Economiseren als probleem
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Summary

The economisation of the world

This book investigates several remarkable developments that have occurred in the Netherlands since the early 1980s, such as the popularity of economic metaphors, the growing interest of non-profit organisations in business methods, the sponsoring of the arts, the increased attention politicians are paying to the market philosophy, and the rise of economists and managers. All these developments can be summarised under the heading of 'economisation'. This study investigates the nature and dynamics of the phenomenon of economisation.

The media have paid considerable attention to the process of economisation and it has even been the subject of several books. The various interpretations of this process may be grouped into three categories: the growth of managerialism, the rise of the market, and the diffusion of neo-liberalism. Each of these three interpretations may shed light on the developments in the eighties and nineties, but the disadvantage is that their analysis is too narrowly based on one perspective. Therefore, the present study attempts to combine the various elements of these interpretations into a coherent analysis of the diverse and complex process of economisation.

The heterogeneous elements are linked by a theory of rationalisation, which goes back to an old philosophical tradition that attempted to understand the times in which we live from a broad socio-theoretical perspective. The account presented here expands on the ideas of several classic sociological thinkers, such as Georg Simmel and Max Weber, who described rationalisation as a cluster of processes. Within their diagnoses of society, the analytical core concepts were 'modernisation' and 'rationalisation'. In this book, economisation is defined as a variant of modern rationalisation.

Rationalisation: dream and doom

Following classic thinkers such as Simmel and Weber, this book distinguishes three aspects of modern rationalisation: growth of knowledge (an increase in the body of knowledge), functional differentiation (the division of society into relatively autonomous subsystems), and social progress (the creation of more wealth and well-being and the increase in opportunities for human action). However, these authors did not regard the phenomenon of rationalisation as unproblematic; they also had an eye for its drawbacks. Simmel, for example, pointed to loss of character, while Weber discussed loss of freedom and the growing problem of value pluralism. The present study also presents a critical analysis of rationalisation. It is not only a
blessing for humanity; it also has its shadow sides. For this reason, the aspects of modern rationalisation are translated into problem contexts.

The first problem context concerns the knowledge society in which religion and ideology have had to make way for more rational forms of knowledge. However, although knowledge is an important constituent factor in our society, it is also constantly under pressure. The body of knowledge that we use for the benefit of our actions is constantly changing. The second problem context, integration/differentiation, refers to the institutional dynamics of modern society. Because of the clustering and spreading of social activities across different subsystems of society, choices are increasing. At the same time, it appears extremely difficult to reach a balance between the systems; systems such as science, the state, and the market frequently threaten to develop into dominant systems. The third problem context, social change, shows that the promises of modernity — social progress and the improvement of the human condition — often remain unfulfilled. Rationalisation is accompanied by a continuous tension between freedom and discipline; it is a source of both opportunities and constraints.

Therefore, constant efforts are made to overcome the problems posed by rationalisation. The discourse theory enables us to investigate these attempts systematically. Four modern discourses (the cultural, the juridical, the political, and the economic discourse) can be distinguished. Each of these discourses attempts to provide a coherent solution to the three problem contexts. Each has its own perspective on the knowledge required, on the way in which the demarcations and interactions between the various institutional domains should be organised, and on the way in which social progress should be realised. As a result, each has its own instruments with which social order may be regulated. In short, the four discourses represent four variants of rationalisation: culturalisation, juridicalisation, politicisation, and economisation. Hence, economisation can be defined as the advance of the economic discourse. By distinguishing between several variants of modern rationalisation, it can be shown that economisation constitutes a change of emphasis within the project of modernity. Because of the often disparate solutions offered by the various discourses, a model emerges of conflicting rationalities that enable a critical analysis of economisation.

**Tilburg: the city as a concern**

In the middle of the 1980s, the municipality of Tilburg instituted a far-reaching reorganisation, in which the old model of a town clerk’s office was replaced by a concern-division model. This new organisational structure was later dubbed *The Tilburg Model*. The Tilburg Model involves the use of methods and tools derived from the business world and ideas from the theory of modern management within a public organisation. Among other things, the process of economisation in Tilburg was a reaction to earlier processes of juridicalisation and politicisation. The municipal organisation was regarded as having become too bureaucratic and local politicians as being insufficiently decisive.

The empirical material gathered in this first case study led me to formulate six characteristics of the economic discourse being formulated. These characteristics can be arranged into three pairs that, to a greater or lesser extent, refer to each of the
three problem contexts. The two characteristics of managerial approach and quantification refer to developments around the knowledge society. Public officials and scientists imitating the corporate culture (an entrepreneurial attitude) and market-oriented activities point to institutional changes in modern society. The fixation on productivity and the emphasis on steering at a distance indicate that, nowadays, social change is based on different ideals concerning progress.

These developments should not be interpreted as the retreat of public administration. The four discourses — cultural, juridical, political, and economic — lead to four different forms of public administration. Each discourse has its own ideas about the legitimacy of government intervention, the tasks of government, the role of politics, and the instruments that may be used to intervene in social processes. Although The Tilburg Model is based on a knowledge-intensive approach, the developments in Tilburg should not be regarded as an increased use of knowledge in general but as the emergence of a specific variant of the knowledge society, a variant whose vocabulary has a strongly economic flavour.

