

In Memoriam Hans van Amersfoort 1937-2021

On the 31st of October 2021, Hans van Amersfoort, co-founder, mentor, and colleague at the Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies (IMES) of the University of Amsterdam passed away at the age of 84. He studied Social Geography at the University of Amsterdam where he received his master's degree in 1964. He started his academic career as a teacher and assistant at the Institute for Social Geography in 1965. He was appointed professor of Socio-Cultural / Population Geography in 1986. He retired in 2001, but continued to publish and coach young researchers until recently.

From the beginning, Van Amersfoort focused on the arrival of newcomers and how they found a place in Dutch society, that defined itself as an emigration country at that time. He started researching these new inhabitants in their new environmentⁱ, e.g. by living in the barracks of the Moluccans (soldiers of the colonial army of the Dutch Indies and their families). He published about the situation of Moluccans, Surinamese, Antilleans, and Moroccan labour migrants in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Van Amersfoort became the founding father of Dutch migration studies because of his explicit and sophisticated approach of the study of the newcomers' settlement process. For his dissertation of 1974, *Immigration and the Formation of Minority Groups. The Dutch Experience 1945-1975*,ⁱⁱ he developed an analytical model for studying what he labelled 'the assimilation process' (following North American literature of that time) and the possible outcome of minority formation.

The first important element of his analytical model (see Van Amersfoort 1982, 44) is that we should study the process of assimilation as an outcome of the interaction between immigrants and the host society. This interaction takes place at an individual level and at group level (adaptation of newcomers as individuals and as group vs. degree and nature of acceptance by individuals and groups of the host society), but most significantly at institutional level. 'Immigrant-related institutions' of the host society – including specific policies of inclusion or exclusion of the host society – constitute the context in which relations between newcomers and the host society play out.

The second important element of his approach is that we should study three different dimensions of the settlement process (and thus of the interaction between immigrants and the host society): the social, the cultural, and the political dimension. He defines the social position of an immigrant group as the position of that group as a whole in the social stratification of

society. That position is to be measured by inequalities in access and outcome between immigrants and natives in the domains of work and income, housing, education, and health. The cultural position relates to the cultural adaptation of immigrants and the degree and nature of their acceptance by the host society and the result of the interaction between these two. The political factor – in the analytical model – is subsumed in ‘immigrant-related institutions’, more particularly in specific immigrant related policies. The crucial question in this dimension is whether immigrants are excluded from the political community and its decision-making and/or have a legal position that otherwise hinders their full and equal participation in society. Having defined these three analytically distinct dimensions and the mechanisms that determine the outcomes in these dimensions, he insists that we also study the interaction between these dimensions.

Van Amersfoort also developed a crucial concept that relates to a possible outcome of the settlement process: the concept of minority as appropriate for the contemporary Dutch case. A group is a minority group if a) its social position is consistently low; b) its (ethno-)cultural position is markedly different; c) its numerical position prohibits the exertion of power and influence; and d) these three conditions continue to exist over generations. In all three dimensions of the settlement process, the minority outcome is the opposite of emancipation. Applying this analytical framework, he draws conclusions in the final chapter on four immigrant groups: the Moluccans, the Surinamese, and guest workers were clearly involved in a process of minority formation in 1973 – although the fourth criterion (‘over generations’) asked for some caution in view of the recent nature of immigration. As for the Indo-Dutch ‘repatriates’ from the former Dutch East Indies, the conclusion was exactly opposite: ‘The Indo-Dutch had a heterogeneous social composition and a high level of adaptation in conjunction with a strong rational orientation to their new situation. They did not develop their own institutions in the Netherlands.’

Van Amersfoort’s dissertation was a trailblazer in the Dutch research context as well as in the wider Dutch society. It was published at a moment that societal unrest was mounting: Moluccan youth had taken up political action, such as occupying the Indonesian embassy; Dutch politics had started preparations for the independence of Surinam, not in the least in the hope to end growing immigration of Surinamese to the Netherlands (a move that had the exact opposite effect, as Van Amersfoort demonstrated in later articles); the first oil crisis brought an end to the recruitment of guest workers, accompanied with policies to stimulate return to their country of origin (here the reality was a strong increase of family migration). When the Ministry of Culture, Recreation and Social Work installed an Advisory Committee for Research on

Cultural Minorities (ACOM) in 1978, the title of the Committee made clear that his analysis and concepts had reached policymakers, and of course Van Amersfoort was one of the committee's most prominent members.

