

The Quality of ASSR dissertations.

**An analysis of opinions on the qualities of theses
defended by PhD recipients of the
Amsterdam School for Social science Research**

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Introduction

In 2002 the Amsterdam School by way of its executive director has started to collect evaluative data on the quality of the 100 dissertations that have been defended by ASSR PhD students. In first instance, I believed that it would be possible to collect the material through the evaluations written by the members of the so-called "promotiecommissies". The promotiecommissies are the committees that decide on the admission of the candidates to the public defence. Several ASSR staff members have pointed at the possibility that this approach might not yield the desired information. Some reasons have to do with procedural restrictions, other with the disciplinary differences that are at stake or the micro politics of the evaluation process.

I can be short - the advice of the beoordelings commissie should be restricted to one sentence: yes, it is acceptable, or no, it is not. Further comment is actively discouraged....

As to the broader question, analyzing quality, I think that would be very good to do, but I am not sure how realistic an image the written evaluations would give. From what I can recall of discussions with members of committees, the letters are often a pale and conventional reflection of their actual opinion.

The criteria which are used vary considerably, also according to personal perceptions of disciplinary requirements. A good example is the balance between good ethnography, or data collection, organization and analysis, on the one hand, and theory on the other. Some critics demand both, others see that strength in one can compensate for weakness in the other. Some people look for a fairly mechanical testing of some question, and check introduction against conclusion, others look for originality of thought.

In my own case, and with the seven dissertations you mention, I would expect that some historians would find a few a bit too theoretical, but almost all social scientists would expect more theory....

Mostly in a committee of five or more these things get balanced out.

Another colleague emphasized the aspect of patronage in the final evaluation of the dissertation. Herewith, he came very close to the results of earlier research that has been done concerning the patron client relationships among ASSR supervisors and PhD students.¹

I fully support your project but I fear it will be very difficult to realize for the following reasons.

I think the basic problem you have is that the improvement in Ph. D. training that research schools brought beyond the old patron-client system has been all but neutralized because the old rules and procedures never changed. If a dissertation is good enough to be evaluated by a commissie is still decided by the promotor(s). When members of a commissie get the dissertation they are, by explicit rule, held to limit their evaluation to thumbs up or down. I have always found this frustrating, if only for the fact that reading the dissertation carefully, which cannot be done without noting necessary corrections and useful changes, seems a waste of time if you cannot communicate these details to the candidate (or promotor). I know that this sometimes occurs informally, but it is certainly not the rule. Under current procedures an argued evaluation is required only when there is a cum-laude proposal (and that certainly has no longer an effect on the finished product).

As to the list you have of "my" graduates, I cannot be helpful either. I could search my archive in Amsterdam, but I know that, apart from evaluations of progress in the school, a detailed evaluation of the diss. by members of the commissie did not take place.

Practically, we will have to live with the Faculty commissie as a formality but the school could insist on evaluation by a committee of, say, three colleagues, of a manuscript, not the printed version, before the promotor sends the work to a commissie.

¹ PhD advisors, PhD candidates, and academic selection: the collectivization of the Dutch PhD process, 1984 - 1995, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 262 pp, 1997 (in Dutch).

This commentator is also hinting at the social complexities committee members have to deal with. The committee member not only evaluates the qualities of a dissertation, but also enters a social minefield. In every evaluation process, social relations, the autonomy and prestige of the supervisor of the evaluated candidate and future academic co-operation are at stake. Power can play a role.

It crossed my mind that I should list all my experiences of PhD defences in which I was involved as a supervisor. It turns out not so easy because they show no fixed pattern. In the case of Z I'd known it would be difficult but eight years later I and X thought we should try to have it pulled through. We failed though. ...A few months later however Z did get [the] PhD degree [...] with exactly the same thesis and for the simple reason that [the new supervisor's] position in [that other] local arena was considerably stronger than ours is in Amsterdam. After all I do have something to say, namely that in dubious cases the supervisor's position in the local arena is decisive.

The following comment emphasizes the autonomy aspect and protection of the supervisor.

The first and probably major difficulty that I see at defences is that it is demanded from commission members (that is from defence commission) to say 'yes' or 'no' to the manuscript. Because one doesn't want commission members to enter into a discussion with the supervisor or the candidate and thus in fact act as a 'second deadline supervisor', the stirring up of a discussion at that phase is discouraged. Only with opposition in the Aula are you allowed to say why in fact you do not want to block the defence even though you have a number of severely critical points to make.

The colleagues proved to be right as far as the absence of written evaluations is concerned. Up to now, I have been able to lay hands on just a few documents. These have been written by foreign committee members who ignored the Roman imperial simplicity of thumbs up or down. Although few in number, they show the considerable value of this type of evaluation for the committees. Also the candidates could benefit from them if they would decide to make their dissertation into a book and could get permission to read the comments.

It is not because of laziness that the Dutch committee members restrict themselves to a "yes" or "no". The architects of the Algemeen Promotiereglement (Rules regarding the preparation, supervision and defense of PhD dissertations) were in full possession of their faculties when they decided to avoid as much as possible a debate in the committees on the qualities of the dissertations submitted for public defense. Perhaps the most striking is not the rule in itself, as well that a huge majority of the Dutch committee members respects it. The comments on the dissertations ID 20 and 149 (see appendix) show the opportunities that are missed in that way. The question arises how the ASSR could benefit from its positive experiences with collectivized evaluation procedures to promote debates on the qualities of individual dissertations and the ASSR dissertation qualities in general. One possibility might be to respect the Algemeen Promotiereglement and informing the dean with "yes" or "no", in combination with sending elaborated evaluations to the ASSR in order to report with regularity on this issue.

One of the informants suggests another measure to avoid decisional simplifications.

In the old days: physical meetings of commission members and professors' arbitrariness to the disadvantage of PhD candidates. Nowadays: (at best) virtual meetings and ignoring of individual professors' judgements. I was a dean at the [...] for 4 years. For the last two years I've borne material responsibility here. My principle: 1 member who has objections is already enough to stop the procedure for a time and insert a correction phase. In this way you serve two institutional purposes: good commission members know that they are treated seriously, and candidates know that at worst there is just delay but no cancellation.

