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## Water, Politics, and Society

*A look at a major work: Consensus en conflict, as seen from France*

Raphaël Morera

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*Consensus en conflict* takes stock of twenty years of research in Dutch environmental history and at the same time offers fruitful perspectives for the years to come. Fourteen years after *Waterstaat in Stedenland*, Milja van Tielhof has brought together approaches related to the history of institutions, economic history, and the evolution of natural environments with a synthetic approach.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, the book deploys the whole range of problems that make up the richness and flavor of the history of water management. By questioning the social and intellectual conditions of the production of compromise – that is, the way in which conflicts and oppositions are overcome by the actors involved in the management of a water commons – she draws attention to a dimension of the functioning of the *waterschap* that is too little known. In so doing, Milja van Tielhof builds a bridge between historiographies that are so similar that they seem to enjoy ignoring each other. She contributes to placing the relationship with nature and the environment at the heart of political and social processes.

With this work, Van Tielhof extends in her own way a form of Dutch exceptionalism. Although the Netherlands is not the only region in the world dominated by wetlands, it is the only one that is so aware of it and has made it the basis of its national identity. The history of Dutch water management is largely a triumphant one, initially seen from an almost

1 Milja van Tielhof and Petra van Dam, *Waterstaat in stedenland. Het Hoogheemraadschap van Rijnland voor 1857* (Utrecht 2006).

messianic perspective.<sup>2</sup> While nowhere in Europe has the history of water management been taken as far as in the Netherlands, the most recent research has revealed some interesting points of comparison. Since the Middle Ages, wetlands and marshes have been attractive areas for societies seeking to exploit their resources or to cultivate them. In Italy, Spain, England, the Germanic countries, and France, impressive amounts of land were reclaimed from the water, sometimes explicitly inspired by the Dutch example.<sup>3</sup> The works are old and temper the exceptionalist reading long promoted by Dutch historians. However, on the whole, they are oriented towards an understanding of the developments and the modalities of the transforming environments. In reality, these historiographies do not really question the daily functioning of the organizations making use of the water commons. In this sense, *Consensus en conflict* is a valuable source of inspiration and invites us to shift our focus.

Reflecting on the environmental commons has powerfully renewed research in environmental history over the last twenty years. Historians have seized upon the investigative methods by Elinor Ostrom to question the functioning of organizations whose purpose is to collectively manage a natural resource.<sup>4</sup> However, this inspiration is not univocal, so that we can distinguish at least two ways of looking at the question. Tine de Moor's work represents a first line of research that focuses on the norms and rules of operation of different environmental commons.<sup>5</sup> Through a systematic study of regulations, De Moor screens past organizations against a standard ideal in order to classify and assess the effectiveness of one commons or another. This approach makes it possible to identify chronologies and trends but avoids the question of the internal functioning of the commons and thus of the social relations they imply. These questions are at the heart of an almost

2 Gerardus van de Ven, *Man-made lowlands. History of water management and land reclamation in the Netherlands*, (Utrecht 1996); Simon Schama, *The embarrassment of riches. An interpretation of Dutch culture in the Golden Age* (New York 1987).

3 Salvatore Ciriaco, *Building on water. Venice, Holland, and the construction of the European landscape in early modern times* (New York 2006); Raphaël Morera, John Morgan, 'Marshland drainage: a colonial project? A comparison of France and England in the early modern period', *Études Rurales* 203 (2019) 42-61. DOI: 10.4000/etudesrurales.15656. URL: <https://www.cairn-int.info/journal-etudes-rurales-2019-1-page-42.htm>

4 Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the commons. The evolution of institutions for collective actions* (Cambridge 1995).

5 Tine de Moor, *The dilemma of the commoners. Understanding the use of common-pool resources in long-term perspective* (Cambridge 2015).

opposite approach to the question of the commons. In the wake of Italian micro-history, while detaching themselves somewhat from the issues of good management of natural resources, historians such as Angelo Torre and Vittorio Tigrino have sought rather to understand how the social group, the community, was constituted around the commons, in relation to the demands of a central power.<sup>6</sup>

I have been working on the history of water management for about twenty years, and I have regularly drawn on Dutch research. After having worked on the reclamations of the seventeenth century, I am now pursuing research in a broader timeframe by trying to consider not only the era of reclamation, but also that of management and organization. By dint of frequenting archives and thanks to funding from the ANR, I have uncovered a mass of documents that were largely under-exploited, particularly in the Rhone delta and in the Marais Poitevin. Thanks to these funds, we are now in a position to reconsider a large part of French environmental history. To this end, the perspectives opened up by Milja van Tielhof are valuable and invite ongoing dialogue at the European level.

