



## **Dutch Business in the 20th Century: The BINT-project**

In 2002, in the Netherlands a national research program has been started: Dutch business in the 20<sup>th</sup> century ('Bedrijfsgechiedenis in Nederland in de Twintigste Eeuw' or BINT). The program is an initiative of the Business History Research Group of Utrecht University and its Research Institute for History and Culture (OGC). The Netherlands Economic History Archive (NEHA), the Erasmus University Rotterdam and the Foundation for the History of Technology are also participating.

The BINT-project has the competitiveness and changing characteristics of the Dutch business system during the twentieth century as its main focus. We will first explain the broader context of the research programme to highlight its particular relevance, then the programme itself and lastly the three projects that together make up the programme.

### **Central problem, purpose and relevance**

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Dutch business system is undergoing important institutional changes as a consequence of globalisation, European integration, technological innovations and market changes, including privatisation and volatile consumer preferences. During a large part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Dutch business system could be typified as 'neo-corporatist', with a close and constructive relationship between state and business, cartel-agreements, conflict avoidance in labour relations, a consensus-seeking business culture and protective corporate governance structures. At present this neo-corporatist business system seems to be moving in the direction of the Anglo-Saxon model, characterised by shareholder capitalism, easy hire-and-fire rules, and a preference for lower taxation and smaller government. Such a far reaching change demands reflection, all the more as the achievements of Dutch business have been impressive during the past century and therefore do not necessarily give rise to radical changes.

In our research project we are particularly interested in the national characteristics of business systems, their economic success and their changes over time. The relation between business systems on the one hand and competitive effectiveness and economic success on the other is complex and needs further understanding. Historians, particularly business historians, can and should contribute to the present discussion among social scientists about where the Dutch business system is heading in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by analysing long term changes in the system and their effects on the competitiveness of the Netherlands.

### **Themes**

To this end the business history group of the OGC has taken the initiative to create a large research project to analyse the development of Dutch business during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The goal is to make an in-depth analysis of the most important elements of the Dutch business system and their adaptation over time to the major economic,

social and technological developments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The analysis will be internationally comparative because only in this way can the typical Dutch characteristics be highlighted. The analysis will be informed by relevant social theories, particularly, though not exclusively, drawn from institutional economics. Six themes have been identified:

1. Entrepreneurs and the rise of the managerial company
2. Labour relations and business culture
3. Mergers and take-overs: Concentration processes in business
4. Internationalisation: The Netherlands as host and home for multinational companies
5. Financing and corporate governance
6. Business and government
7. Innovation

### **Collaborations**

Our aim is to seek close collaboration with business historians from other universities as well as with other social scientists. At this moment the Erasmus University, IISG and Neha are already involved. With the research group from Eindhoven University studying the History of Technology in the Netherlands in the 20th century, collaboration is under way, particularly with respect to innovation. The format of a large research project has been chosen to bring Dutch business history into the forefront of international scholarship. At the moment, business history is a thriving field in the Netherlands as elsewhere, but it has to rely largely on outside funding through the writing of the commissioned histories. Scholarly company histories are contributing considerably to our knowledge of business life, particularly through the opening of archives. But the format of the company history has significant limitations with regard to the range of subjects explored and the application of social theories. Through a large project such as the one we now envisage, the results of many earlier research projects can be tied together and brought to a higher level by synthesising the developments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and by applying theoretical insights on the evolution of business systems and the sources of competitive advantage. At the same time we can begin to fill gaps through more systematic research.