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Erwin Dekker
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**JAN TINBERGEN (1903–1994) AND THE RISE
OF ECONOMIC EXPERTISE**

Jan Tinbergen was the first Nobel Prize Winner in Economics and one of the most influential economists of the 20th century. This book argues that his crucial contribution is his theory of economic policy and the legitimation of economic expertise in service of the state. It traces his youthful socialist ideals, which found political direction in the Plan-socialist movement of the 1930s, new economic models to combat the Great Depression. After World War II he was able to synthesize that work into a theory of economic policy which not only provided a lasting framework for economic policy around the world, but also secured a permanent place for economic experts close to government. The book then turns to an examination of his attempt to repeat this achievement in the development projects in the Global South and at the international level for the United Nations.

Erwin Dekker is Assistant Professor of Cultural Economics at Erasmus University Rotterdam. He is the author of *The Viennese Students of Civilization* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), which won the award for Best Book in Austrian Economics.

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ERWIN DEKKER

Erasmus University Rotterdam



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*Ja, mach nur einen Plan
Sei nur ein großes Licht!
Und mach dann noch'nen zweiten Plan
Geh'n tun sie beide nicht.
Denn für dieses Leben
Ist der Mensch nicht schlau genug,
Doch sein höhres Streben
Ist ein schöner Zug.*

—Bertolt Brecht

No act of man can claim to be more than an attempt, not even science.

—Karl Barth

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[More Information](#)

Contents

<i>List of Figures/Tables</i>	<i>page xi</i>
<i>Preface</i>	xv
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xix

PART I BECOMING AN ECONOMIC EXPERT

1	The Construction of Peace	3
1.1	High Hopes	3
1.2	Naïve Utopianism	6
1.3	Tinbergen's The Hague	8
1.4	The Organization of Peace and Economic Prosperity	11
2	A Progressive Education	17
2.1	The Tinbergen Household	17
2.2	Luuk and Niko	23
2.3	Growing Up	28
3	The Bourgeois Socialist	33
3.1	In between Classes	33
3.2	The Social-Democratic Student Club of Leiden	37
3.3	The AJC in Leiden	44
3.4	Pacifism	52
4	From Ehrenfest to the Econometric Society	60
4.1	The Socrates of Leiden	62
4.2	The Essential Problems in Science	67
4.3	A PhD in Physics, and a Start in Economics	70
4.4	Useful Education and Science	77
4.5	The Econometric Society in Leiden	84

5	Hendrik de Man and Jan Tinbergen	94
5.1	Hendrik de Man and Cultural Socialism	97
5.2	From Cultural Socialism to the Plan Movement	104
5.3	What Planning?	107
5.4	The Plans of Labor	112
5.5	Socialist Goals, Fascist Means?	118
6	Macro-dynamics and the Problem of Unemployment	125
6.1	Unemployment and Rationalization	126
6.2	Dynamic Steps	131
6.3	Smoothing Dynamics	135
6.4	A Model of the Dutch Economy	141
6.5	Tinbergen's Scientific and Econometric Vision	150
7	The Rise of the People's Party (<i>Volkspartei</i>) and the Economics of the General Interest	155
PART II THE YEARS OF HIGH EXPERTISE		
8	From The Hague to Geneva: The World Order of the League of Nations	163
8.1	International Intelligence	166
8.2	The First Volume of Tinbergen's Study	172
8.3	The Second Volume of Tinbergen's Study	176
8.4	Tinbergen or Tinbergen, Polak, Koopmans, Loveday, Robertson, and Frisch	181
8.5	A Third Volume on International Economic Order?	187
9	Fascism at Home	192
9.1	Wartime	192
9.2	Fascism on the Rise	204
9.3	The War and the Breakthrough Movement	210
9.4	The Reconstruction Years	216
10	Tinbergen's Theory of Economic Policymaking	222
10.1	Economic Dynamics without Policy	224
10.2	Not Prediction, Task-Setting	227
10.3	The Theory of Economic Policy	234
10.4	Who Does the Planning? Centralization and Decentralization	243
11	The Expert <i>in</i> the Model, the Economist <i>outside</i> the Model	249

