

ON SCHOLARLY MISCONDUCT AND FRAUD, AND WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM IT

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This article deals with the scholarly misconduct committed by the former Amsterdam Free University (VU) cultural anthropologist, Professor Mart Bax, who received international acclaim during the last three decades of the twentieth century for his fieldwork and research in Ireland, the Netherlands, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and for applying his “theory” of competing religious regimes. Despite earlier suspicions, it was only a decade after his retirement in 2002 that a university commission reached the conclusion that more or less his whole oeuvre was built on quicksand: fraudulent, fake, or non-existent source material. The incredible and appalling Bax case is described and assessed here by a Dutch ethnologist who was confronted with Bax’s deception through his own work. This experience also raises questions about how to deal with what happened and what lessons can be learned from it.¹

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A Saint’s Revenge

It was during the summer of 1995 that I came across a reference to a Dutch pilgrimage site I had never heard of: Neerdonk. I was carrying out a long-term research project on pilgrimage culture and its sites in the Netherlands at the time (cf. Margry & Post 1998). As I was trying to chart the network of pilgrimage shrines in the southerly province of Noord-Brabant, this site resisted all my heuristic efforts. It was supposedly a monastery that was the destination of a pilgrimage to the Italian saint Gerard Majella, where the monks allegedly ritually humiliated this saint – the statue and his relics – on account of the personal revenge which he had taken on the local population for their presumed devotional “disloyalty” towards him. When the parishioners began to frequent a

modern, newly-built church around 1875, the saint soon caused it to go up in flames.

But the site in question, the village of Neerdonk, seemed impossible for me to trace. I knew I had to dig deep, as Professor Mart Bax’s (*1937; since 2002 emeritus) published inaugural lecture was the single source. He mentioned that he had had to use pseudonyms to protect his “key informants”, two friars of the monastery in question (Bax 1989: 5). Bax pronounced this lecture on 5 October 1989 upon accepting an endowed chair in “Political Anthropology, and in particular Religious Regimes and State Formation” (cf. Bax 1987, 1991) at the Free University (VU) of Amsterdam.² Anonymization is a common practice in cultural anthropology as there are cases and informants who require privacy. However, Bax

not only used pseudonyms, but also used invented names for most of the geographical places and other names he mentioned, while detailed data and references to explicit sources were conspicuous by their absence from the lecture. This surprised me, as this was a historical case study: why would privacy and concealment still be necessary for an event dating to the 1870s?

Of course, the best thing to do in situations like these is to ask the author himself. Bax was a renowned scholar of pilgrimage who had been working at the VU since 1965, and I had therefore already been in touch with him in relation to our pilgrimage project. Given that he was an international expert on the topic, the Meertens Institute had invited him to join the advisory board for this project. Surprisingly, he turned down the invitation. By way of a follow-up, I made an appointment with him in the hope of personally convincing him to join the project. This would also give me the opportunity to ask him in private about Neerdonk. It was the spring of 1996 at that point. I assumed that he would be willing to give me some clue or other as to the true identity of Neerdonk for the purposes of a scholarly project. However, referring to still “ongoing sensitive privacy issues”, he declared that he was unable to disclose the real name of the village. From that moment on, I became even more intrigued by this remaining unsolved case, while at the same time doubts started to grow.³ I decided then to try to get everything out into the open, as it was important for our project to place this covert sanctuary with its mass pilgrimage and its “culturally alien” ritual on the research map.

With the information contained in his lecture and my knowledge of pilgrimage culture, particularly of the province of Noord-Brabant, in hand, I assumed it would be possible to trace the place one way or another. After all, how many villages could there be where a *wooden* church was built as late as the 1870s, and which burned down shortly afterwards, and which was also the site of a mass pilgrimage? But my quest produced no results whatsoever, and as a consequence a shrine in Neerdonk did not appear in the project results (Margry & Caspers 1997–2000).