To compensate for the absence of elaborated evaluations, I have asked the supervisors with a considerable number of PhD recipients to describe the strong and weak qualities of the theses that have been defended under their responsibility. In their reactions we sometimes can recognize the well-known elements of protection and neglecting of flaws. Although we are still in a hesitant and complicated phase of data collection, some major trends can be outlined at least as working hypotheses that can be tested in a debate in the ASSR and in the meeting with the International Advisory Board that read a number of theses and 8th month papers.

The comments that are presented in the appendix cover 41 dissertations. 18 of these dissertations are clearly appreciated for their empirical value, but receive critical notes as far as the theoretical aspects are concerned. 14 dissertations are mentioned in terms of good or excellent and are praised for their empirical and theoretical qualities. In 5 cases (serious) doubts are mentioned.

We can contrast these impressions with the total number of 18 *cum laudes* among the 100 PhD recipients and the 5 cases (not overlapping with the 5 mentioned above) in which very serious problems led to vivid discussions in the committees and sometimes to re-writing of (parts of) the dissertation (personal information and inside knowledge).

Can we see a red thread in the comments, an issue that would deserve special attention in the training of the PhD students? That point seems to be lying in the nexus of theory and empirical data. Many ASSR dissertations are praised for their empirical strength, but are less appreciated for their theoretical qualities. An important question for the International Advisory Board is if they recognize this trend.

We could arrange and summarize the different comments in this respect by one-liners that almost show levels of ambition or potential. The question is what the ASSR considers to be a minimum level of theoretical ambition.

Levels of theoretical flaws and strengths

Level 1.

Mastering of abundant relevant literature

Impressive grasp of the discipline' s contemporary literature

Embedded in relevant literature

Knowledge and use of more general <anthropological> literature on behalf of structuring the argument

[*versus*

Casual relation to theoretical debates

Insufficiently embedded in the literature on the subject]

Level 2.

Focussing the theoretical framework

Clear sight on important theoretical goals

[*versus*

Mentioning everyone whose work is even vaguely linked to the study]

Level 3.

Signalling of debates

[*versus*

Avoidance of obvious theoretical discussions]

Level 4.

Elaborating on the theoretical work of <...>

Well embedded in theory

Theoretically well grounded

Level 5.

Testing hypotheses derived from <sociological> theory

Theoretical considerations that are very well oriented towards empirical research

Level 6.

Interpretation in a <sociologically> explanatory manner and from a connected theoretical perspective.

[*versus*

A return to those issues in the concluding chapter did not happen]

Level 7.

Useful contributions to the discussion

Original contributions to the existent insights

Innovative contribution to several areas of lively debate

Considerable theoretical and practical significance

[*versus*

Non innovative elaboration

Theoretically not innovative.]

Level 8.

Sociological theory-building

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The little report is just a first step on a long and windy road to a public debate in the ASSR on the general qualities of the ASSR dissertations. The ultimate goal is to further a continuous debate on our levels of ambition and to transform the conclusions into new components of the PhD training program and a more consciously handling of this issue by supervisors and PhD students in their dyadic communications. One of the ASSR supervisors suggests the following.

The dissertations [of the PhD recipients of the supervisor in question - hs] are characterised by empirical quality but theoretical mediocrity, whereas the school has the atmosphere which (sometimes) gives students an impression that theoretical fireworks are more important than (boring) empirical solidity. I would like to see periodical evaluations of students which let them see - timely and clearly – that the following standards are applied (1) just enough to pass, (2) good empirical qualities, (3) successful combination of empirical and theoretical work, (4) brilliant work.

Another respondent confirms the general finding and asks himself how the ASSR could react.

What is common to all the above dissertations [by PhD recipients of the supervisor in question – hs] is a good empirical/ethnographic basis but - with a single exception - poor theoretical embedding (and low theoretical ambition!). ...You can remedy that problem *à la* the ICS [a Dutch graduate school that is completely immersed in one theoretical perspective, rational choice theory

– hs] that is by positing a single common theoretical framework within which each candidate studies one partial problem and then gets a degree with articles. That does not seem to me the ASSR's style and you are not very likely either to get staff to do the job. Its advantage is that you can reduce duration of study. Still I don't know what to think about quality of candidates who got their degrees in such a way.

In the appendix that follows, the readers will find summarized and anonymous comments on the ASSR dissertations that lay the foundation for the generalizing observations that have been presented above.

HS, May 2003

Abstracts of comments

Good fieldwork, strong data, reservations from a theoretical viewpoint

ID 6 (Cultural Anthropology) ²

Respondent 1. (In a letter concerning a possible *cum laude* distinction.) I see no reason for a *cum laude*...The project is of particular quality, The writer has successfully processed relevant literature on the region. ...A bold thesis and X's dissertation is in general sufficiently readable. I say, in general, because in some parts without further explanation a reader may lose track of the argumentation because of the multitude of names mentioned. The use of relationship diagrams (family relations, and possibly egocentric networks) normally used in anthropology should have been a solution in this place.

More important though, I see some problems of theoretical nature mentioned by my colleague It would be unjust to suggest the opposite statement to X's opinion, but still in my view the theoretical side of the project does not seem sufficient. Although the writer's treatment of-model is intelligent indeed, ... avoids tackling other obvious theoretical discussions (see e.g., p. 154 note 6). ... could have drawn inspiration not only from the literature devoted to the in India but also should not have ignored socio-economic and socio-demographic theories of occupational binding, freedom and lack of freedom, patronage and exploitation, as well as stigmatisation. The anthropological theory of hypergamy and hypogamy could have been useful in discussing 'mixed' marriages/relationships.