Contents

ix

PART III GLOBAL EXPERTISE

12	Opening up Vistas: India and the World	261
12.1	Stuck at Home?	262
12.2	To India?	267
12.3	Imagining the World Economy	273
12.4	Imagining World Development	276
13	Development Planning on Paper	287
13.1	Procedural Excellence	289
13.2	Shaping the World Economy	294
13.3	Planning in Space and Time	300
13.4	Development Economics without Culture and Morality?	306
14	Development Planning on the Ground: Tinbergen in Turkey	309
14.1	The Prehistory	309
14.2	A Fresh Start	312
14.3	The Process of Planning	319
14.4	The Great Resignation	326
14.5	The Second Five-Year Plan and Tinbergen's Departure	330
15	Sometime the Twain Shall Meet: The Optimal Order	336
15.1	Coexistence	338
15.2	Socialism at Home	341
15.3	What Is Optimal about the Optimal Order?	347
15.4	Above the Parties, or, Head in the Clouds	352
16	Expertise Far from Home	363

PART IV THE LIMITS OF EXPERTISE

17	Measuring the Unmeasurable: Welfare and Justice	375
17.1	Ehrenfest's Intuition and Frisch's Explorations	377
17.2	Work Classification and Appropriate Wages	378
17.3	The Leiden Approach	386
17.4	Measuring Sustainability	389
17.5	Measurement and the Normative	390
18	Governing the Ungovernable: Can We Govern the Planet?	393
18.1	Planning for Peace and Prosperity	395
18.2	Hubris	399
18.3	Can We Manage the Earth?	406
18.4	Stability, Harmony, and Balance	409

19 Expert or Idealist?	414
19.1 Vision and Synthesis	415
19.2 The Wrong Nobel	417
19.3 Tinbergen and Expertise	425
<i>Bibliography</i>	431
<i>Index</i>	455

List of Figures/Tables

Figures

1.1 The Peace Palace under construction in The Hague, 1911.	<i>page 4</i>
1.2 Satirical postcard that suggested the Peace Palace was bankrupt, and could be repurposed as cinema. Interested bidders could address their letters to the Angel of Peace, C. (for Carnegie).	7
2.1 The parental home of Jan Tinbergen in the Bentinckstraat, The Hague.	18
2.2 Tinbergen was taught drawing from his father. He proudly noted that this tram was drawn from memory.	25
2.3 Wedding picture of Jan and Tine with Jan's parents on the left, and Tine's parents on the right, 1929.	29
3.1 Celebration of Pentecost at an AJC camp, 1924.	47
3.2 Jan on the left sitting in his AJC clothes in the fields near Ermelo, 1928.	49
3.3 Tine and Jan visiting Jo and Emilien, friends from the AJC in Rotterdam, ca. 1926.	52
4.1 Paul Ehrenfest performing a classroom experiment, with his students including Tinbergen, Sam Goudsmit, and Eliza Wiersma in attendance, ca. 1924.	63
4.2 Paul Ehrenfest (with glasses) surrounded by his students. From left to right: Gerhard Heinrich Dieke, Samuel Goudsmit, Jan Tinbergen, Ralph Kronig, and fellow physicist Enrico Fermi, ca. 1924.	66

- 4.3 An industrial barometer produced at the CBS in 1939, modeled after the Havard barometer of the 1920s. The lines track industrial production, employment, usage of inputs, and the import of inputs and machines. 74
- 4.4 An early picture of the team at the CBS, on the right Jan Tinbergen, next to him M. Eisma and A. L. G. H. Rombouts, man on the left unidentified, ca. 1929. 80
- 5.1 Election poster of the Belgian Socialist Party of Hendrik de Man from 1935: “He created 125,000 jobs for the unemployed.” 113
- 5.2 Recreated from A brochure from 1936 elaborating the new political and economic order proposed by the Dutch Plan of Labor. (Adapted and translated by author) 117
- 5.3 Iconic poster created by Harm Visser for the campaign surrounding the Dutch Plan of Labor, 1936. 119
- 6.1 This circular-flow diagram from 1935 was the visual complement to Tinbergen’s first mathematical set of equations representing an economic system. The letters (L, L'_A , etc.) refer to those used in the system of equations (adapted and translated by author). 142
- 6.2 Diagram with the expected employment effects of various policy measures to combat the Great Depression, from Tinbergen’s pre-advice from 1936. T, devaluation of the guilder; S, wage cut; PR, Plan of Labor without devaluation; P, public works; R' , organization of industry; Q, protection; R, rationalization. This version can be found in his *Collected Papers* (1959). 147
- 6.3 Group picture at the CBS on the occasion of Tinbergen’s departure for Geneva in 1936. Standing, left to right: A. L. G. M. Rombouts, P. de Wolff, J. B. D. Derksen, B. van der Meer, M. Eisma, and K. S. Struik. Seated, left to right: M. J. de Bosch Kemper, Tinbergen, and J. C. Witteveen. 149
- 8.1 League of Nations building at the lake of Geneva, Switzerland, ca. 1940. 166
- 8.2 Jan and Tine with their daughters Tineke (standing) and Els (in her father’s arms) in Geneva, the family Groeneveld (on the left) was visiting, 1937. 172
- 8.3 Tinbergen in his office at the League of Nations which he shared with Koos Polak, 1937. 184