His approach to the settlement process of immigrants and their position in the host society became widely accepted in research and policy circles in the Netherlands in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In 1979, the Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) published a report entitled 'Ethnic Minorities' in which the WRR advised the Dutch government how to deal with the dilemmas of immigration and integration of newcomers in Dutch society, and particularly how to avoid minority formation among immigrants. The WRR-report led to a period of 'minorities policy' in the Netherlands (in Dutch: *minderhedenbeleid*) that aimed to avoid minority formation, or – formulated positively – should lead to emancipation of ethnic minorities in the social, cultural and political dimension. Both 'minorities' and Dutch society were addressed in this policy. In the Western European context at the time, such policies were exceptional and caught the eye of policymakers in other Western European countries. The Dutch 'minorities policy' as both a term and a practice was in use until 1994, when it was replaced by 'integration policy'.

In the early 1990s, Hans van Amersfoort played an important role in establishing the Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies (IMES) at the University of Amsterdam. This was also the start of a period of internationalisation of Dutch immigration research: the somewhat inward-oriented Dutch academic world started to connect with research institutes in Sweden (IMER), the UK (CRER) and France (MIGRINTER). The contacts that Van Amersfoort had established since his dissertation helped IMES to build a strong international position. After the turn of the century, IMES took the lead, e.g., in establishing IMISCOE in 2004 in which 19 research institutes in Europe cooperated.

At this point in his career, Hans van Amersfoort worked on several special topics within the broad field of migration studies, as can be seen from his extensive bibliography. Writing state-of-the-art essays expounding on these topics, he brought together the accumulated knowledge on said topics. Like he did in his dissertation, he developed analytical or heuristic models to map the knowledge that served as guidelines for researchers at the same time.

On the topic of ethnicity and the modern state, for example, he wrote the analytical introduction of the book *States and Nations; the rebirth of the 'nationalities question' in Europe*, mapping the different forms of ethnicity, their relation to the state and their potential for conflict (Van Amersfoort 1991). Later he developed another variation of this same theme, under 'diaspora politics' (Van Amersfoort 2004).

A second topic was the systematic study of migration processes and the question whether and in what way policy interventions steer such processes. His analytical framework for the study of these processes (Van Amersfoort, 1998: 20) has been a guide for many researchers in the analysis of migrations.

A third theme was the European welfare state and the question how such a state handles the dilemmas of immigration and of including or excluding admitted immigrants, also in view of the response in society to both immigration and immigrants (Van Amersfoort 2011).

As can be read from the succinct description of all these topics, the research always implied the study of potential and existing policy interventions. In that sense Hans van Amersfoort was a scholar in the tradition of the Dutch school of Social Geography in which research should combine scientific independence with societal usefulness – wherever possible. On the potential tension between these two – often apparent in research commissioned by policy institutions on hot societal issues – his position was clear: scientists have a duty to be engaged in society and to contribute to a better functioning of that society by their research, but that contribution should come from an autonomous and independent scientific practice. Stakeholders in society, including government, may indicate what issues they want to have analysed for policy purposes, but researchers have a duty to science to carry out such analysis according to the rules of science. In his valedictory lesson of 2001, entitled *Verplichtingen ons opgelegd* ('Duties imposed on us'), Van Amersfoort looked back on how the Social Geographical Institute and he himself has tried to combine these scientific and societal duties (Van Amersfoort 2001).

This brief outline of his work makes clear that we will remember Hans van Amersfoort as an important, critical, and wise scholar. He was also a good-humoured, talkative, open-minded and cooperative person. He passionately shared his critical, distanced observations of people, politics, and society – including the academic world and its mores – and not excluding himself as part of that same world. His humane sense of humour often came to light from these distanced observations; often enhanced with a generous touch of self-mockery.

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ⁱ In doing research among Surinamese immigrants, he met his love and lifelong companion, Henna Bonapart, who died a month before Hans passed away. Their daughter, Maartje, diagnosed that “Hans had died from a broken heart”.

ⁱⁱ The original dissertation was written in Dutch (Van Amersfoort, 1974). The English translation was published in 1982 by Cambridge University Press (Van Amersfoort, 1982).