## Democratic or aristocratic commons?

*Consensus en conflict* first tackles a monument of contemporary historiography and culture. The *poldermodel* locates the origin of the Dutch democratic culture and the constant search for compromise in the early institutionalization of water management. In this theoretical framework, the constraints imposed by the maintenance of water infrastructures produced a culture of debate oriented towards compromise and consensual action. In secularized terms, this reading of history transposes a teleological view of history. In her book, Milja van Tielhof repositioned this theory as a hypothesis and subjected it to the scrutiny of social history and environmental history. This process consists of confronting the ideal vision of history with the critique of practice. With this work, always concerned with a precise and documented contextualization, Van Tielhof hooks Dutch history up to the train of European history and supports a complete historiographical reversal. Joining Tim Soens in his conclusions, she

6 Angelo Torre and Vittorio Tigrino, 'Beni comuni e localita: una prospettiva storica', *Ragion Pratica* 41 (2013) 333-346; Vittorio Tigrino, 'Risorse collettive e comunita locali. Un approccio storico', *Economia e Societa Regionale* 3 (2015) 23-44.

shows that water management was more democratic, or socially more open, in the Middle Ages than in the modern period, when polders were developed en masse.<sup>7</sup> She thus demonstrates that water management tended towards a form of aristocratization linked to the monetization of the issues at stake.

Does this conclusion exhaust the question of democratic practice and the formation of collective decisions? On this point, the comparison with the French historical trajectory deserves close attention. French political history is structured around the French Revolution, which, through the seizure of power by the people instituted as a nation, is said to have triggered the country's long march towards democracy. In this perspective, the Revolution is conceived as a disruption. For several decades, historians have been working to unravel the causes of this event: economic and social circumstances have been mentioned, followed more recently by the political and cultural changes of the eighteenth century.<sup>8</sup> These analyses finally provide a fairly accurate, if still debated, view of this historical dynamic. However, they leave an essential question unanswered: How could this people, now politically instituted, learn so quickly to make decisions together? How was it possible for such a complex process to permeate the entire region, including the most remote countryside?

The power of the French monarchical state and its legitimating discourse has long distorted this problematic horizon. Political and institutional history has focused on the circles closest to power. In reality, all important political decisions, although they emanated only from the king, were made after discussions between specialists and powerful men. The demand for access to the king's council is a constant in the political history of the kingdom. More recent works have turned their attention to circles further away from monarchical power. Doing so, Olivier Christin has taken an interest in the cathedral chapters and the ecclesiastical world.<sup>9</sup> Christian Jouhaud sees the academies and literary debates as democratically functioning cenacles.<sup>10</sup> Deliberative practices would therefore have developed first and foremost in close proximity to the powers that be. Can we, following the paths opened by

7 Tim Soens, *De spade in de dijk? Waterbeheer en rurale samenleving in de Vlaams kustvlakte (1280-1580)* (Gent 2009).

8 Camille Ernest Labrousse, *La crise de l'économie française à la fin de l'Ancien Régime et au début de la Révolution* (Paris 1990 [1944]); Roger Chartier, *Les origines culturelles de la Révolution française* (Paris 1990); Alexis de Tocqueville, *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution* (Paris 1856).

9 Olivier Christin, *Vox populi. Une histoire du vote avant le suffrage universel* (Paris 2014).

10 Christian Jouhaud, *Les pouvoirs de la littérature. Histoire d'un paradoxe* (Paris 2000).

Milja van Tielhof, find traces of this dynamic in other circles and social universes?

