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Kennedy, J.; Wagenaar, P.; Rutgers, M.; van Eijnatten, J.

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# Corruption and Public Values in Historical and Comparative Perspective: An Introduction

*James Kennedy, Pieter Wagenaar, Mark Rutgers and Joris van Eijnatten*

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The Netherlands has long enjoyed an international reputation for being a country free of corrupt practices. It ranks consistently in surveys as one of the least corrupt countries in the world. Already in the mid-nineteenth century, liberal Dutch historians like Robert Fruin were proud of the transparency of the country's public institutions, which, in contrast to a corrupt past, kept unethical practices at bay. The preeminent Dutch historian Johan Huizinga was less sanguine; in 1934 he suggested that the Dutch found modest and subtle forms of corruption entirely commensurate with their bourgeois identity. Whatever the reality, the Dutch public opinion has often been shocked at the unexpected venality in the public sphere, perhaps all the more because of their self-image as largely incorruptible. The Lockheed Affair – in which the prince consort Bernhard was revealed in the mid-1970s to have taken bribes from the aircraft manufacturer – constituted a serious crisis in the Netherlands, and evidence in recent years of structural kickbacks and other illegal practices in the construction industry has again prompted the Dutch to ask: what are our public values?

That question can perhaps best be answered by considering it in a deeper historical perspective. It is only through in-depth, case-by-case studies that we can hope to comprehend the meaning of public values and their change over time. For that reason, we have launched “Under Construction: The Genesis of Public Values,” a project fully funded by The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) and begun in the fall of 2006. The historical range of the project is broad, straddling the years between 1650 and 1950, with the three doctoral students featured here (Michel Hoenderboom, Toon Kerkhoff and Ronald Kroeze) dividing the three centuries equally among them. The choice for three diachronic periods is more than arbitrary; each one (1650-1750, 1750-1850, and 1850-1950) roughly correlates with three relatively well-defined periods of state formation in the Netherlands: “the ancien régime in optima forma,” “the ancien régime in transition,” and “the ‘modern’ constitutional state.”

This task of diachronically outlining changes of public values with respect to corruption carries with

it important challenges. Public values – the ones that seek to define and idealize “good” behavior in the public sphere and which seek to banish “bad” practices and ideas from public life – are sometimes difficult to trace historically, particularly as to how and when – and why – they change over time. In order to execute this project, the framers have taken their cue from the American political scientist Michael Johnston, who defines corruption as “the abuse, according to the legal or social standards constituting a society’s system of public order, of a public role or resource for private benefit.” But more than his definition alone, Johnson’s focus on the *development of conflicts* over which public values should be followed has functioned as inspiration for this project.

Indeed, episodes of conflict are extremely important in discerning which public values are really salient and how such values change as a result of such conflicts. We make the argument in our program (see [corruptionproject.nl](http://corruptionproject.nl)) that public values, as they relate to corruption or other matters, are often only visible in moments of crisis or, more particularly, in reference to corruption, in moments of scandal. To be sure, one can historically examine “best opinion” – moral, theological or legal authorities which sometimes articulate a usually more abstract understanding of what is good and bad behavior in public life – and this project takes structural account of the moral stances of such authorities. There are, too, “shop floor” practices, which, wherever possible, should also be followed to understand continuity and change in the way public administration was actually carried out. But such texts and sources, taken by themselves, offer only a limited and incomplete explanation of changes in public values that have taken place over three centuries.

That is why this project has chosen to heavily focus on corruption cases that signal changes in the development of public values. These cases are almost always, by definition, “scandals,” states of affairs which generated public emotion and vigorous debate. “Scandals,” in contrast to “normal” corruption cases, are often, we could argue, indications of a *changing* mindset among key actors in the public sphere about the moral (un)acceptability of certain public practices. Most typically, scandals signal public moral opposition to practices that hitherto had been considered acceptable or at least condoned. By analyzing such cases, and historically contextualizing them, we hope to come to better historical understanding of how the public values of the present day found their “genesis.”

Sources for these cases are, of course, drawn from court proceedings and other official documents. But even more important are the sources of public opinion in reference to these scandals. Public opinion is notoriously hard to discern, especially as one goes back in time, but any research into the creation and development of public values cannot bypass an attempt to reconstruct public opinion. Pamphlets, newspapers and the written record of other forms of public debate, such as parliamentary proceedings, thus constitute an all-important source in this research project. Such sources are an imperfect indication of public sentiment, but they offer us as close a view of prevailing opinion in our selected cases as we can attain.