When in 2004, in the aftermath of the project, the publication of an additional index volume with recently discovered sites and a list of “rejected” or “disqualified” pilgrimage sites was scheduled, I had to decide whether to include Neerdonk or not. This seemed to be a final chance to sort things out. Nearly ten years after our encounter, I again wrote to Bax, now retired, for a last attempt to retrieve the village’s name. A few weeks later I received a typewritten letter in which he explained that he had travelled back to Noord-Brabant especially for the purpose of replying to my request, and had submitted it to the monastery. The friars had told him that his inaugural lecture which mentioned the case had “not been beneficial to the community” and still had detrimental effects. Nothing was to be revealed, even after nearly 150 years. Bax concluded his letter stating simply that he had to respect their position.⁴

I then approached colleague-historians from Noord-Brabant, just to check if they might have data I had overlooked, or if they had knowledge that could lead to the revelation of the mystery shrine. None of them did, and they were as puzzled as I was by the text of Bax’s inaugural lecture, which I sent them, previously unknown with this text of the anthropologist.⁵ A new close reading of Bax’s lecture, trying to make sense of all the muddled contextual information, further underlined that he had succeeded in applying an extremely high level of encryption. Almost none of the hard data given in names and dates could be brought into meaningful coherence, as there were practically no relevant footnotes with references to sources. Worryingly, one of the footnotes even mentioned that he had not done any research on the ritual practice himself, but that one of the friars had just carried out a “short” investigation in the archives (Bax 1989: 44).

What did become clear was that the lecture had to be regarded as a highly playful bricolage of names, geography, chronology, and events. For example, no devotional practice related to Saint Gerard Majella existed in the Netherlands before the twentieth century, although according to Bax it had begun in Neerdonk as far back as the seventeenth century. He also had Saint Willibrord († 739) meet Saint Gerard

(† 1755) at some point, despite the two being separated in time by a millennium, etc. The narrative of the humiliation ritual performed over centuries on the Neerdonk statue of Saint Gerard, bears all the characteristics of a purposely constructed story⁶ to support his appealing new perspective or theory on competing “religious regimes”: the opposition between the diocesan clergy and the regulars of the monastic order (cf. Bax 1988).⁷

The issue continued to rankle me, and in 2005 I decided to contact some of his former fellow anthropologists in Amsterdam, as some of them had initially read and commented on the draft text, as was acknowledged in his lecture. None of them was able to give me any solution either.

Visions in Medjugorje

In the meantime my scholarly interest had turned to the Marian shrine of Medjugorje in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which happened to be Bax’s pet research subject.⁸ This shrine supposedly provided a contemporary textbook example of his theory of opposing religious regimes. Most of his published articles address this case, brought together in edited form in his 1995 Medjugorje book. How was his research perceived and received in the region? In September 2006, I attended a conference in Celje (Slovenia) on the ethnology of religion, and I encountered colleagues from Croatia, whom I asked about Bax and Medjugorje. They quickly admitted to having doubts about the content, as many elements and “facts” simply could not be right. Despite the fact that Bax himself mentioned having done presumably long-term fieldwork over several years, they felt it looked like work written by someone who had never actually been there, or at least by someone without a sound knowledge of the history, language, and culture of the region, with all sorts of inconsistencies in language, names, dates and geographies. Then, in 2008, a very critical review of Bax’s Medjugorje book was published by Norbert Mappes-Niediek in the Austrian and German press, suggesting that a small “war” with many casualties in the Medjugorje area, which Bax had discovered and described, was an invention.⁹ This time I contacted Bosnian and

Croatian academics and asked for their opinion about his Medjugorje research. Responses pointing at significant “problems” with his Medjugorje work streamed in very soon afterwards.¹⁰

In one of the rare interviews that Mart Bax has given, he was very positive about his own research on Medjugorje, claiming that he was convinced that his book would ultimately help politicians, the military, and journalists to come to a new assessment of history and the peace process, because, he suggested, there were “many Medjugorje’s to be found” in the former Yugoslavia (Van den Boogaard 1995).¹¹ In hindsight, his interviewer’s amazement at how this timid and hesitant scholar could have done fieldwork among the warlords and local musclemen is not the only thing to strike the reader, as many of Bax’s statements have since acquired a completely different meaning.