Milja van Tielhof insists on an aristocratic control in the management of the polders during the early modern period. In fact, the development of the urban economy, the arrival of Flemish refugees, and the boom in large trading companies did move in this direction. A similar process can be observed in France. In the Camargue, in the Rhone delta, water control was an imperative for the development of agriculture. In the Middle Ages, the Arles municipality took charge of the construction and maintenance of equipment to protect the land from the flooding of the Rhone, on the one hand, and to drain it on the other.<sup>11</sup> Water control practices changed in the sixteenth century with the creation of a *corps*, that is, an instituted body with a status and recognized by the authorities. The *Corps de Corrège Major*, created in 1543, brought together all the owners of the Camargue island (i.e., the northern part of the delta), in the immediate vicinity of Arles.<sup>12</sup> The *Corps de Camargue* is one of the oldest still active, even if its legal status has of course evolved.

The corps of Camargue Corrège is organized around a consul, a treasurer, a secretary, and a census of the region. Chosen from among the owners, the consul changes regularly, but the other officers of the corps remain in place for much longer periods. The body collects the dues from the owners and plans and organizes the necessary works. Members pay in proportion to the amount of land they own and the quality of that land. In reality, this organization works in a way that is very similar to the Dutch polder system. However, backed by the urban patriciate of Arles, it benefited from royal approval as well. The king's representative, the *viguier*, could sit in on the annual assemblies. The bourgeoisie, the nobility, and the clergy of Arles formed a landed aristocracy that dominated the regional economy. To settle their affairs, however, they chose a way of working that put the question of status and rank in the background: they met as owners, on an equal footing as it were. Deliberative practice and equality based on the recognition of ownership are elements essential to the resilience of this organization. Beyond nobility and religious orders, the committed actors share a

11 Louis Stouff, 'La lutte contre les eaux dans les pays du bas Rhône XII-XVe siècles, l'exemple du pays d'Arles', *Méditerranée* 78 (1993) 57-68.

12 Municipal Archives, Arles, DD 78, *Transaction et accords passés entre les consuls et communauté d'Arles et les propriétaires et possédants biens dans le territoire de ladite ville sur le fait des chaussées et vidanges de Trébon, plan du bourg et coustières de Crau, ainsi que de la Camargue*, 30 december 1542

quality forming a community of interest, within which they discuss and make decisions based on the will of the majority: the most numerous, or the most possessed, impose their decisions.

Within the absolute monarchy itself, and under its benevolent gaze, the management of large parts of the region was delegated to local actors. And just as in the Netherlands, the social composition of these organizations was limited to landowners only. This configuration meant that tenant farmers, regardless of the nature of their tenure, had no say in the management of the facilities that enabled them to cultivate the land. The small peasantry or the artisans of Arles who owned a piece of land were thus absent from the archives until the 1770s.<sup>13</sup> And when they did suddenly appear, it came in the form of a list in which they were associated with the plot of land they were farming. They thus entered history at a time when the owners – at that time by and large the Arles clergy – undertook to make them participate in the financial effort of maintaining the infrastructures. The same development can be seen in the Paris region where the maintenance of rivers poses recurrent problems: the greater part of the riverside population suddenly became the object of an administrative enquiry when the lords, powerful in the region, decided to make them pay for the cleaning work.<sup>14</sup>

In the wetlands, deliberative practices and property-based representation have thus imposed themselves almost simultaneously with what is observed in the Netherlands. It would be futile to look for the origin of democracy in these wetlands, though there are practices necessary for its development. It is in fact much more in urban environments that we can see the emergence of less exclusively aristocratic deliberative practices. The most recent achievements in environmental history add important elements to this record. The attention paid to the maintenance of infrastructure and urban environments shows that deliberative practice actually permeated French monarchical society. Although political power was concentrated in the hands of the king, a significant number of responsibilities rested on the shoulders of local actors with a direct interest in the proper functioning of facilities or the maintenance of environments. Following on from Robert Descimon, Nicolas Lyon-Caen and I conducted a long-term investigation into the cleaning of Parisian streets from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries.<sup>15</sup> We were thus able to measure