The argument that fieldwork was done in a totally unique (part of) society about which still nothing is known turns thus into a self-fulfilling prophecy. This impression grows stronger if we realise that the writer useds work done among the neighbouring in a merely casual way and without exposing it to any systematic discussion. Within the framework ofs theory and usings or X's own observations X could have for example quite easily discusseds fieldwork area as a 'metropolis'.

That does not change the fact that I find X's doctoral dissertation very successful, which made me also seriously consider a possibility of a *cum laude* distinction. My answer, on re-reading Prof.s letter, is negative.

However, I cannot help saying that the new rule that excludes a *cum laude* on a single negative vote seems to me harsh indeed. For this reason in more dubious cases colleagues who are particularly specialised in the discussed topic should be given an opportunity to persuade more peripheral co-evaluators, to which, I myself as not an [...]specialist, certainly belong.

Respondent 2. A good dissertation which however took more time than initially agreed. That was caused because the writer felt a recurrent urge to return to ... fieldwork in order to collect more data. Difficult, very successfully performed fieldwork. Well written but without really locating within a larger framework some phenomena studied, such as forced labour, far-reaching social inequality, and magic/witchcraft. Should that have been done, X's work would have been awarded a higher grade.

ID 11 (Development Sociology)

² After every ID number, the MA discipline of the recipient is mentioned

Respondent 1. An interesting study, good research done in difficult circumstances, theoretically not particularly penetrating but a useful contribution into the discussion over

ID 12 (Development studies)

Respondent 1. Given this candidate's previous education, not only of low quality but also different as for the field of study, ... project shows that ... has considerably matured. Competent fieldwork as I saw ... doing it at ... location. The candidate was not particularly open to methodological and theoretical suggestions and the final result has a clearly descriptive character. My evaluation is above sufficient.

ID 13 (Anthropology)

Respondent 1. (Letter to the dean) On this occasion I must admit that I had doubts about my own evaluation and that is why reread this dissertation. I find it a good dissertation as far as fieldwork and historical depth are concerned but poor theoretically. Unfortunately, the writer does not enter discussions about corruption and clientage but stays content with but a few remarks (pages 10-13) to which X refers a number of times later. I hoped that X would return to those issues in the concluding chapter but unfortunately that did not happen. It is a pity because on the basis of X's material X could have produced a magnificent contribution to those debates, and yet in fact failed to do so. Notwithstanding, the other chapters are of such quality that I gladly approve of the whole. At the same time I still hope that the writer will find time to develop the theoretical aspect when it comes to the elaboration of the script into a book form since X's work certainly deserves to be published.

Respondent 2. (Question during the defence ceremony)

You have reported on remarkable fieldwork in ... and shown yourself to be a qualified fieldworker. You unearthed complicated ... affairs and connections, part of which of an 'underground' character and write about it with gusto. I like to compliment you with this major achievement.

But I found the theoretical side of your dissertation much less convincing and it is on one of the issues of that side of your book that I would like to exchange views here.

Let us have a look at the title of your chapter ..., where you use the terms [...] and [...] in juxtaposition. Both terms are introduced in your first chapter, together with a host of others like [...] networks and [...] coalitions.

I must confess that your use of all these terms just mentioned made me wonder whether they have all been invented to describe the same phenomena. During much of the first chapter you give that impression, although at the end you seem to consider ... as a different species from [M]ore general anthropological literature might have helped you to structuring your argument. Such classics as Boissevain's Friends of Friends, subtitled: Networks, Manipulators and Coalitions (1974) as well as a reader edited, among others by James Scott whom you quote entitled Friends, Followers and Factions, a Reader in Political Clientelism (1977) are only a few of classics in the field.

The former would have given you a useful distinction between patrons as people with direct access to first-order resources and brokers as people who deal in contacts. As the title of X's book says, X is also engaged in clarifying the concepts of networks and coalitions, which, unlike in your usage, are NOT interchangeable.

Many articles in the Schmitt, Scott et al. reader would have facilitated understanding the local day-to-day operations with such macro-originated processes as elections.

Your discussion of the terms starting with .., maintains the impression that they are more or less interchangeable. We are, in my view, short-changed by the abrupt transition to a definition when it comes to the ‘client..’ –like terminology, while your use, further on, of big men, kingpins, middlemen (59), strong men (302) remains without theoretical underpinning, while the concept of ‘broker’ is completely absent, even though it might have helped you in sorting out matters.

ID 17 (Anthropology)

Respondent 1: A successful but largely descriptive study (‘a story’ but no analysis) linked to debates over common property, signalled but not elaborated in an innovative way.

ID 24 (History)

Respondent 1. A very solid, up to very well performed historical study, theoretically not innovative. In the general evaluation of the commission – perhaps except [...], opposed by another commission member (not myself) who suggested a *cum laude* – a good or even very good historical study manifesting the writer’s sensitivity to nuances.

ID 25 (Development Studies)

Respondent 1. A dissertation which cost supervisors much effort in order to get it completed as well as defended. The candidate seemed more promising at the beginning of X’s study than at the end. Decent fieldwork into a politically sensitive topic in [...]. Being involved in this project, I suggested that the writer should mobilise comprehensive knowledge of the situation of the tribal societies in South Asia in order to avoid an excessively inward image of the Unfortunately, X did not do so. Despite that, within its limits, a decent dissertation.

ID 29 (Cultural Anthropology)

Respondent 1. In reply to your request I have acquainted myself with the manuscript of the doctoral dissertation of ... It was difficult to come up with a final evaluation the thesis. The manuscript still manifests many technical defects (not only in English but is also sloppy about some geographical and other issues: [...]). There is also no glossary in the dissertation. The manuscript’s value consists in detailed stories about the development of ... production in ... and mutual relationship among social actors. The problem however is that because of abundant details the reader slightly loses sight of the main line of argument. In fact that is at least partly resolved in the conclusion, which is why, provided the author carefully corrects X’s sloppy English, I am ready to admit the thesis to defence.

Respondent 2. A special contribution about a relatively unknown subject (...), very informative, with an innovative use of sources (...) but very messily elaborated (among others as far as English is concerned). Theoretical framework dragged behind (apart from that enthusiastic mail from [...] – an authority in this field - who finds that on considerable revision the book should appear on the market).

