Government by Expertise: Technocrats and Technocracy in Western Europe, 1914-1973

Veranstalter: Camilo Erlichman / Peter Romijn, University of Amsterdam
Datum, Ort: 13.09.2017–15.09.2017, Amsterdam
Bericht von: William Haynes, Faculty of Humanities, University of Amsterdam

Technocracy has in many respects become one of the major political profanities of our times. The term is visible in current political discourse, and there has been increasing historical interest in the role of technocrats within modern governance. While many scholars locate technocracy's origins in the interbellum period with important antecedents in the nineteenth century, technocratic governance became a defining part of post-war politics in western Europe. The conference 'Government by Expertise' concentrated on tracing the genealogy of the technocratic process and the differing trajectories of technocrats in the twentieth century. As well as addressing its gradual ascendency, a broad understanding of technocracy was adopted, understood widely as a form of doing politics that occurs behind the formal political process, not requiring immediate democratic legitimation at the ballots.

Keynote speaker PHILIP NORD (Princeton) tracked the role of experts in France from the 1930s to the 1970s. Nord emphasised an overarching technocratic concern with social justice and modernisation, with technocrats presenting themselves as 'above' politics or as pragmatic problem solvers, despite extensive links to political parties. Simultaneously, technocratic schemes involved corporatist or consultative machinery that allowed them to gain civil society's consent. The 1970s were identified as a watershed moment as technocratic governance ran into difficulties where, with the collapse of the industrial order, the state's role was no longer clear. At the same time, important signposts for technocrats such as 'modernity' were called into question, while organised interest was weakened, leading to a decline in the corporatists intermediaries that technocracy needed to gain legitimacy.

Nowadays, the 'direction' of experts remains unclear, especially as the link between technocratic decision-makers and civil society has in many respects broken down.

As an introduction to the second day of the conference, JONATHAN ZEITLIN (Amsterdam) gave a welcoming address, noting the pertinence of the event, with recent political events illuminating the general ambiguity of expertise. The election of President Trump and Brexit for example, represent two political shocks that expose both the inability of experts to predict, as well as the popular disillusionment with the political status quo and the role of experts. In turn, by bringing together global experts in the field, the conference would give a unique opportunity to rethink technocracy in relation to democracy, post-war Europe, and Europeanisation.

Conveners CAMILO ERLICHMAN (Amsterdam) and PETER ROMIJN (Amsterdam) then introduced the overarching themes of the conference. As such, a periodisation of what the organisers described as the 'rise and rise' story of technocracy into four distinctive periods was proposed. This included first the 1920s and1930s, which saw the rise of experts who sought to shape society through the steering of social and economic affairs; second, the expansion of state bureaucracies and planning-bodies during the Second World War; third, the crucial ascendancy of technocrats during the liberation period and reconstruction in the late 1940s leading to a post-war top-down recalibration of society and political structures; and finally the 1950s-1970s era, defined as a period of 'high-technocracy' which saw the consolidation of forms of technocratic power and the expansion of the number of consultative bodies and expert committees, both within national policymaking and increasingly at the European level.

Introducing the first panel on the relationship between experts and the 'people', DANIEL KNEGT (Amsterdam) focussed on French intellectuals in the period 1930-1950, exploring a small group of modernist internationalists including Jean Luchaire, Bertrand de Jouvenel, and Alfred Fabre-Luce who navigated the intricacies of changing political regimes in France. As Knegt argued, the

monthly journal „Notre Temps" was part of a wider elite movement in France characterised by a desire for political, social and economic reform. This elite presented their proposals as pragmatic, non-political, and presumably technical solutions. In exploring the case of this non-heterodox French group, however, Knegt questioned the longevity of the intellectual movement that advocated concrete rather than ideological solutions.

Juxtaposing the concept of the 'functional demos' with the 'expert technos', STEFAN COUPERUS (Groningen) analysed state-society relations and state governance in interwar Europe. Expertise gradually took hold in political systems and councils representing 'functional' interest groups in interwar Europe, which often developed into influential decision-making bodies alongside democratic parliaments. Couperus then discussed the development of the 'expert technos' focusing on the ad-hoc technocratic process that could be observed in Britain. Overall, there was a wide-spread feeling that national, functional councils had been disappointing and therefore there was a return to expert councils, though the new array of councils did not do away with interest groups entirely.

