

Learning to Live with Uncertainty A Portrait of Abram de Swaan

A photograph from 1968 shows the then twenty-six-year-old Abram de Swaan interviewing the Cuban leader Fidel Castro. The bearded hero of many left-wing students at the time is holding forth vehemently, clenched fist raised, while De Swaan listens attentively and looks at him sidelong. In the interview that he later published in the social-democrat newspaper *Het Vrije Volk*, De Swaan dutifully recorded the *líder máximo's* determined statements: 'Within ten years Cuba will have made such advances in cattle-breeding that we will be exporting Cuban cows to the Netherlands.'

Although De Swaan definitely saw himself as left-wing back then, he did not, unlike many of his generation, harbour an unquestioning admiration for the Cuban leader or for any other revolutionary heroes. Neither did he view Marxism, so much in vogue at the time, as a closed doctrine that was able to offer a definitive answer to every question or problem. Marx had asked good questions and formulated valuable insights, but the same could be said of so many philosophers and scientists. De Swaan's attitude in that 1968 photograph could be described as 'boundlessly inquisitive', and that same expression – in Dutch: *Grenzeloos nieuwsgierig* – was chosen as an appropriate title for the festschrift published in 2007 to mark De Swaan's departure from the University of Amsterdam. De Swaan, who in 2008 won the P.C. Hooft Prize, the highest literary award in the Netherlands, for his essays, has never allowed his curiosity to be shackled by any one doctrine, political tendency, research method, or even by a single academic discipline.

De Swaan, born in 1942, got off to a flying start in the world of intellectual debate. He grew up in a left-wing, Jewish family, in a house where intellectuals and artists were frequent visitors and where as a child he participated in discussions about democracy, capitalism and Stalinism. 'In our house, people never talked about day-to-day niggles. Our discussions were always about the situation in the world,' he once said in an interview. His father Meik de Swaan ran a successful jute-sack business, and was also director of *De Vrije Katheder*,

a magazine with its origins in the Artists in Resistance movement. Communists and non-communists worked together on the magazine from 1945 until 1950, when the communist party did away with it. De Swaan's mother, Henny de Swaan-Roos, was later one of the driving forces behind the radical feminist Dolle Mina group.

In 1959, De Swaan went to the University of Amsterdam to study political science, which for a while he combined with mathematics. Three years later he chose sociology as a subsidiary subject and went on to become one of the most important sociologists in the Netherlands. He also created a reputation for himself in many other areas. In 1964, he joined the editorial team of the renowned student magazine *Propria Cures*. He was charged with 'contemptuous blasphemy' for a piece he wrote in October 1964 and was the last person to be condemned for this offence in the Netherlands. The charge was based on such comments as 'a carpenter's son who rose through active self-study' and 'the rabble-rouser, faith-healer and nutritional expert J. "Christ" of Nazareth'. That he had meant to poke fun not at Jesus, but at the hysterical and infantile style of writing in publications such as *Time* and the *Haagse Post* was something the judge considered irrelevant.

De Swaan expressed his matter-of-fact, gently ironic, sociological view of the world around him through various outlets, including a lengthy article about the Beatles first concert in the Netherlands which was published in the weekly magazine *De Groene Amsterdammer* in 1964. While many older people saw the hysterical scenes as evidence of a serious 'youth problem', he viewed it as a relatively innocuous phenomenon. Soon after that, he started writing for the prestigious magazine *De Gids*, founded in 1837, and served as its editor from 1969 to 1991. In 1966, he graduated cum laude with a thesis entitled *Possibilities and Problems of a Political Application of Game Theory*. He then went to the United States for two years, where he worked on his doctorate at Yale and Berkeley. He continued to write articles for newspapers and recorded opinion pieces for the progressive broadcaster VPRO, which were published in 1967 as a book with the title *America in Instalments: A Breathless Report from the USA* (*Amerika in termijnen: een ademloos verslag uit de USA*).

On his way home he stopped off in Cuba, where he interviewed Castro, and when he got back to the Netherlands he worked as a journalist and made TV documentaries on subjects which included art, pop music, factory workers and the sociologist Norbert Elias.

In 1970, De Swaan published a controversial article in which he declared that political science in the Netherlands had failed because the academic discipline kept itself too remote from relevant social issues. This resulted in a rift with his supervisor Hans Daudt. Three years later he finally gained his doctorate with the strongly mathematical *Coalition Theories and Cabinet Formations: A study of formal theories of coalition formation applied to nine European parliaments after 1918*. In the same year he accepted a position in the sociology department at the University of Amsterdam, becoming professor of sociology in 1977.