13 Bibliothèque municipale, Arles, M 995.

14 Archives nationales (Paris), S 7002.

15 Robert Descimon, 'Milice bourgeoise et identité citadine à Paris au temps de la Ligue', *Annales*.

the extent to which it was based on the commitment of the inhabitants concerned and on very advanced forms of deliberation, until the early years of the eighteenth century. In terms of design, the royal power had entrusted the Parisian municipality with the task of organizing the cleaning of the streets. In turn, the aldermen made appointments district by district, or even street by street, to organize the collection of waste. These appointed clerks changed every year. They had a roll listing all the inhabitants of the district and mentioning the amount of tax they had to pay. The commissioner thus levied a form of tax to reimburse himself for the payment of the land carrier in charge of his district. The choice of this provider was made after a meeting of all the contributors benefiting from the service. These meetings were an opportunity to reaffirm the social order, with its ranks and dignities, but they brought together inhabitants from very different backgrounds, from the modest bourgeois to the richest officers. Descimon refers to the Parisian districts and the organization of the urban militia as a form of democracy in the sense that decisions were made by a vote involving all the members of the assembly. In the case of sanitation, the notion of participatory democracy may sound exaggerated but these works did operate by means of democratic practices, putting rank and birth second.

## Building consensus, rejecting conflict

*Consensus en conflict* immediately points to a strong historiographical tension: in matters of water, interests always converge, though only to a certain extent. On empirical grounds, Ostrom highlights rules of good conduct that are generally effective in ensuring sustainable management of the resources necessary for the life of collectives engaged in the exploitation or use of the commons.<sup>16</sup> Taken to extremes, these rules make it possible to award good points and distinguish the good commons from the bad. Conflict management is at the heart of these normative formulas that promote the explicitness of the rule, communication between members, and the effective implementation of sanctions when they are necessary. The blind spot in Ostromian thinking lies in

*Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 4 (1993) 885-906; Nicolas Lyon-Caen and Raphaël Morera, *À vos poubelles citoyens! Environnement urbain, salubrité publique et investissement civique (Paris, XVIe-XVIIIe siècle)* (Ceyzérieu 2020).

<sup>16</sup> Elinor Ostrom, 'Beyond markets and states. Polycentric governance of complex economic systems', *American Economic Review* 100 (2010) 641-672.



its angle of observation: the commons, all the commons, and nothing but the commons. Strongly linked to the politics of development and also conceived from observations in contexts of state failure, Ostromian theory cannot be transposed as it stands to the context of medieval and modern Europe where the legal culture is very strong.

Milja van Tielhof's new look at Dutch water history makes a real contribution to considering these essential questions. The insights from the sociological study of the actors involved in water management and the evidence of a dynamic of aristocratization thus naturally raise the question of the sociological elaboration of consensus in overcoming conflict. How can agreement be reached in a context of strong economic and social differentiation? This tension is redoubled by the entanglement of water networks and management methods. The region of the Netherlands has been managed thanks to a complex aquatic grid where the primary networks are dependent on much larger secondary networks. Two levels of decision-making are thus superimposed and dependent on each other. Milja van Tielhof shows in this sense that consensus and conflict can coexist in the same region. The primary level, which is more socially open, is more prone to conflict, whereas in the maintenance of the vast water networks, in the hands of the most powerful owners, reaching consensus can occur more readily. These observations open up new horizons in the study of any commons, especially water commons. They invite us to put the commons in context and to study it also in very political and institutional terms.

Given the current state of knowledge and of archival research, a term by term comparison with the French case, which is in principle more diverse, cannot be carried out simply. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the Dutch water commons became established, the French archives were still terribly lacking. The case of Arles and the Camargue is an exception in this respect, at least from a documentary point of view. Information on the functioning of the water communes is substantially strengthened from the reign of Louis XIV onward, that is, when the administrative and judicial state is substantially reinforced. In France, the monarchy was partly built on the management of the commons and regularly worked to strengthen them. This administration can be seen in particular in newly conquered regions, such as Flanders, where the records of the *wateringues* gained in substance and regularity after the French took over the region.<sup>17</sup>

17 Raphaël Morera, 'Conquest and incorporate. Merging French style central government practices and local water management in Maritime Flanders, 17th century', *Environment and History* 23 (2017) 341-362.

These accounts were necessary for the administrations to control and monitor the management of the region.