Respondent 3. A very good empirical study of networks and strategies among ... entrepreneurs in ... in the 20th century; difficult research, well performed, containing a lot of important material but theoretically unimpressive. This work raised some commotion among

commission members because one of them turned down the manuscript on grounds of its theoretical weakness. That caused indignation among other members who underlined its empirical value.

ID 50 (History)

Respondent 1. An important empirical study of a still quite unknown part of socio-economic history of ..., theoretically not particularly impressive. Despite that, in this work ... proved to be a good researcher.

ID 51 (Cultural Anthropology)

Respondent 1. A candidate who was not particularly enthusiastic about doing fieldwork, and while doing it ran into various problems. That does not change the fact that the final result is better than I expected. X uses the political conduct of the new class of entrepreneurs in order to come up with a good doctoral dissertation. Submitted to a reputable publisher, it has contributed to the popularization of the subject.

ID 52 (Sociology)

Respondent 1. An excellent dissertation. Just one remark: quite early on the candidate worked out X's own way of doing fieldwork and processing collected information. In all respects competent and of high quality. After publication, this thesis has been well received in professional circles.

ID 53 (History)

Respondent 1. A decent historical study, yet without theoretical ambitions, dealing with the effects of ... trade in a small ... village and its vicinity along the coast of ...; accepted without any reservation by the commission.

ID 58 (History)

Respondent 1. An excellent PhD dissertation, especially if we take into account the background of this candidate, who studied history and no social sciences. Good fieldwork, skilfully recorded; however, the theoretical aspect should have been given more attention. Publication of this book at an international publisher has given it reputation and a welcome reception. Thanks to the dissertation the candidate's professional career has been accelerated.

ID 65 (Agronomy and Economics)

Respondent 1. A whole story. ... has done good research into the emergence of civil society in the latter days of the X has an eye for local politics and has traced down an interesting bürgerinitiative. The drawbacks were (a) project's embedding in rather monotonous managerial theories and (b) cautiousness in making some formulations (understandably, ... did not want to expose himself too much in those days). Later on the book had its impact, and now ... is one of leading researchers of civil society in

ID 74 (History)

Respondent 1. X's advantages: very large material, careful statistical processing, thorough bibliographic research, clear composition, and great precision.

X's disadvantages: not enough vision beyond the level of material, and a subject not inspirational enough (also for the candidate herself).

ID 79 (Cultural Anthropology)

Respondent 1. X's doctoral dissertation has been successfully completed with Y's considerable assistance. A typical example of somebody who enjoyed research more than writing. The fact that it was published by ... University Press suggests its quality. Empirically interesting, theoretically limited.

ID 117 (History)

Respondent 1. X's advantages: solid and original research into a socially valid phenomenon, clear argumentation, an adequate survey of relevant bibliography, and reasonable interpretation of the material.

Disadvantages: not much connection to sociological theory.

ID 20 (History)

Respondent 1. I have read X's dissertation with interest. It is a very solid piece of work, and quite unique in its portrayal of the endurance and resurgence of the ... lineage in diaspora. The study gives us an ethnographic picture of how the re-establishment of links between ... members in ... and ... in the 1980s has produced a transnational space of ever intensifying ... activities, leading to a process of ... in The tracking of decisions, projects, local state action that fuel travel and interrelations between both poles of this transnational space is rich and fascinating, casting a light on ethnic ... transnational extensions from both the ... coast and from ... sites such as

Specifically, members of the ... who have settled in ... have sustained relations between hometown ... and points in ..., ..., ..., etc., shaping a transnational space of lineage-linked activities, collective practices of ... association, school projects, remittances, donations, restoration of home town, etc. Social capital from such activities help to intensify transnational relations, capacity to mobilize clansmen & capital, rekindle ethnic ... and clan imagination, elicit local ... authorities support for activities and accumulation of prestige, leading to the reincorporation of the lineage that has become truly transnational in a way distinct from past networks. This is an instance of transnationalized ... networks becoming reembedded in the mainland, a significant part of ...'s alternative modernity.

I gladly pass the dissertation.

I do however have comments and hope they will be helpful in X's revision. The heart of the dissertation are the three chapters on ... men in ... who develop significant contacts with their hometown of The work though based on multi-sited research, draws almost exclusively from their oral histories. There is mention of archival work, but perhaps X may want to say something about life histories as a method.

The main reservation I have about the study is its theoretical packaging. The Introductory chapter weakens and distracts from the topic itself (p. 15-42). Perhaps instead of worrying about mentioning everyone who's work is even vaguely linked to the study of transnationalism, X may want to focus the theoretical framework more tightly around the

changing nature of ... transnationalism. Many references to transnationalism should be reduced and instead X should say why the study of lineages is not dead in the age of globalization.

What in my view distinguishes X's work is that X considers a form of transnational practice that is primarily embedded in lineage relations. Thus, it is very different in orientation my own Flexible Citizenship which deals with managerial figures seeking eco. advantage, political security new kinds of prestige in the United States. The contrast with my study then is not that X identifies a spectrum of reasons for transnational practice, but that these activities are embedded in a clan network and directed back towards the homeland/town. This is an important claim since most people are not aware that the resurgence of clan systems exists outside of [...] propaganda hype.

X says [...] approach is historical but yet is not historical enough in contextualizing the different motivations and strategies of transnational ... figures. To foreshadow the coming chapters, X should more clearly set out the different kinds of impulses and historical conditions that shape the activities of different actors. For instance, the first figure [...] especially was influenced by what B. Anderson calls "long distance nationalism" (in The Spectre of Comparison) which inspired many [...] emigrants before WWII to build schools, collect money, support anti-Japanese movements, etc. So in a sense instead of merely giving us the by itself interesting story of how the [...] settled down as plantation workers in [...], we should have a sense of how their political consciousness was shaped by events in [...]. The most interesting point for me is X's idea of "transnational re-incorporation" of the diaspora post- market reforms in [...] The ways clan resurgence has been enabled by new global forces are something that should be discussed in a more analytical fashion.