<i>List of Figures/Tables</i>	xiii
9.1 Despite the outbreak of the war the family went on holiday in the summer of 1940. Jan with his daughter Tineke and his bicycle.	194
9.2 For a trip to the United Nations headquarters in New York in 1947 Tinbergen took the ship from Rotterdam, the Netherlands.	200
12.1 Group picture of professors at the NEH in 1958 in Maarsbergen, the Netherlands. Standing, from left to right: H. Drion, B. Pruijt, H. J. Witteveen, J. H. van Stuyvenberg, T. J. Bezemer. Sitting, from left to right: J. Wisselink, B. Schendstok, Tinbergen, Ch. Glasz, H. W. Lambers, N. E. H. van Esveld.	265
12.2 Overview of the costs and benefits of the Deltaplan intended to secure the Netherlands from future floods.	266
12.3 Group picture from his visit to India in 1954. From left to right: Oskar Lange, Mrs. Lange, Mrs. Podea, Paul Baran, Mrs. Galbraith, Titus Podea, Mrs. Bettelheim, Charles Bettelheim, Mrs. Mahalanobis, Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis, John Kenneth Galbraith, Jan Tinbergen, Mr. Links, and Margaret Engemann (identified as Mrs. Norbert Wiener).	272
12.4 Father Simon Jelsma during one of his Plein-speeches for international aid and justice in The Hague.	277
12.5 Iconic early poster from 1958 of the NOVIB: “2/3rds of the world is in need / the Netherlands could achieve something great / let your heart speak / support the campaign of the NOVIB.” The phrase “something great could be achieved” had in the past also been used to describe the achievements of the colonial government of the Netherlands in Indonesia.	286
14.1 Organizational chart of the SPO and its relation to the Turkish government. Adapted from Torun, 1967.	316
15.1 Gorbachev paid Tinbergen a personal visit at his home on the Haviklaan, The Hague, in May 1993.	359
18.1 Tinbergen at the presentation of the World Employment Plan in 1981. Left to right: Wim Kok (prime minister from 1994 to 2002), Joop den Uyl (prime minister from 1973 to 1977), Tinbergen, and Jan Pronk (a student of Tinbergen and influential politician for the Dutch Labor Party).	396

18.2	Tinbergen kicking in a tariff wall, late 1970s.	398
18.3	Tinbergen in conversation with the next generation about the third millennium, early 1990s.	409
19.1	Jan Tinbergen receiving the first Nobel Prize in economics in 1969; behind him, his wife Tine is proudly observing the proceedings.	419
19.2	At the reception of the Erasmus Prize in 1967. Left to right: Prince Claus and Princess Beatrix (heir), Queen Juliana, Jan and Tine Tinbergen, Prince Bernhard (Juliana's husband), and Princess Margriet (third daughter of Juliana and Bernhard).	420

Tables

14.1	Overview of the targets and results of the first five-year plan in Turkey (adapted from Küçük, 1967)	325
17.1	Scoring table for the item knowledge from the report on work classification	380

Preface

Economists are, in our day and age, best known as policy experts. This book is about one of them, Jan Tinbergen. He paved the way for this new type of economist. The economic expert is a government functionary, who works in service of the economic and social goals of government. The rise of the economic expert was intimately connected with a change in what was considered the most valuable sort of economic knowledge. For the expert, an economy is not a natural system he studies as a physicist would, but a system that he can steer – and improve. The rise of expertise also gave birth to new types of institutions: business-cycle institutes, planning offices, forecasting bureaus, and international organizations of economic expertise.