In 2008, with the Balkan war and continuing ethnic tensions still fresh in their memories, Bosnian and Croatian colleagues started to qualify Bax’s work as “dangerous”, not just for the academic community but also “for inhabitants of Herzegovina and South-East Europe as a whole”.¹² Given Bax’s international fame and the possible ethnic tensions that might result from his “findings” of clan wars and (mass) murders, his work was considered liable to upset the delicate balance of ethnicities.¹³

At this point I knew enough. However, having been trained as a historian, and having worked since 1993 as a (European) ethnologist, I felt that I was not in a position to bring the work of an acknowledged cultural anthropologist into public disrepute. I therefore asked two of his former anthropology colleagues if they would join me in writing an article on the findings and on how to deal with verifiability and sources in scholarly work.¹⁴ Both replied that they indeed had their doubts about Bax’s work, but that they could not bring themselves to believe that he had committed fraud. Making the case public was also likely to cause collateral damage by hurting the university, its department of anthropology, and the field at large. They kept faith in the academic oath Bax had taken after his Ph.D. defence on 16 November 1973. What more could I do?¹⁵ I felt

sidelined. I decided to let the case rest and relegated my Bax file to a drawer.

Circumventing Reality

The file remained there untouched until 2012 when, by coincidence, I met a science journalist of the Dutch national newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*, who was working on a book about scientific fraud. He asked me if I had any knowledge of scholarly irregularities in my field. I handed over the file.

This journalist, Frank van Kolschooten, then published a book, entitled *Ontspoorde wetenschap* (Derailed science), which contained a chapter on Mart Bax and on what was then known about his research and about the Dutch inaugural lecture case (Van Kolschooten 2012: 190–202).¹⁶ It was immediately headlined in the papers as a shocking example of scholarly misconduct. Moreover, about six months later, another Dutch journalist, Richard de Boer, published a thorough article containing a troubling evaluation of Bax's work on Medjugorje. With his knowledge of Bosnian-Herzegovinian language and culture, De Boer critically reviewed Bax's work on Medjugorje, which proved to be an accumulation of fake facts and errors, with sources that did not exist or were simply made up (De Boer 2013a).¹⁷

At this point, the Free University (VU) could no longer ignore the case. On 22 July 2013 it set up a commission to investigate the two journalists' allegations.¹⁸ If misconduct were to be confirmed, it was also the commission's task to point out what the consequences would be for the research culture at the university and for anthropology as a discipline. Finally, it was asked to make suggestions about how to prevent repetition. The commission started with a thorough screening of Bax's academic work produced during his time at the VU. The commission's final report *Circumventing Reality*¹⁹ contains a devastating conclusion, implicitly qualifying Bax as one of the greatest frauds of Dutch academia, possibly second or equal to Diederik Stapel.²⁰

As a matter of coincidence, the report was soon followed by an article by the Herzegovinian historian Robert Jolić on Bax's work on Medjugorje (Jolić

2013). He could confirm that to a large extent "his data are false and fabricated" (Jolić 2013: 327).

All this headline news put the VU in a delicate position. What (legal) actions should it take? They could not fire Bax, as he had already retired in 2002. His doctoral thesis had not been part of the commission's investigation, as it was defended at the University of Amsterdam (and not the VU). Therefore, the VU could not rescind his doctorate, as some suggested it should do as a clear signal that academic standards and oaths should be maintained. The university board decided that the elderly Bax and his family had already been punished enough due to the media storm and the scholarly obloquy that had been heaped upon him.

Bax never reacted publicly nor apologized, and he never rectified anything. He did agree to talk to the VU commission of inquiry. As the reports states, he admitted during the interview that he may have been sloppy at some point or may have misinterpreted information. He also told the commission that he presented improbable stories as fact to make his work more accessible to readers. In a letter to a former colleague, in which he explained his *modus operandi*, Bax clarified that he had derived his working practice from the Catholic circles ("smart people") he was researching himself; they used the practice of "contaminating": "incorporating related details from an analogue context, thus creating an alternative whole, which, however, can only be partly empirically traced".²¹ Bax seemed to be convinced that there were still Catholic and scholarly conspiracies going on which only he could trace and analyse using his new research perspective and the borrowed practice of "contaminating". In this way, he thought he was capable of retrieving information that other researchers would not be able to find, as they – in his view – only worked through the traditional lens of the "priest-perspective". In his letter, he depicts himself as a vanguard scholar-warrior, misunderstood and always obstructed by colleagues in his research and in the publication of results. He believed his methods and his theory made him the only researcher who was able to deconstruct the hidden and cunning politics of Catholicism in