Anyone who supposes that De Swaan with political science, sociology and journalism had explored enough professions is underestimating his insatiable curiosity. By that point, he had also qualified as a psychoanalytical therapist and from 1973 to 1984 he had a small psychotherapy practice alongside his university post. In the early 1970s, he worked with other researchers on psychological aspects of treatment at a cancer hospital. The findings of this study, which included a plea for improved psychological support for cancer patients, did not go down well with the hospital management, who forbade the report's publication.

This research at the cancer hospital, together with other projects, including a sociological study of the psychotherapeutic profession, formed part of De Swaan's preliminary studies for a much larger task that he had set himself: a historical and sociological account of the rise of the welfare state. The result of this undertaking was *In Care of the State. Health Care, Education and Welfare in Europe and the USA in the Modern Era* (Oxford University Press, 1988), in which he analysed the development of the welfare state over a period of no fewer than five centuries.

Although De Swaan is seen as a proponent of historical sociology and as strongly influenced by the work of Norbert Elias, who is a well-respected figure particularly amongst the members of Amsterdam's sociology

department, his approach has always been much broader. In addition to comparative historical research between different countries, he also uses models based on 'rational choice' theory. *In Care of the State* combines Eliasian analyses with game-theory models. Within sociology, these two traditions, historical or figurational sociology and rational choice theory, are generally seen as incompatible, so sociologists almost always opt for one or other of the two approaches. De Swaan spoke about this in an interview in 2002: 'I believe that this distinction is out of date, and that you can make very good use of a flexible form of rational choice theory, in which economic models are applied to other spheres, within a historical, comparative account. The soft, supple flesh of the comparative historical argument can be carried on the skeleton of sharp analyses made possible by rational choice theory. This allows you to formulate much sharper questions and hypotheses.'

In the chapter on education in *In Care of the State*, De Swaan describes how in some countries the advent of primary education involved a linguistic conflict. While the church generally defended local dialects, the state wanted education to be delivered in the national language. To analyse this development, De Swaan devised a centre-periphery model of languages which he summarised in a formula. As he was fascinated by the economic and political significance of languages but could find little about the subject in the work of historians and linguists, he decided to focus on this area of research. By entering this field as an outsider, his native inquisitiveness enabled him to ask questions that had never been asked before. For instance, what sort of economic good does a language actually constitute? Or: what differences in economic value exist between different languages? In 2002, he published a book on the subject: *The World Language System: A Political Sociology and Political Economy of Language* (Polity Press).

His book about the world language system fits in very well with his great interest in globalisation and cosmopolitanism, as expressed in his collection of essays *The Cosmopolitan's Song* (Het lied van de kosmopoliet, 1987) and elsewhere. The behaviour of nation states, which have on the whole played a positive role in the creation of the welfare state in the Western world,

can also have very negative consequences, as is clearly demonstrated by the subject that has chiefly occupied De Swaan in recent years: genocide and other forms of mass violence. He collected a number of essays on this theme in *Beacons in No Man's Land* (Bakens in niemandsland, 2007), in which he employed his typically sober and lucid style to write about subjects including the genocide in Rwanda, the extremely violent role played by the state in the twentieth century and the problems in the Middle East. In his writing, he shows a keen eye for all kinds of group processes and assumes positions that sometimes conflict with prevailing opinions. For example, he views Islamic radicalism as in part a struggle for liberation against authoritarian puppet regimes in the Arab world that are feathering their own nests with support from the United States.

Although De Swaan has never settled exclusively for one single academic method or ideology, he is not a postmodern relativist who views the collapse of the 'grand narratives' as an unmitigated blessing. This collapse has, after all, led many people to become insecure. In his final essay in *Beacons in No Man's Land*, 'The National Bad Mood' ('Het nationale slechte humeur'), he describes how, in confusing and gloomy times, this uncertainty can easily turn into despair. As to whether anything can be done about this, De Swaan gives no clear-cut answer because, to a great extent, it is a question of the individual's philosophy of life. And since many people no longer have a clearly defined ideology, De Swaan gives some advice that is typical of the matter-of-fact, gently ironic and intensely curious way in which he looks at the world: *'Try to get by with some emotion, common sense, a cheerful outlook and the help of the sensible people around you. That sense of certainty is never going to return. So learn to live with uncertainty, that gentle, nagging pain of freedom.'*

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