X can e.g. discuss the different circumstances shaping transnational practices from earlier generations. Currently, people seem more drawn by a hometown nationalism (with a small n, versus the pre-war Nationalism) and business opportunities as well as the social capital that come with them. X tells us local authorities have played a major role in welcoming [...] such as the [...] thus augmenting their philanthropic and economic activities with official recognition, tax breaks, and cultural events. Here X can develop further the idea of a [...] based process of localization that draws on the diaspora. To what extent is the construction of the "locality" now co-terminus with the transnational space of the clan, or does it merely overlap with them?

Still on the Introduction... the categories that X use should be regularized for them to do their work properly. X uses terms such as trans-spaces, trans-territorial places, region-crossing, etc. when perhaps a more suitable term could be "translocal spaces" built up by bipolar circuits of people and resources. There is a scholarship on [...] returning to their [...] hometowns to do business that X should cite, e.g. [cf...]

I am not sure by the "cultural logics" argument and wonder if it is asked to do too much work for a variety of different relations and elements that intersect in shaping the spatiality of this resurgent clan-based transnational realm.

By cultural logic, is X referring to habitus of the [...] in market society (as I use it in Flexible Citizenship) or merely reflexive practices or self-regulation? I think that perhaps Portes' relational and structural embeddedness go further as a theoretical grounding for the phenomena X seeks to take account of, and the institutional contexts of other interactions. X should spend some time discussing these ideas and how they help X frame X's analysis of transnationalism embedded in [...] lineage networks. Middlemen can be differentiated from the transnational figures that seek to reconnect with the hometown.

There is some repetition in citations, e.g. the same quotes by Portes, Smith and Guarniza, etc, are repeated in the Into., Conclusion and somewhere in the middle chapters.

My congratulations and best wishes to X. After revision X should consider publishing the book. It will be an important contribution to the new scholarship on [...] transnationalism.

Meeting the standards

ID 87 (Sociology)

Respondent 1. X chose a subject which is difficult but very relevant, socially as well as scientifically; a broad comparative historical-sociological perspective consistently applied and with original contributions to the existent insights.

X's disadvantages: often sloppy, especially in earlier versions.

ID 107 (Social Studies)

Respondent 1. X's advantages: a wide subject never discussed from the historical-sociological perspective, mastering of abundant relevant literature and eloquent composition.

X's disadvantages: sometimes wordy just because of X's easy pen; halfway through the book suspense vanishes and argumentation becomes a bit forcibly filled in with a story about 'how it used to be'.

ID 119 (Cultural Anthropology)

Respondent 1. X's advantages: original research into a socially valid phenomenon, a careful line of argument and testing hypotheses derived from sociological theory.

Disadvantages: breakdowns as research proceeded – it took a lot of encouragement to get [...] over it.

ID 142 (Sociology/Political Sciences)

Respondent 1. I found it remarkable that within 4 years the candidate who was not particularly well prepared (with a typical ... education which did not combine so easily with our PhD culture, and who spoke hardly any English when X joined us) has managed to complete a manuscript of rather high quality. It is first of all noteworthy that X has been successfully guided away from a rather philosophical anthropology / sociology towards a more empirically oriented approach. What seems also very positive about this project is the fact that quite soon after [the defence] X found employment at the University of ..., and later a 4-year job in ... (USA) at the reputable I have hardly any negative remarks to make – theoretical considerations in this dissertation are very well oriented towards empirical research (not particularly sophisticated) but I am not sure whether it should be regarded as a drawback.

ID 63 (Sociology/Anthropology)

Respondent 1. A good dissertation based on difficult fieldwork. In theoretical and analytical respects I expected more but the evaluation above sufficient up to good indicates a decent

outcome. The result facilitated X obtaining a post doc position, and X is certain to continue [...] scientific career.

ID 71 (History)

Respondent 1. With ..., I have never had a difficult moment. The crux of the dissertation is a number of thorough historical studies. And that's how the candidate makes it. At the same time I must say (but that remains to be seen) we will also hear an opposite opinion saying that ... has missed a lot. To give a good example, X failed to write down resistance poetry by those involved, whereas one of the foreign [members of the committee] did so. Yet this poetry encapsulates meaningfully rebels' sorrows and aspirations. As we know from ..., it also plays a role among the Why did ... fail to get this kind of material? Well, the truth is that ... is not easy to convince. If I was not X's supervisor I would make reservations about the limited role the ... period plays in X's work. ...I mean to say how limited - at least this particular - supervisor is in giving directions for research. There are also some other things that I would rather see different (for example family relations) but it does not mean that next week I will go to this PhD defence reluctantly. X has really earned the degree.

ID 67 (History)

Respondent 1. A study based on archival research. The candidate combined inflexibility with perseverance. Quite a decent PhD dissertation about an interesting socio-demographic problem, elaborating on the theoretical work of X's initial supervisor. Solid and competent research on which I as a supervisor had little influence, partly because of the candidate's reserve. Unfortunately, the project did not lead to a commercial edition of the script.