Ireland, the Netherlands, or Bosnia. While critics were beginning to accuse him of making things up, he professed that he had actually only been working for justice, and had done so truthfully.²² Therefore, according to his own logic, to remain successful, he had to conceal sources and the identity of informants, and he even had to destroy *all* his research materials immediately after publication. While authorities like the Yugoslavia Tribunal acknowledged his results and sought his expertise, Bax claims, he kept colleagues and university boards at a distance as he was afraid to lose his academic freedom. This turned him into a sort of scholarly enemy, and that was the price he had to pay, according to his exculpatory letter to his former colleague.²³

The concluding evaluation of his work by the VU commission amounted roughly to the following: of the 161 publications mentioned by Bax on his publications list, no fewer than 64 articles simply did not exist, the content of the rest was (in part) a fictional creation, and many articles were undisclosed copies of the same fiction, but using different names and situations (Baud, Legêne & Pels 2013). Not much of his scholarly work remained uncriticized by the commission.

A few years later, in 2019, there was again breaking news on Bax. As a follow-up on the report, the Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant* had decided to subject his Ph.D. thesis to scrutiny. This turned out, again, to contain a highly “contaminated” case, the anonymized town of Patrickville in Ireland. The confabulatory pattern in his research career seems to have begun at a very early date.²⁴ Despite having been awarded the *judicium of cum laude*, the 1973 dissertation also proved to be full of invented facts.²⁵ Reality was subservient to his theory; contradictory data was omitted so as to ensure that reality would fit his model. With this outcome a highly successful academic career was now fully deconstructed.

Lessons to be Learned in the Aftermath of a Scandal

When the misconduct storm had blown over, one of Bax’s former Ph.D. students emailed me saying she did not regret her decision to discontinue her doctoral

research and leave the “sect”, which is how the commission qualified the coterie around Bax, a research culture which systematically rejected outside influences (Baud, Legêne & Pels 2013: 43–44). It permitted Bax to exercise the anxious authority of the typical lone fieldworker who is trying to speak for a whole group of people based on his solitary and difficult experiences (Spencer 2002: 502). It was still difficult for her to accept the truth of the report. In hindsight, she thought that Bax at one point became a dogmatic believer in his own contamination philosophy and fake data. She recalls that in those years people very much looked up to him as he wrote so eloquently and was willing to undertake daring experiments, such as introducing fiction in academic work.²⁶ The students who did complete their Ph.D. under Bax’s supervision have not been affected very much, as they conducted their research independently. They did not have to depend on his data – in contrast with the Stapel case – as he simply did not have it, nor, thankfully, did he make his “data” available to them.

One of the reasons why Bax was able to transgress the rules of academia so flagrantly was the culture of the 1980s and 1990s, with its ideological battles among the faculty, which divided into hostile factions; phenomena which are not of course limited to anthropology. In this case, an additional “anthropological” handicap was perhaps the faculty’s research focus on the political and on conflicts, which possibly itself “invited” conflict as Vlasblom described the situation in hindsight (Vlasblom 2013).

Although this is seemingly a tragic case of one scholar, both academia in general and the discipline of cultural anthropology in particular – as well as the world at large – are nonetheless affected by it.²⁷ Ours is a world in which facts are increasingly being doubted, vested authorities are being undermined, scepticism about science flourishes, and fake news is presented as a new expression of truth.

Under these circumstances, headlines and breaking news about large-scale academic fraud are troubling events for the academic world.²⁸ It reinforces existing ideas cherished by populists and their following. The response must be that the self-reflexive and self-cleansing ability of academia must be

shown to the world. It must be demonstrated that, contrary to fake news and hoaxes, it is possible to stop the erosion of authority and keep academia highly alert to and reflexive on what is happening. Self-reflection and consistent ethics must be regarded as inherently important to scientific research (cf. Fluehr-Lobban 1998). Yet the effect of the work of scholars like George Marcus and James Clifford, of training in reflexive research, and of modern data management policies is generally still insufficient (Clifford & Marcus 1986).