In France, the role of the judicial system has played a decisive part in the management and maintenance of water facilities, without ever intervening directly or financially. A textbook case, perhaps too exceptional to be exemplary, is offered by the history of the Bièvre.<sup>18</sup> This small river flowed to the south of Paris, between Versailles and the current Gare d'Austerlitz on the left bank of the capital. From the fourteenth century onward, in the most Parisian part of its course, the Bièvre was the site of important artisan activities for which water was necessary: tanning, dyeing, tapestry-making, and milling. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the urban authorities concentrated polluting activities there. The situation of the river was so bad that it became unproductive for many craftsmen. The riverside residents formed a syndicate and signed their first accord, validated by the King's Council in 1673. However, they did not manage to keep it going for many years. The situation only improved when the monarchy clarified the institutional and legal framework in order to avoid jurisdictional disputes. This movement led, in 1732, to a decree regulating the Bièvre River. The actors then left the contractual approach to rely on the direct authority of the monarchical state, which in fact ruled on the functioning of the water commons constituted by the Bièvre. The state then imposed itself as a source of law and as a regulatory body, without investing any money in the maintenance of the river. From then on, and at the end of a long process, the river became a political artefact, so necessary was the king's commitment to its preservation and restoration.

The historical process of the Bièvre and its location in Paris highlights the role of the monarchical state, but it is not an isolated case. It is found in a similar position in many water commons. In the eighteenth century, the intendants, the king's local representatives, were regularly approached by owners of dried-out wetlands who were unable to reach an agreement, or who were experiencing difficulties in financing themselves.<sup>19</sup> In reality, the monarchical institutions were the only ones with full legitimacy to manage and resolve conflicts: they are the ones who fulfill the function of justice. This case is particularly clear

18 Idem, 'La rivière comme bien commun. Exploiter la Bièvre du XVI<sup>e</sup> au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle', in: Fabien Locher (ed.), *La nature en communs. Ressources, environnement et communautés (France, Empire français XVII<sup>e</sup>-XXI<sup>e</sup> siècles)* (Ceyzérieu 2020) 103-124.

19 Archives départementales (hereafter AD) Charente-Maritime, C 24.

in the Marais Poitevin and the dried-up wetlands of Vix-Maillezais.<sup>20</sup> Reclaimed in the 1670s, this marshland functions like a Dutch polder. The association collected contributions and in return organized and financed the maintenance of the common facilities. A study of the register of deliberations for the 1770s shows that decisions were systematically made unanimously. The actors involved thus endeavored to create a consensus by putting in writing their strong commitment to the common project. The archives and the memory of the community show the willingness to form and act as a group.

Yet is it really that simple? Can we really believe that consensus is built so easily? In a way, consensus is also built around conflict. For all the actors involved, it is clear that it was not the role of the collective to manage conflicts; this was not its mission, and it did not have the authority to do so. When disagreements went beyond the stage of a neighborhood quarrel and powerful interests were at stake, conflicts turned into legal proceedings and were systematically transferred to the royal courts. This applied both to internal disputes within the commons and to external relations. Conflicts were thus dealt with on a different scale and within a clearer jurisdictional framework, allowing the other actors not to take sides and thus preserving the future of the collective. I have noted the same approach in different communes, in the Marais Poitevin as well as in Paris.

The French monarchical state created commonality and was administered in part by commonality. In this way, it insinuated itself very deeply into the life of the kingdom, even for apparently trivial matters. The provincial states proceeded in a comparable manner, as with irrigation in Provence.<sup>21</sup> This description should not, however, give the misleading image of an omnipotent state or one that was overwhelmed by the management of affairs relating to the commons. Powerful brakes existed to compel actors towards consensus. Justice and institutional intervention were excessively expensive for the parties involved, and procedures always took so long that their outcome was uncertain. Once a case was referred to them, the courts and lawyers took over the cases and the conflict would slip away from the parties. In the event of an appeal, the cases were tried in the provincial parliaments or even in Paris. However, travel and accommodation were exorbitantly expensive. In the 1770s, the association of Vix Maillezais found itself in

20 AD Vendée, 62J 1-13.

21 AD Bouches-du-Rhône, several mentions in série B.

trouble because of a trial that had been brought in Paris.<sup>22</sup> In this way, the conditions under which the state took charge of conflicts were a strong incentive to find consensus and reconcile points of view. In the French case, the interlocking scale did not entail so much the water commons as it did legal jurisdictions.