ID 149 (political science)

The thesis by provoked similar thoughts. Again, this is a very competent piece of work, but one which could have benefited from some inter-disciplinary inputs, especially from the political science and international relations literatures. It is a thesis about the power and role of in the national and international arenas in the struggle over the inclusion of social clauses in international agreements. A particular methodological focus is on the role of discourse and discursive coalitions in explaining the level of successful influence exerted by Yet this is a rather difficult notion to use – and I'm not entirely convinced by the way it is used in this work. Had I been asked to judge the thesis, I would have passed it but I would also have wondered why a vast range of obvious literature had not been consulted, covering (a) theoretical approaches (especially concerning the problematic and difficult deployment of discourse as a concept; the author seems to be entirely reliant on one approach taken from one study of public policy); (b) alternative concepts of interest politics and mobilisation of influence; and (c) background literature from the international relations literature about transnational coalitions of the kind analysed in this thesis. I think the issue here is the extent to which the student is exposed to a rigorous course of training in the field in which he or she is working and the degree of exposure to influences outside the narrow field of research in which they are engaged.³

³ This evaluator had similar observations regarding an 8th month paper that one of the ASSR PhD students defended successfully: "This one should certainly have passed – and I imagine it did. But what struck me about this piece was that it was rather short for a full statement about the thesis project and the fact that some key literatures are really only referred to in passing without a full investigation of what they may provide in terms of research guidelines, propositions or hypotheses. While there is a strong development of an organisational

perspective, reference to a 'varieties of capitalism' literature is made but remains rather under-developed. And it is unclear how the study relates to existing work on corporate governance (the natural contextual literature for this study, both in its legal and business management aspects) in the Netherlands or elsewhere. I would have expected the interdisciplinary 'state of the art' on the subject, including the comparative perspective (which again is mentioned but not developed), to be more thoroughly explored. The weight given to organisational sociology, but the neglect of other adjacent and appropriate literature by the author (although mentioned as likely to play a major role in the thesis) made me wonder if this student was sufficiently exposed to interdisciplinary influences."

Strong data, well embedded in theory

ID 57 (Cultural Anthropology)

Respondent 1. A good study, the best in the series of works that you have presented to me. Good research, well embedded in theory, well written. With some extra effort (at the final editing), the book could have possibly been awarded a *cum laude* distinction. The commission gave a unanimously positive evaluation.

ID 59 (Agricultural Sciences)

Respondent 1. In all respects an outstanding dissertation. Based on solid comprehensive fieldwork, embedded in relevant literature and theoretically well grounded. For all those reasons it is clear why an important publisher published it. A typical example of somebody who has proved scientific talents and who continues to do so.

ID 62 (Sociology)

Respondent 1. A clever dissertation which has justly been awarded a highest grade available. Well founded, exemplary fieldwork integrated with the theoretical level and available literature on the subject. It took no effort to have the dissertation accepted for print by a scientific publisher.

ID 80 (Anthropology)

Respondent 1. X's advantages: a very broad perspective applied in a balanced way; a successful combination of anthropological fieldwork, historical bibliographic research, sociological theory-building and great precision. His disadvantages: combination of attention for detail and grand structures makes the text sometimes difficult to read.

ID 90 (Sociology)

Respondent 1. An original subject. Plenty of principally descriptive statistical material collected, systematically arranged and interpreted in a sociologically explanatory manner and from a connected theoretical perspective. [cum laude]
X's disadvantages: in earlier versions sometimes prone to jump to conclusions.

ID 99 (Cultural Anthropology)

Respondent 1. Published by [...]. Interesting. Solid work. [cf ID 106: About this excellent and highly readable work I can say the same as about [the] three predecessors: high quality empirical material and theoretical treatment. The four of them close to a *cum laude* distinction.

ID 106 (Social Anthropology)

Respondent 1. About this excellent and highly readable work I can say the same as about the three predecessors: high quality empirical material and theoretical treatment. The four of them close to a *cum laude* distinction. The PhD dissertation unfortunately has not been published. Attempts to have it published failed for personal reasons.

ID 141 (Cultural Anthropology)

Respondent 1. An outstanding and very readable work: 30 cases analysed and convincingly interpreted (explained). Published by [...] (2001), and in English translation by [...] (2003). [cf ID 106: About this excellent and highly readable work I can say the same as about [the] three predecessors: high quality empirical material and theoretical treatment. The four of them close to a *cum laude* distinction.]

ID 109 (Cultural Anthropology)

Respondent 1: Another outstanding PhD dissertation, both theoretically and empirically. Published by [...] (1999). [cf ID 106: About this excellent and highly readable work I can say the same as about [the] three predecessors: high quality empirical material and theoretical treatment. The four of them close to a *cum laude* distinction.]

ID 145 (Cultural Anthropology)

Respondent 1. X's advantages: an interesting subject, never before treated in the form of a sociological monograph, thorough knowledge of literature, an original and well designed research project, clearly presented methodological premises, and a combination with various theories.

Disadvantages: sometimes too wordy descriptions.

ID 148 (Cultural Anthropology)

Respondent 1. Its standard is high although shows some traces of a haste: X has been offered a post doc position at ... dream place, that is with ... in ..., and that is why X had to speed up to finish by 1

Respondent 2. This is an accomplished piece of work, which contributes in innovative ways to several areas of lively debate in contemporary social anthropology, notably studies of identity, of borders and of post socialist transformation. It also constitutes a pioneering investigation of a region (... , adjacent to north-east ... but for half a century behind a virtually sealed frontier) almost completely unknown in the international literature.

The dissertation consists of three "case studies" carried out in different locations in ..., each with a different main theme and distinct methodological bias. All three studies are convincing and they complement each other. Inevitably there is a price to be paid for this unusual broad coverage and one sometimes wishes for more ethnographic depth and for a more rounded account of social relations in the various field-sites. It seems that this fragmentary pattern (which is replicated within each of the case studies in the style of the analysis), was not the preference of the author, but rather was imposed upon him by difficult political circumstances in the field. In any case, the benefits of this unusual structure and range in many ways exceed the drawbacks. X has addressed a demanding research agenda in post-socialist X's

analyses are full of subtle insights, revealing both an impressive grasp of the discipline' s contemporary literature and the sympathetic sensibility of a born ethnographer. X never loses sight of X's important theoretical goals, and demonstrates conclusively why one cannot hope to understand post socialist identity politics without a careful analysis of both pre-... history and of ... modernization itself. I have no hesitation in declaring that this work meets the standard for a PhD. Indeed it is one of the very best - and best written - PhDs that I have ever read.

...