This research’s focus on casuistry within the confines of Dutch history cannot, of course, be con-

ducted in isolation. The journal issue presented here, then, is a wider examination of public values and corruption, stretching beyond the Netherlands and offering, directly and indirectly, ways of drawing international comparisons. The time expanse remains large, with a focus chiefly on the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. The reader with a more contemporary interest in public values should nevertheless find various opportunities in this issue to relate current understandings of public values with their past development.

Hoenderboom and Kerkhoff do exactly what was envisaged when we started the project. In their article “Values Underlying Capability: The Case of Lodewijk Huygens (1676)” they study a seventeenth-century corruption scandal to find out which underlying values were at stake in this celebrated case. This scandal did not really constitute a turning point in the development of administrative values, they conclude, but was rather a moment, where existing values were again confirmed. Scandals, then, need not always lead to change in moral perception and practice, but they may also serve to reify and rearticulate persisting public values.

A criticism on the project has been that, by focusing on scandals, it ignores “normal” corruption cases. Wagenaar, in his article “Classical Corruption: Hugo van Arckel, Dike Warden of the Krimpenerwaard, and the Corruption of His Time,” tries to solve this problem. First, he briefly discusses the most important clusters of social science theory dealing with corruption, and then he goes into the case of Hugo van Arckel. Van Arckel was a seventeenth-century Dutch official, who managed to combine several functions in his own person, which he then used to line his own pockets. Wagenaar finds that in such a “normal” case the neo-classical approach to corruption is not the most obvious one to choose, as there was no controversy about administrative values.

Kroeze, in his article “Political Corruption Scandals in the Netherlands in the Nineteenth Century: The Letters Affair of 1865” uses the same approach as his fellow students Hoenderboom and Kerkhoff, but for a period some two centuries later. He pays a good deal of attention to the roles scandals play in shifts in administrative and political values and then elaborates on a scandal concerning charges of vote-buying, which shook the liberal cabinet of the mid-1860s. In doing so, he not only discovers genuine shifts in values, but also a new understanding of “publicness.” In particular, this case reveals that the national press had taken on a more pronounced role than would have been conceivable only a few decades earlier.

In his article “Reflections on Balzac’s *Physiology of the Bureaucrat* (1841): Tracing Popular Opinion and the Problems of Irony,” Rutgers focuses on one of the sources of public values: public opinion—as noted before, a most difficult source to research. Using Balzac’s ironic writings on the bureaucrat, he shows how fiction can be used to reconstruct public opinion. Yet, such efforts at reconstruction are a risky business, especially if the author under study employs irony. Rutgers demonstrates the challenges of analyzing such readings by comparing Balzac to Taylor.

Jens Ivo Engels, a researcher with parallel interests to those engaged in the project, focuses on public opinion as well but systematically uses an international-comparative approach. He sees the

nineteenth century as the period in which existing conflicts between value systems were finally resolved and focuses on turning points. In his article “Political Corruption in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: France, Great Britain and the United States” he compares anti-corruption movements in these three countries and focuses on the motives behind them. Not only did the public-private dichotomy become more clearly demarcated, Engels writes, but so, too, did a tendency towards centralization. Moreover, it was often an anti-pluralist world of ideas, consisting of anti-capitalism, anti-liberalism, and anti-Semitism, that spurred the anti-corruption movement. Surprisingly, he finds that the anti-corruption movement was not related to modernization or to democratization but drew from quite different sources.

These articles, taken together, offer a sample of recent work being conducted by historians and social scientists in the history of public values and changing understandings of corruption. It reveals, at the same time, just how new this kind of research is, with many questions remaining unanswered, and much terrain remaining uninvestigated. It might be hoped that these contributions will stimulate further cross-fertilization among scholars focused on the genesis of public values and their development.

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**Dr. James Kennedy** is a professor of Dutch History since the Middle Ages at the University of Amsterdam. He specializes in the intersection of politics, religion and morality in the modern Netherlands.

**Dr. Pieter Wagenaar** is an assistant professor at the department of Public Administration and Organization Sciences of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. His research interests include informatization and the history of public administration.

**Dr. Mark R. Rutgers** is professor of public administration at Leiden University, the Netherlands. He wrote this article as a fellow at the Netherlands Institute of Advanced Sciences, Wassenaar. His areas of research include the philosophy and history of public administration and its study, the nature of public values, and public integrity.

**Dr. Joris van Eijnatten** is a professor of cultural history at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. His research interests are the history of ideas, the history of communication and the history of religion.