Concluding the first panel, ANTONIO COSTA PINTO (Lisbon) focussed on technocrats' relationship to corporatism in authoritarian states. Congruent with increasing 'anti-parliamentarianism', many authoritarian rulers such as Salazar increasingly advocated a 'scientific' approach to governance. Costa Pinto provided a precise mapping of the interrelationship between dictatorships and corporatism in Europe between 1918 and 1945. This demonstrated similarities among dictatorships throughout Europe in the way they adopted 'functional' forms of representation through corporatist bodies composed of experts and representatives from interest groups. Conclusively, functional representation through corporatist advisory chambers was the main institutional reform of fascist regimes, who saw them as ideal replacements for democratic bodies.

The second panel on the relationship between technocracy and changing political orders was initiated by MARTIN CONWAY (Oxford), who explored notions of technocracy and democracy after 1945. State authority had been considerably weakened and in some cases, collapsed entirely. Technocracy was therefore seen as crucial in a modern political landscape. However, whereas post-war democracy focussed on problem solving and responding to the needs of the people, by the 1970s technocracy no longer seemed as a 'friend' of democracy, with many accusing technocrats of approaching citizens as objects to be manipulated. Many believed that technocracy had damaged democracy. Subsequently technocracy shifted away from structures of democratic governance at the national level and moved into European institutions, and subsequently into the world of capitalism.

IDO DE HAAN (Utrecht) explored the relationship between technocracy, Keynesianism, and neoliberalism. In post-war Europe, a viable political system needed to reconcile a capitalist economy with democracy. Despite their major ideological differences, the role of specialists and experts was key to both Keynesianism and neoliberalism. De Haan detected major commonalities between the two systems, such as most notably a shared sense of elitism, scepticism towards mass democracy, the adoption of a 'scientific' rather than political approach towards the economy, and a rejection of laissez-faire capitalism. Yet the increasing role of experts saw that the tension between demos and technos was only exacerbated in the long-term.

Taking a global perspective, SANDRA KHOR MANICKHAM (Rotterdam) began the third panel, focussing on technocratic rule in the British colony of Malaya during the period of wartime Japanese occupation. In this region, a 'racialised technocracy' was installed by the British colonisers, leaving native Malays with no access to govern or to acquire skills. However, White officials, 'generalists' equipped with expertise about the area and its people, could assume the highest positions in politics and society. The subsequent wartime occupation by Japan essentially reversed the West's claim to racial superiority, heralding a period of technocratic pan-Asianism. Racial superiority was now attributed to the pan-Asian peoples, and Malays were instated to positions previously

occupied by Whites.

ROBIN DE BRUIN (Amsterdam) explored the relationship between colonialism and Saint Simonian technocracy, revolving around the notion that enlightened experts should deliver welfare to the people. This featured prominently throughout the European colonial ethos and could even be regarded as a forerunner to social democracy. According to De Bruin, the influence of Saint Simonianism was evident in the administration of the East Indies, leading him to argue that Saint Simonianism should be considered as a typical product of Dutch ethical imperialism.

To conclude the third panel, MARIJKE VAN FAASSEN (Amsterdam) analysed Dutch and international migration management, exploring the role of experts in modelling society through migration policy. As such, the rise of sociography, the mapping of populations, preceded the foundation of international migrant organisations like United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (ICEM). Through a statistical textual analysis, Van Faassen then revealed significant shifts in discourse on Dutch migration, demonstrating in particular how discourse moved from developmentalism into emphasising entrepreneurship, possibly heralding the neoliberal dawn of the 1970s.