## France – United Provinces: mutual influences

Finally, I would like to make one last connection between Dutch and French history. The history we are interested in ends at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution. In the middle of the nineteenth century, it is clear that the steam engine changed the situation, both in technical and capitalist terms. It also ended with the French Revolution and its unworthy son, Napoleon Bonaparte. For Milja van Tielhof, the French influence was decisive in renewing water management and getting the polders out of their local conflicts by adopting a more directive attitude. In this sense, she extends a reflection on models of governance which is linked to questions of influence and political domination. In the context of a dialogue between France and the Netherlands at that time, the positive influence of Napoleonic legislation was merely an exchange of good practices, since the polder model was mobilized in France. Not only did the Dutch managers have a real influence in the kingdom, but they also helped to legitimize the monarchy.<sup>23</sup> In the present field, the Dutch hydraulic engineers are perceived as salutary modernizers today.

It seems interesting to me to return to this moment, that of the French Empire, to discuss the complexity of the historical interpretation of this environmental history. French historiography still sees the Empire as a moment of normalization, as a moment of return to order after a chaotic revolutionary decade. This reading was constructed in the nineteenth century, notably in the wake of Alexis de Tocqueville.<sup>24</sup> Today, it is part of the political identity of a large part of the French right. In the wetlands, and in terms of water management, it refers to an intense activity on the part of Napoleon. The law of 1807 relaunched the policy of draining the wetlands by encouraging investment.<sup>25</sup> The

22 AD Vendée, 62 J 13.

23 Edouard de Dienne, *Histoire du dessèchement des lacs et marais en France avant 1789* (Paris 1891).

24 Tocqueville, *L'Ancien régime et la Révolution*.

25 'Loi du 26 septembre 1807 relative au dessèchement des marais', in: J-B. Duvergier (ed.), *Collection complète des lois, décrets, ordonnances, règlements et avis du Conseil d'État*, t. 16 (Paris 1826) 193-201.

government invested the prefects with a very powerful role of control and incentive. This revival of an ambitious water control policy was based on a catastrophic discourse about the wetlands that had been developed and cultivated. In the emperor's mind, it was a question of providing solutions to a profound crisis. In so doing, he constructed a narrative of rupture with a rather indistinct old order referring to a past envisaged in a global manner.

From this point of view, the French and Dutch trajectories coincide perfectly. Even so, one of the essential contributions of Dutch historiography, and of *Consensus en conflict*, is to shed light on the first level of water management, that of the *waterschap*, which had never been studied in France. Focusing on this level breaks down important historiographical barriers. Indeed, the French Revolution set out to destroy the intermediary bodies of the Ancien Régime, in particular in order to promote its idea of property and entrepreneurial freedom. This fundamental movement, embodying the liberal dimension of the Revolution, had consequences in the wetlands the management associations were threatened. Insofar as they raised funds and managed themselves, they were likely to constitute centers of resistance to the Revolution. Yet this development was not the most important event of the Revolution. The nationalization of the clergy's property and its subsequent resale to the richest peasants and bourgeoisie was in fact a genuine agrarian reform with monumental consequences.<sup>26</sup> The religious establishments owned a very large part of the kingdom and, for our purposes, property in the reclaimed wetlands. In other words, the Revolution, through otherwise salutary measures, upset the conditions of water management, in the dried-up areas as well as in the artisan-centered and urban rivers like the Bièvre.

In this context, Napoleon's works for water control were in reality much more a restoration than a reform or modernization. He re-established old practices by reinforcing the control of the prefects, it is true<sup>27</sup> – but to what extent? From this point of view, the continuity found in the archives is edifying. In Arles, for instance, the revolutionary period corresponds to a substantial decrease in the quality and quantity of information. Subsequently, following the law of 1807, the archives were once again well kept. Though the stakeholders were different,

26 Bernard Bodinier and Eric Teyssier, *L'événement le plus important de la Révolution. La vente des biens nationaux en France et dans les territoires annexés 1789-1867* (Paris 2000).