In conclusion, despite some criticisms and caveats noted above, this is an important contribution to several topics of considerable theoretical and practical significance. X proves himself to be well versed in recent anthropological and other writings on identity, borders and (post)socialism. X also shows himself on occasion to be a subtle narrator of ethnographic fragments. I am less well read than X in the literature concerning identity, where some of X's conclusions (that identities are 'mutually constitutive' and that social context matters more than 'difference' per se) do not really seem so illuminating. But to explore identity in this exceptionally instructive setting is bound to be rewarding. In X's handling of debates concerning post socialism and in X's detailed analysis of the implications of ..., both topics where I feel myself better qualified to assess this work, I rate this contribution somewhere between very good and outstanding. If I cannot quite bring myself to endorse the latter assessment of the work overall, this has to do with a certain thinness of ethnographic materials and the fragmentary, occasionally repetitive nature of the exposition. Yet the structure of the work, with its three case studies, was largely outside the author's control. In the circumstances X should be congratulated for bringing a difficult and pioneering project to an entirely satisfactory conclusion. My various quibbles should all be interpreted as evidence of how stimulating I found this work; and with only minor polishing I am sure it should be submitted to a top rank publisher, and become the monograph that launches its author on a successful academic career.

Doubts

ID 61 (Development Studies)

Respondent 1. One of the examples when a candidate could have done better than it has really happened because of serious problems in personal life (...). For this reason ... investment in fieldwork was more limited in time and scope than agreed. A limited amount of data optimally processed. More attention paid to social-scientific literature on ... and ... life would have enriched the study.

ID 47 (Anthropology)

Respondent 1. A decent study: Good research, but its relation to theoretical debates remains but casual. [...]was at the time irritated by some (alleged) racist remarks in the manuscript. Later on among ... a flood of rumour spread [...]about the low quality of the dissertation. That caused ... displeasure so I interfered. [...] has done ... best to fight those rumours. It was certainly no dissertation below standard (as [...] has also confirmed in writing).

Respondent 2. One of the poorest doctoral dissertations I have ever supervised. Fieldwork material was barely sufficient, which was disappointing because I took effort to visit him in the field and discuss quite thoroughly [...] strategy of material collecting. The state of factual data on which X based X's work was quite poor and not informative enough about several dimensions of ...s' conduct which are but cursorily mentioned or even totally ignored. Analytical and theoretical aspects are also apparently poor. Insufficiently embedded in the after all rich literature on the subject. The whole product was just enough for a pass grade.

ID 136 (Political Sciences/Sociology)

Respondent 1. I have read N's PhD dissertation with great interest. I realise that as a commission member I am supposed to give a yes or no answer to the question if it is adequate for a PhD. It is difficult for me to refuse to give my approval because a large part of researched material seems interesting and in several points its treatment suggests some innovation. Yet for a number of reasons I cannot accept the manuscript, and *tant que tel* as an academic dissertation.

First of all I consider the first chapter inadequate as a theoretical basis for an analysis of differences in the access to political power which constitutes the focus of the study.

However, the author takes a stance towards essentialist and 'naturalistic' ideas about ... differences. In what follows X argues for a certain form of ... but fails to elaborate this notion and explain what effect that has on research strategy. ...Moreover, the first chapter lacks a description of (possible) differences in the construction of various minorities studied...Conclusions proposed on pages 22/23 seem to me not well grounded...

That is followed by a paragraph '...' and a paragraph about '...', yet without a systematic discussion and conceptual conclusions important for research.

In the second chapter ... the treatment of the ... - after all of crucial importance for the dissertation - is done on mere 3 (three) pages. Also the discussion of the '...' is very brief and superficial, certainly compared to the far-fetched conclusion built on this basis...

ID 91 (Non-western Sociology)

Respondent 1. A poor dissertation written by a candidate who turned out worse than initially expected. Laborious fieldwork that is quite solidly reported yet devoid of theoretical elaboration. Perhaps the candidate's relatively [difficult private situation] played a part in the processing and writing down of the collected material.

ID 195 (Political Sciences)

Respondent 1. Unfortunately I cannot give a positive evaluation of this thesis. In my opinion in such a form the manuscript may not be admitted to PhD defence, and the reasons are as follows:

1. The command of English is insufficient. I am no native speaker myself but still I have found a large number of small mistakes and unclear items. What is still worse – and I am unable to say whether that has to do with the fact that the writer writes in a language that is not [...] native – is that there are too many empty or unclear sentences in the manuscript, especially in the introduction. Three examples: ... Sometimes that leads to unclear reasoning, such as an opposition between 'direct' and 'collective' relations ... or a sudden appearance of 'social fragmentation' in the reasoning on p...., or qualifying ... with the two adjectives 'conservative' and 'progressive' used after each other on p....
2. Considering that style and content are mutually dependent, we face the following problem. In my view the writer fails to make clear what ... means to say in ...the dissertation. By quoting an impressive number of authors and leaving many often mutually opposed opinions next to each other – also because of what has been discussed above in point 1 – ... fails to make ... own position clear. Therefore ... reasoning remains often implicit and conclusions and concepts unrefined. This vagueness is to be seen in the title of the dissertation itself.
3. The manuscript presents in fact a general history of based on a number of other writers. The author's own research material is rather scant, and in fact only to be found in the last two chapters (and suddenly in note ... all interviewees are listed). For that reason the manuscript contains little genuine new information.
4. As a result, too little discussion of what the manuscript seems to promise, and too little insight into the responses of the ... labour movement. More than half of the manuscript is a quite general historical overview, while in the rest the workers' movement obtains hardly any 'profile'. I do not believe there is a single workers' leader mentioned or his or her ideas analysed. Also the relations between the 'old' labour movement and the 'new' ones such as the ... are given hardly any deeper thought.

I am very sorry to have to give such a negative evaluation. I do not know what follows in the procedure. For the moment I do not intend to write a letter to the dean yet. In any case I hope to have justified my opinion.