In the fourth panel focussing on ascendant expert groups, JOACHIM LUND (Copenhagen) focussed on the role of business elites in Denmark between 1900 and 1945. Technocratic solutions provided a new economic and industrial elite with a political voice, whilst institutionalised networks of engineers turned into political pressure-groups in the 1930s. In this decade, technocracy gained territory, while the German occupation of Denmark provided many local 'captains of industry' with the opportunity to advance their technocratic projects. In the long-term, Lund observed a gradual shift of socio-political influence away from engineers and towards economists, who claimed to possess expertise on business matters.

RAPHAEL VAN LERBERGE (Brussels) then focussed on the techno-political transformation of social security in Belgium in the period 1937-1970, presenting advancements in the field of punch-card machine systems as a major element in the gradual depolitisation of social security. HERVÉ JOLY (Lyon) followed, providing a history of two groups of technocrats embedded in the French power elite in the period 1930-1970: the finances and mines inspectors. Joly dissected the mechanisms of social selection involved in the elite institutions of the French state that draw prestige from an extreme process of examination, producing experts who are able to manage any organisation, with many of them later occupying top positions within France, including the presidency.

In the fifth panel on the technopolitics of space, JENS VAN DE MAELE (Ghent/Antwerp/Brussels) explored 'the architecture of state bureaucracy' in Belgium between 1915 and 1965. Belgian politician Louis Camu advocated state-of-the-art architectural facilities in the 1930s that would showcase the prestige, modernity, and efficiency of the civil service. This new architecture was characterised by open, airy spaces with a strong emphasis on the relationship between political transparency and glass architecture. In the 1940s, however, this relationship ultimately disintegrated, with Camu and other officials engaging in collaborationist politics behind closed doors.

Focusing on Central Europe during the interbellum period and especially on Poland, MARTIN KOHLRAUSCH (Leuven) suggested approaching modernist architects as a distinctive group of technocrats. Modernisation became a key imperative of central and eastern European societies, portrayed as 'new Europe'. Architecture also served as an interface between technology and humans. As Kohlrausch argued, architects believed in the transformative nature of technological and modern science, whilst distancing themselves from being technocrats. However, they had few qualms with authoritarian regimes.

Beginning the final panel, KOEN VAN ZON (Nijmegen) focused on patterns of dirigisme and decentralisation of experts within European integration in the period 1952-1967. Despite Jean Monnet's aversion to dirigisme and suspicion of industrial cartels, the High Authority would come to be ridiculed as a

'super cartel'. Following this, the 1957 Treaty of Rome speaks volumes about the nature of expertise in European political systems, establishing the European Commission, which acted as a 'broker' of expertise. Therefore, a key difference exists in relation to expertise between ECSC High Authority (acting as in-house expertise) and the European Commission.

LIESBETH VAN DE GRIFT (Utrecht) then followed, introducing the role of interest groups in European governance in the 1950s to the 1970s, leading to the rise of consumer organisations in the 1970s. During this decade, the European Commission hoped to give the EU a more human face, shifting focus away from trade and increasing its responsiveness to citizens. Hence, consumer organisations became more involved in the European political process dominated by agricultural interest groups, particularly. Of course, public interest is an ambiguous term, and can come to mean commercial self-interest.

As the conference's final speaker, PATRICIA CLAVIN (Oxford) focused on the supranational element of technocracy in Europe (and the world) in 1920-1973. Clavin presented the League of Nations as foundational for the organisation of the EU. Clavin's paper also concentrated on the role of crisis as capacity to expand technocracy, giving levers to build institution. Despite this, the need to be secret was imperative, considering how quickly markets can respond. The power dimension of expertise was also crucial in this period, demonstrated by various colonial projects. After touching on the absence of women technocrats, who had been notably absent from a conference focusing largely on men, Clavin concluded on the challenges to those working on technocracy, encouraging us to think of new categories to approach the ways technocrats think and operate.