Economists have, of course, always been concerned with policy. From (free) trade regimes, the best way to manage the currency, and the role of the state in the provision of public goods, policy questions have never been far from the minds of economists. But they typically did so in their roles as professors and public intellectuals. Economists since Adam Smith, and undoubtedly before him, have played an important role in shaping the thought of both politicians and the public about markets and trade, and the proper functions of the state. They often also had the ear of those in charge. The most famous economist of the past century, John Maynard Keynes, had the ear of the politicians in Britain of his age, and his ideas had influence across the world. And it is often recounted how important the ideas of Friedrich Hayek were for Margaret Thatcher, who carried his book in her hand bag. But the authority of both Keynes and Hayek was based on their personal standing, their personal reputation, not because of the techniques they mastered or their official government position. That is different for Tinbergen, who will not be remembered for his contributions to economic theory, proper. But he should be remembered for designing

the way that economic policy is done. Keynes and Hayek will be remembered for their economic ideas; Tinbergen should be remembered as the most important economic “bureaucrat” of the twentieth century.

That might sound boring: Who wants to read a book about a bureaucrat? Ideas have more charm, but ideas go in and out of fashion. What has remained far more stable since the middle of the twentieth century is the position of economic experts, and more generally the position of expertise in the modern state. If we want to understand this rise of the expert, we should be willing to look beyond the originators of economic ideas, and to economist experts and policymakers like Jan Tinbergen.

He in fact stands in a longer tradition: economists have more often worked quite directly for those in power. François Quesnay, one of the important economists before Adam Smith, worked at the Court of Louis XV. In Germany, there is a famous intellectual tradition in which economics is part of a broader field of knowledge known as *Kameralwissenschaften*. The *Kameralwissenschaften* were defined as those parts of science that were required to work at the court. Around 1900 that term had changed to *Staatswissenschaften*, but the idea remained similar: the knowledge relevant to govern the state. It is in this tradition that Tinbergen worked. From his earliest work on business-cycle statistics to his work on econometric models, and then on development planning, he was concerned with questions of governance. One of his later books was called *Can We Govern the Planet?*, a question with a philosophical connotation, but for Tinbergen it was a question about governance. Can we design our global governance institutions so that those in power can *govern* the planet and its climate?

If we are willing to look beyond the ideas, we discover that from central banks to the IMF, and from government advisory boards to antitrust agencies, economic experts are very prominent. Occasionally, the experts even come into power, then we call it a technocracy. But the ideal position of the expert is not on the throne, but right next to it. Not as visible to the public, and unlikely to be the subject of political controversy, but no less influential because of it. The proper position of the expert was in fact one of the major concerns of Tinbergen. He was active in the design of expert institutes on economic policy, and their proper position in relation to government, parliament, and the public. In his home country, the Netherlands, he quite literally created a position for the economic expert. But his aspirations were global, as was expressed in one of his most famous reports, *Reshaping the International Order*. Much of that reshaping was about creating better institutions for governance and an improved position for expertise at the international level.

Underlying Tinbergen's work on governance is a more fundamental, hopeful idea that we, as humans, can direct our own fate. He scoffed at the idea that we could predict the future using economic forecasting tools. We had to take the reins and direct the economy in the desired direction. Planning, for him, above all else, meant setting goals and finding rational means to reach those goals. The Dutch and German languages have a beautiful word to describe that perspective, *Machbarkeit* or *Maakbaarheid*: the ability to construct or shape the social world. Modern economic expertise is built on this foundational belief, that with rational policy instruments we can achieve our goals. It was Tinbergen who gave us the language of policy instruments and targets.

Perhaps the most surprising part of the story of Jan Tinbergen is that these goals were pursued by one of the greatest idealists the economics profession has ever known. He was a pacifist, an internationalist socialist, co-founder of Novib (later part of OXFAM-Novib), lifelong party member, and admirer of Gandhi, who until late in life addressed his friends as "comrade" (*partijgenoot*). His work in service of many national governments around the world, and international organizations like the League of Nations and the United Nations, had to lead to serious tensions, and it did.