12 Theses on Theses

1. The present dissertation regime supports the Ph D students' individual intellectual development and promotes innovation in the discipline through their efforts;
2. It also ensures almost complete neglect of the end product, the thesis, and hardly prepares for a subsequent academic career;
3. Most dissertations take much too long to write and much too long to read. Ph D students ought to be more sparing with their own and their readers' time.
4. Four, five or more years of monomaniac devotion to a single project is too great a chunk of a young adult's life, and it is certainly unlikely to ever happen again later in life: most commissioned research allows a completion period of three months to two years at most.
5. The present dissertation regime conforms to national and international usage, but it can be reformed without transgressing these norms, while adapting even more closely the rules of the University of Amsterdam which expressly set a maximum of 80.000 words for Ph D theses. This may be the only regulation that is routinely disregarded.
6. Ph D students ought to spend their first year reading assigned course literature, surveying the relevant literature for their dissertation project and perfecting their research design.
7. The better part of the second year should be spent in the field, in the archives, interviewing respondents etc.
8. The third year should serve to write a clear, succinct and tightly organized dissertation of 200 pages (book print) at most.
9. The fourth and final year must then be reserved for writing one or two articles about the Ph D project for an international, widely read journal in the field and for drafting a research proposal. The latter two are as important and as instructive in preparing for a career as the dissertation itself.
10. Writing in a foreign language, English in most cases, is too easy: Just like making love to an inflatable doll, it always works. Only when using their own language, students realize all the pitfalls, ambiguities, and inadequacies of their efforts and realize what a stubborn craft writing is. In many cases – Dutch - Ph D students are better off writing the dissertation in their own language, and drafting their journal articles and research proposal in English.
11. Thesis eleven: theses must have theses. The abolition of 'stellingen' by the University must itself be abolished.
12. Rather than forever asking researchers to list their publications, the more and the longer, the better (WHY?), every once in a while we ought to pose another question: 'What did you invent, what did you discover, these past few months?'

Abram de Swaan, (staff seminar) 19 November, 2001

Further Musings on Theses

From the beginning, the ASSR promised to accept any topic that candidates would propose, as long as it concerned social science and there was someone in the School who could say something sensible about it. 'No matter what you come up with...' we boasted. At the time we believed that this would attract more gifted candidates than a program with set thesis subjects, and that it would stimulate scientific innovation.

It is hard to tell whether we were right, but there is a comparison with our main rival, the ICS in Utrecht/Groningen, which does indeed predefine subjects within a fixed rational choice ('methodological' or 'structural individualism') program. Their Ph.D. Students more often complete their theses within the required period of four years, their work more neatly fits the institutional paradigm and answers questions raised by it. I find the theses of low quality when it comes to originality, scope, depth, relevance and style.

There is also the experience at the ASSR of group projects with predefined research topics, e.g. the 'mutuals project.' (E. Bähre, A. Bijnaar, A. Kane, H. Lont, P. Smets, supervised by M. van der Linden and AdS) Since students still could choose their preferred country for fieldwork there was a considerable degree of freedom. Group work improved the quality of supervision, it stimulated students to keep on track and on schedule, it did not do much to invite collaboration. It seems to me that, on average, the quality of the theses was about the same as in the rest of the School. Most importantly, there were a few clear and flexible guidelines that allowed to make comparisons between countries, which much contributed to the interest of the individual dissertations, and there was a central hypothesis that was supported by the research findings (the main motivation to participate in mutuals is to find 'social constraints toward self constraint': they function as a kind of 'spenders anonymous'). A rival hypothesis (C. Geertz: that mutuals are a transitional phenomenon, bound to disappear with full monetarization and a finely-branched, low threshold banking system) was rejected. Finally, the hope that these mutuals would prove a good vehicle for micro finance initiatives was not confirmed. These and other findings will be reported in an edited volume with contributions of all Ph D students to appear in English. It is in that collective volume that this comparative project will show its full merit.

The great majority of dissertations written at the ASSR are individual projects, proposed by the candidates and modified in the supervision process. Most of them are lively, competent and contain interesting observations. But everything is interesting.. All of them discuss 'the relevant literature' in the first of second chapter. But very few state their assumptions and hypothesis at the outset and then go on to criticize and test them. That is why they often lack scientific relevance.

Why should that be?

In the first place, many students believe that there are no longer any 'grand narratives', and therefore broad generalizations are impossible. As a result, they come to see themselves as story tellers, an art for which they are usually ill-equipped, especially in a foreign language. Most of these beliefs are plain misunderstandings that ought to be clarified by the teachers at the ASSR.

Secondly, the staff of the ASSR should make more of an effort to state their theoretical positions and to propose explicit hypotheses that are both relevant and promising for empirical tests. When it comes to issues of theory and method, many staff members prefer to remain non-committal and that quality is reflected in the students' work.

The staff members should also try harder to collaborate in small programmatic research groups (Zsuzsa Ferge in her 'notes to HS' has important things to say on this subject). Supervisors will find that this will much increase their intellectual involvement with

their students, now that they work together on common problems. Students will profit from this increased commitment. Of course, there should remain positions for individual projects, and of course the group projects should leave ample room for the Ph.D. students to blaze a trail of their own.

PS. Three points for discussion, if time allows it.

1. Are Ph.D. Students indeed in the vanguard of scientific innovation, as they are said to be in the natural sciences, or do they lack the knowledge and insight to come up with something worthwhile and new, and are the postdocs the true pioneers of social science? The answer is important to find the optimal degree of freedom in the School's program.
2. An efficient solution to the problem of supervising a vast variety of freely chosen Ph.D. topics by a staff of finite competence is the 'grandparental' supervision system: An experienced (but rather ignorant) supervisor collaborating with a junior 'co-supervisor' who is highly knowledgeable about the topic at hand.
3. Finally, the School has had a very hard time getting funded for projects in its style of research, which for the great majority of projects is 'ethnographic'. This is an ongoing scandal. The School might improve its chances by presenting its methodology more explicitly and seeking a more suitable forum for its grant requests. At present most grants (except in anthropology, where the situation is better) are turned down by a coalition of economists and rational choice sociologists.

Abram de Swaan, (IAB meeting) June 6, 2003