Finally, a closing discussion rounded up the event. Speakers agreed that there is no single, normative model of what a technocrat is and that the practices and objectives of technocracy shifted significantly over time and need to be historicised. Comparatively tracing the changing conceptions and different 'regimes' of technocracy as well as the itineraries of technocratic groups throughout twentieth-century Europe was therefore identified as a major historiographical desideratum. At the same time, it became clear that the projects and political agendas of technocrats were sometimes supported by large sectors of the population, while others found significant distrust. This prompted a discussion about the need for what the organisers described as a contextualised approach towards technocracy, in which the function and influence of technocrats is not explored in isolation, but situated in relation to wider social realities and societal expectations. Such an analysis of the conditions that enable technocrats to claim socio-political influence may be seen as part of a broader historiographical project of understanding the shape of political power in twentieth-century Europe and its relationship to shifting social realities, while also contributing to a historical contextualisation of important structures and mechanisms that continue to affect policymaking today.

Conference Overview:

Keynote Lecture
Philip Nord (Princeton): France's Age of Technocracy, 1930-1970

Jonathan Zeitlin (ACCESS EUROPE, Scientific Director): Welcome

Camilo Erlichman (Amsterdam) and Peter Romijn (Amsterdam): Introduction: Western Europe's Age of Technocracy

Panel 1: Demos and Technos
Chair: Michael Wintle (Amsterdam)

Daniel Knegt (Amsterdam): The Lure of „Realism": French Intellectuals between Technocracy and Fascism, 1930-1950

Stefan Couperus (Groningen): A 'Functional Demos' or an 'Expert Technos'? Debating State-Society Relations and State Governance in Interwar Europe

Antonio Costa Pinto (Lisbon): Technocracy, Corporatism, and the Development of „Economic Parliaments" in Interwar Europe

Panel 2: Technocracy and Political Orders
Chair: Camilo Erlichman (Amsterdam)

Martin Conway (Oxford): Allies or Enemies? Technocracy and Conceptions of a Democratic

Order in Europe after 1945

Ido de Haan (Utrecht): Democracy, Keynesianism and Early Neo-Liberalism in Post-war Europe

Panel 3: Global Expertise
Chair: Peter Romijn (Amsterdam)

Sandra Khor Manickam (Rotterdam): Technocracy in a Time of War: Governing Malaya and Singapore during the Japanese Period

Robin de Bruin (Amsterdam): Dutch High Official Hans Max Hirschfeld (1899-1961) and the Convenient Marriage between Colonialism and Saint-Simonian Technocracy

Marijke van Faassen (Amsterdam): Modelling Society by Migration Management: Exploring the Role of (Dutch) Experts in 20th Century International Migration Policy

Panel 4: The Ascent of Experts?
Chair: Peter Romijn (Amsterdam)

Joachim Lund (Copenhagen): Business in Government: Elites, Technocracy and Political Change in Denmark, 1900-1945

Raphael Van Lerberge (Brussels): The Techno-Political Transformation of Social Security in Belgium, 1937-1970

Hervé Joly (Lyon): The Finances and Mines Inspectors: Two Concurrent Groups of Technocrats in the French Power Elite, 1930-1970s

Panel 5: The Techno-Politics of Space
Chair: Camilo Erlichman (Amsterdam)

Jens van de Maele (Ghent/Antwerp/Brussels): Technocratic Models of Governance in 1930s Belgium: A Case Study on Ministerial Office Architecture

Martin Kohlrausch (Leuven): Modernist Architects as a New Technocratic Elite: Central Europe between the Wars

Panel 6: Technocracy and European Integration
Chair: Liz Buettner (Amsterdam)

Koen van Zon (Nijmegen): Brokering Expertise: The European Communities between Dirigisme and Decentralization, 1952-1967

Liesbeth van de Grift (Utrecht): Bringing the EC closer to its Citizens: The Role of Interest Groups in European Governance, 1950s to 1970s

Patricia Clavin (Oxford): Technocracy and the Boundaries of Europe in the World, 1920-1973

Final roundtable discussion
Camilo Erlichman (Amsterdam) & Peter Romijn (Amsterdam): closing remarks

Tagungsbericht *Government by Expertise: Technocrats and Technocracy in Western Europe, 1914-1973*. 13.09.2017–15.09.2017, Amsterdam, in: H-Soz-Kult 08.02.2018.