27 'Décret portant règlement pour les associations territoriales des villes d'Arles et de Notre-Dame-de-la-Mer', in: *Délibération de l'association du dessèchement des marais d'Arles* (Arles 1827) 419-436.

the organization was the same, so much so that the same notebooks were used. The new normative framework was undoubtedly necessary because of the intensity of the social change observed in the wetlands: though the men involved were all new, the institutions were returning. A reading of the eighteenth century documentation clearly explains this return to old practices. On the banks of the Rhône, there were only two catastrophic floods during the eighteenth century, in 1708 and 1756. In both cases, the consequences were quickly resolved: on the one hand, by a temporary increase in contributions and, on the other hand, by opening up to new investors. In all cases, water management did not pose insurmountable difficulties.

In fact, the water governance of Ancien Régime France worked quite well, even in the eighteenth century. The Empire merely restored it after it had been undermined by the French Revolution. Napoleon's political coup consisted in having lumped the whole of the past together and in having cast an opaque veil over the Ancien Régime while being incapable of really going beyond it. However, what the archives show us clearly illustrates the intensity of the social work that took place during the period. Models of governance that are also economic and social models circulated and were redefined over the centuries. In the end, the legacy of Napoleon to the Netherlands is due to the ability of the Bourbon monarchy to govern from a distance, to act as an arbiter by playing on local rivalries, and to offer a future to those who finally decided to follow it.

## Playing with scale, temporality, and historical paradox

Milja van Tielhof's historiographical renewal is based on an advantageous methodological approach. Continuing the work begun with Petra van Dam in *Waterstaat in Stedenland*, she breaks down the recurrent academic divisions and thus considers her subject in all its coherence and complexity. Taking the defensive dimension of the medieval reclamations for granted, Van Tielhof is able to place the aquatic history of the Netherlands in its social and political context much more freely. From then on, it was no longer just a matter of highlighting Dutch exceptionalism, but of considering it as economic and social production. Water management thus evolved at the pace of society, and the Dutch have shown both an entrepreneurial spirit and a pragmatic and wait-and-see attitude, depending on the means at their

disposal. The second major move in Van Tielhof's work consists in having varied the scale of analysis. Although the *Hoogheemraadschappen* emerged as a supervisory and coordinating body, they did not make the *waterschappen* disappear. The relevant history is therefore no longer that of a progression from one body to another, but that of their relations and interactions. This implies that the scale of their operations must be interlocked, analyzing competences as well as actors and their investments.

The work on chronology modifies the interpretations in a substantial way: not only is the reclamation of land on the water initially a defensive process, but after the glorious successes of the Golden Age, the history of the eighteenth century highlights a sleeping beauty that does not think of questioning itself. The decline in land yields and English domination of the world's seas partly explain this change of heart. In this sense – even when periods of extreme heat and drought during the eighteenth century, as well as the proliferation of shipworms, made the task even more difficult – the Dutch water commons does appear to be an economic, social, and cultural product. Thus, *Consensus en conflict* contributes to further linking environmental history to social history and to breaking out of the reductive opposition between destruction and protection.

From this point of view, Milja van Tielhof's work goes beyond the history of Dutch water management. It directly questions the link between nature and society, which is now at the heart of social debates. Environmental history has long focused on the processes of destruction of resources and environments on the one hand and on the history of nature protection on the other. This reading, which is roughly described here, underpins the opposition between nature and society, at the risk of failing to take into account the importance of resource exploitation for human groups through the benefits it allows. The methods and achievements of economic history have of course been used for several decades to question this binary opposition. Belgian and Dutch historians have been at the forefront of these debates. However, *Consensus en conflict*, by virtue of its heightened vision, reveals how the environment (i.e., the interface between society and nature) is at the heart of the development of social ties and socio-political culture. The constraints of water management and the need to cultivate a region created by human hands, on the one hand, and to grow a political and legal culture as well as economic and social structures, on the other hand, were intertwined rather than opposed to or turned against each

other. In so doing, it shows how environmental issues are social issues and thus provides keys to understanding the present and to acting on the future.

## About the author

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