Twente: the entrepreneurial university

In the early 1960s, the University of Twente (then Technische Hogeschool Twente — a Polytechnic) started out as a campus university. The Drienerlo estate near Enschede offered good opportunities for creating a lively academic community pleasantly isolated from the rest of society. Some thirty years later, an about-face seems to have taken place in Twente. Today, the University of Twente (UT) promotes itself with the slogan the entrepreneurial university. It wholeheartedly embraces the dynamics of its environment nowadays: people from outside the university regularly visit the UT, and a science park with all kinds of small businesses has been established in the vicinity. At present, most of the students and staff no longer live on campus and the university is no longer run on the basis of the ideal of an autonomous scientific community. A large part of its funds is currently acquired through contract research and contract teaching. In addition, the university uses marketing and management techniques extensively to manage its affairs.

Despite these remarkable changes, the UT’s history may also be characterised in terms of continuity. From the onset, a mixture of discourses has been used in Twente, although there have been periods in which a particular discourse was paramount. The entrepreneurial university is also the result of several discourses. The modernisation model allows us to explain this continuity more thoroughly. The entrepreneurial university should be regarded as the most recent variant of the modern university, the precursors of which were the classical university (based on the cultural discourse) and the critical university (based on the political discourse). It has thus continued to satisfy the demand for social relevance that emerged in the seventies, which, in turn, was a consequence of the rise of the political discourse. The rise of the entrepreneurial university created a new configuration of science and society. As part of its being oriented towards society, the university is increasingly concentrating on its economic role, while its desire for autonomy is mainly directed at increasing its independence vis-à-vis politics and the government.

Both case studies show that the economic discourse embodies a specific idea about the way in which an organisation should be run. Although Tilburg and Twente
are both attempting to strengthen their management, they are also going about this in a subtle manner, because they realise that not all processes can be managed well from the top down. This explains their choice for ‘steering at a distance’. Steering at a distance is not a conspicuous or all-embracing means of exerting power. Rather, it hides behind the exchange of information. Through information, administrators try to exert influence; through information, the city and university executives are trying to bring about certain effects elsewhere, despite the fact that they have no direct presence there. Knowledge is employed to co-ordinate thought and action. Here, knowledge does not have the neutral connotation of knowledge about oneself or the world, but the normative connotation of ‘disciplining’ knowledge: knowing what to do. In an economic discourse, the emphasis is not on knowledge per se but on economic knowledge. To guarantee that the knowledge possessed by one party is the same as that of another party, standardised information is used.

To get everyone in line, key metaphors also come in handy. Within the University of Twente, the ‘entrepreneurial’ metaphor is usually employed to ensure that a heterogeneous group is prepared to make a concerted effort to further the development of the university’s mission. To achieve this, the concept of ‘entrepreneurial’ should be flexible enough to incorporate several definitions. However, this also means that it will allow actors to attribute their own meanings or interpretations to it. The Twente Student Union, for example, talks about ‘social enterprise’, in the sense of wanting to contribute to social developments. Even dominant discourses are not all-powerful: actors in various social worlds try to convert or translate the economic discourse in ways that suit their own situations or preferences.

The dynamics of the economic discourse

The wide scope of the discourse theory provides an opportunity for relating a variety of recent developments to each other. The economic discourse is currently used in situations where it used to be regarded as inappropriate. The dominant discourse functions as a social binding agent: to some extent, it symbolises the prevailing trends in our thinking and attitudes. A discourse is a mixture of epistemic, social, and normative elements that form a resonant heterogeneity. We also notice this in Twente: the entrepreneurial university has a certain amount of coherence but does not constitute a strict totality. Discourses possess interpretative flexibility, which means that the advancing discourse does not operate in the same way in every situation. Because of this interpretative flexibility, discourses are not linked to a specific system or institutional practice. The economic discourse is not exclusively used in the market; as we have seen, it is capable of fulfilling a prominent role within both a municipal and a university organisation. Thus economisation should not be regarded as a retreat of public administration or as detrimental to the university, but as the emergence of different politics or different science. Politics and science are then each constructed from different sets of elements. Not only are the roles or tasks of politics and science in society not constant, but their characteristics and values also appear to be susceptible to change.

The discourse perspective allows us to demonstrate the ambiguity of economisation. The economic discourse only uses a limited concept of rationality,
which may be challenged by other discourses. Therefore, the rise of the economic discourse leads to an ambiguous outcome: it may both stimulate and reduce productivity and freedom. Likewise, economisation creates both threats and opportunities for existing institutions.

This book shows that the ideals of modernity — development of knowledge, a functionally oriented social order, and human progress — are still very much alive, although new ways of realising these ideals are constantly being developed. Through using a new vocabulary, people are trying to solve the problems of the old, which means it remains closely linked to the preceding vocabulary. Vehicles of the new discourse display a kind of borrowing behaviour, through which they try to learn from the positive and negative experiences with the preceding discourse. By pointing to the coherence between continuity and discontinuity, it may be shown that the process of politicisation still has an effect on the process of economisation. If we acknowledge this effect, we cannot interpret the developments of the last two decades of this century as the emergence of a new spirit of the age, as suggested by the term 'no-nonsense era'.

The expansion of a dominant discourse is accompanied by all kinds of problems, such as loss of clarity, trend hopping, reduced success, and the rise of new problems. These problems suggest that the expansion of the economic discourse will one day come to a halt. Recent developments in Tilburg and Twente underline this; after years in which the economic discourse was on the rise, a reversal seems at hand. Has the process of de-economisation already started? The book concludes with the speculation that the cultural discourse seems to be in the ascendant at present. However, we should not expect this discourse to gain a long-lasting dominance in the end, because the narrative of modernity is neither unequivocal nor easy. Neither should we expect a peaceful coexistence of discourses, because competition between various modes of speech should take place again and again if we are to continue to take seriously modernist values such as the development of knowledge, freedom, individuality, and progress.

(vertaling: Paul Hulsman, Talencentrum RuG)