of the Minister of Education and Science, the universities and the intermediary organizations, NWO and the Academy, in research and higher education. Will NWO and the Academy become increasingly concerned with activities at the international and national level and seek to stimulate interdisciplinary contact? Would not that be favourable for NIAS?

For the immediate future developments which may affect the functioning of NIAS include, first of all, the way in which the financing of research schools will take shape. Will there be life outside the research schools? There is, secondly, the decision that will ultimately be taken with regard to a possible 'claw-back' of funds from the universities to the national research council (NWO) and there is, finally, the degree of appreciation and recognition senior staff will experience in their daily academic life. Will the increased concern for their opportunities to produce original work, which has become noticeable recently, pick up momentum? Will that improve their chances of making themselves free for a stay at an institute for advanced study?

If I pursue my favourite pastime, and reflect on this range of issues, try to weigh the likely impact of different outcomes and the degree of uncertainty involved, I am satisfied that NIAS has a valuable national and international role to play for many years to come, provided, of course, that sensible choices are made and a spirit of endeavour prevails. Essential is that the universities continue to appreciate the institute as a valuable element in the internationalization of the humanities and social sciences and that the institute does not waver in its desire to be of service to these fields of learning and scientific inquiry. For the immediate future this implies efforts to:





- utilise the institute's new facilities to the best possible advantage;
- explore the prospects for broadening international support;
- reach an improved working relationship with the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Councils of NWO (developing joint ventures and themes of common interest);
- establish a good, and symbiotic co-operation with newly founded research schools (master classes, summer courses, theme groups)
- continue to stimulate the best possible international and national talent to apply for a fellowship, to participate in multi-disciplinary theme groups and to devote an extended period of time to fundamental reflection and writing;
- seek the funds necessary to be able to offer scholars from the Netherlands a stipend that will allow them to accept an invitation for a fellowship without

undue hardship for their faculty or research team at their university;

- react positively to opportunities to involve in its programmes scholars from Central, and Eastern Europe, from Russia, Asia and other areas of particular significance to the Netherlands;
- try to contribute to the intellectual discourse in the Netherlands.

The passage of time, I have already noted, goes quickly at NIAS. I now repeat it, and this time with a twinge of regret. On the other hand, for visitors, fellows and staff alike, it is part of the charm of being at the institute. That charm should not be lost. It is the task of directors to see to it that it is not lost, and to chart a course accordingly. I trust that many generations of scholars will have a chance to contemplate their soul in the Persian Rose Garden, enjoy themselves on the volleyball court, seek solace on the beach, pace their room in



frustration, hear the rain fall on the leaves and laugh uproariously in the fellows' bar.

I further trust that quite a few amongst them will experience the silent joy of having written a few paragraphs, chapters even, so well, that they feel slightly closer to becoming immortal. By contributing to the stock of knowledge and insight, scholars and scientists alike can give meaning to their lives and to the passage

of time. It allows each successive generation to absorb a large amount of information in its formative stages and will thus give it a headstart in its own endeavours. In my best moments that thought gives me peace of mind when I walk the lanes of NIAS. It also gave me the feeling that I was fully justified in seeking the funds necessary to upgrade its facilities and for spending these with a flourish.