A biographical approach has the virtue of making us aware of the contingencies and failed ambitions. Tinbergen's own ideals extended far beyond the foundation of economic expertise, to economic justice, global equality, and most of all social peace. His religious background and socialist youth instilled an appreciation for culture in him and made him suspicious of materialism, a curiosity for an economist pursuing growth goals in much of his work. He grew up in The Hague not far from the Peace Palace and from a young age was a pacifist, but his economic work for governments brought him in contact with General de Gaulle (France), General Franco (Spain), and the German occupiers during WWII; in Turkey and Indonesia, he even secured his advisory position in the aftermath of a military coup. At other times, science could not quite deliver what he hoped for. His lifelong search for the definition and measurement of economic justice never succeeded. His famous models never brought the certainty and rigor that he sought but were successful pragmatic tools. This book is about the deep tensions between the three elements that made up Tinbergen's life: the pursuit of scientific economics, the transformation of economic knowledge into expertise to improve governance both nationally and internationally, and his pursuit of social and global peace.

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Only a few months after I started my research into Jan Tinbergen, I joined a wonderful course by Hans Renders at his Biography Institute in Groningen, whose guidance helped me in connecting person and work. My own approach has been the other way around, to connect the work of Tinbergen to his personal beliefs, ideals, and lifestyle. Economics is a discipline about human beings by human beings, “humanomics,” as Deirdre McCloskey never tires of stressing. I see this biography as a contribution to that project.

The conversations with Tinbergen’s daughter Els Barendrecht and her late husband Maurits revealed much about him as a family man. I will never forget the warmth with which Hanneke and Els touched the bust of Tinbergen when it was revealed at the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of his Nobel Prize in Economics. They could touch his hair, once more. I hope this book reveals a bit more about what their father was doing when he was away from home. Wilfred van Peski inspired and connected. Caecilia van Peski encouraged and intrigued. Peter Cornelisse, one of his more critical *and* loyal students, was an amazing support throughout the process. His patience and trust generated insight and gave me the courage to develop a more critical perspective.

Marcel Boumans, Roger Backhouse, and Mary Morgan formed the dream team of historians of economics who oversaw the project from a distance. They corrected me where needed, but most of all encouraged me to write my own story about Tinbergen, however different that would be from theirs. Marcel, to my surprise, endorsed the epigraph of Bertolt Brecht. Arjo Klamer’s official role as supervisor is over, but he was still close, and his influence is visible throughout. Jack Vromen, Conrad Heilmann, and the other colleagues at EIPE provided a stimulating and hospitable academic home and have already ensured that the Tinbergen project will continue.

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Pete Boettke had the wisdom to advise me to take up the project, even when it meant less time for Austrian economics. But I am sure he will find many unexpected connections in this book. Stefan Kolev was there all along as friend. Our endless conversations about ordo-liberalism and thinking-in-orders shaped this book and my interpretation of Tinbergen. Not econometrics, but economic order is Tinbergen's major field. Because of him, Max Weber is in the final paragraph. Pavel Kuchař, Carolina Dalla Chiesa, Blaž Remic, and Julien Gradoz made sure I also kept writing, and talking, about things other than Tinbergen. That was important.

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Tinbergen's former students were invariably helpful in providing help and sharing stories. Jasper Lukkezen made sure that Tinbergen's legacy would be passed on to the next generation of Dutch economists. His efforts and the Tinbergen events at the SER, CPB, the Dutch Central Bank, and the Ministry of Economic Affairs demonstrated to me what parts of his legacy were still alive, and which parts were in need of renewed attention. My work was greatly helped by the near-complete bibliography that Kees van Opijnen and Jacob Kol prepared in 2003. Pieter van Leeuwen provided the best access possible, under the circumstances, to Tinbergen's archives.

The community of historians of economics and science was a kind and helpful audience for the many, many draft chapters I presented. There are too many to name them all, but I must mention some: Ariane Dupont-Kieffer, Juan Acosta, Erich Pinzón-Fuchs, Hans-Michael Trautwein, Kevin Hoover, Beatrice Cherrier, Andrej Svorenčik, James Morrison, Quinn Slobodian, Henk Don, Bert Tieben, Raphaël Fèvre, and Harald Hagemann. Harro Maas dared to ask for more, when that was most needed.

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xxi

But this book was made possible, first and foremost, by the support and sacrifice of those closest to me. Katinka recognized my passion and made space for it. Eline is now taking over her role in making sure daddy spends enough time away from work. Madee is already showing signs of my absentmindedness, or, should we say, “concentration.” Harm passed away, but we will make sure the book will be added to his library. Ruben joined the family right in the middle of the writing process. They will forever be connected to it.

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