Science implies a dialectical process of trial and error, with the possibility of repeatability and re-study. These latter aspects are less applicable to the humanities or the social sciences, but this means it is even more important in these disciplines to be able to point out when things are wrong, or to be cautious when there are strong doubts as to research results. The Bax case demonstrates that this is easier said than done and that practice is more unwieldy than theory.²⁹ It can be very difficult to believe that an internationally renowned scholar and colleague is not the person he says he is.

Against this backdrop, it was not exceptional that VU University acted only very late on the longstanding suspicions about Bax. Questions on misconduct can also be sidelined when someone's good name and reputation are at stake. In the initial phase of the investigation of the Bax case, I was hesitant and was warned by colleagues at the VU that there was resistance against doing anything and that it would be better not to look for a scandal.³⁰ In the end, however, the VU commission that was set up performed an important task by bringing most of the fraud to light, and by publishing its incisive and transparent report online in both Dutch and English. Nevertheless, these actions cannot outweigh the global reach of Bax's work, which has extended far and wide throughout academia over several decades. His work is profusely cited in the publications of anthropologists and of practitioners of adjoining disciplines, and it will take time before this stops, let alone before the impact exercised so far is undone.

One practical measure to limit the impact is to retract publications. *Ethnologia Europaea* now re-

tracted seven articles, and other journals have done the same for some of their own publications.³¹ Other voices have suggested that it is necessary to make a bolder statement by rescinding Bax's doctoral degree (De Boer 2013c). The University of Amsterdam decided in 2013 not to investigate his thesis and Ph.D. degree, but this stance may be subject to revision after the 2019 revelations on the content of his dissertation (De Boer 2019).

The Bax commission was also asked to formulate lessons that can be learned from the case and to draw up suggestions for the university to prevent future misconduct (Baud, Legêne & Pels 2013: 42–47). As a first result, the VU appointed independent confidential counsellors to whom suspicions of scholarly misconduct and integrity issues are to be reported, and also to avoid the self-protecting mechanism of departments or disciplines. It is such a person's (or commission's) task to create openness and alertness towards misconduct. The commission further pointed at the fact that the Dutch online publication registration system had in the meantime improved, making it difficult to register non-existing articles like Bax did extensively.

The peer-review system of course already existed during Bax's active work life (1965–2002), but in his case it failed: none of the reviewers (or editors) noticed the fake and duplicated articles under different titles that he submitted. Neither did evaluation and checks afterwards prove secure: even during the department's 2005 evaluation, Bax's articles were still completely overlooked. His self-plagiarism under different titles or with certain variations in the text also remained undetected at this stage.

The great pressure on output in academia, with frequent publishing required to achieve positions or project funding is to a certain extent also a perverse incentive. Bax already mentioned this pressure as an excuse for his own behaviour. One of the members of the commission warned that the present race for excellence and competition could again lead to similar behaviour (De Boer 2013b). This pressure also causes many publications with more or less comparable content to be produced and published by single authors. Articles that are very similar to each other

are published in more than one journal, possibly also in an edited volume, and may end up once again as a book chapter. This practice is quite common but it creates output which can partly be described as *over-publishing* in academia.³² Publishing copies of the same text or text-recycling is silly in an age in which most articles can be found online, and it produces a large number of redundant publications, which, even if they are not wholly similar, makes it difficult to establish the value of the publications in relation to one another (Horbach & Halfffman 2019: 500). The high incidence of recycling has been seen by some as an indication that the current reward system in science is reaching its limits (Horbach & Halfffman 2019: 501).

In 2014, one year after the Bax case erupted, the question was raised if this recycling should be called *self-plagiarism*, and to what extent it could be labelled as scholarly misconduct. The occasion was the news that sixty percent of the articles of one Dutch professor of spatial economics, a highly prolific author of articles, contained large text portions copied from previous articles written by him, sometimes with co-authors, without proper referencing.³³ The scholar in question was ultimately cleared of the allegation, but the necessity remains for the academic community to adopt guidelines: for unclear forms of self-citation and to monitor and control the undesirable present phenomenon of over-publishing.

Peer review is of course still the major instrument to control and evaluate the quality of publications, at least when it is done by capable persons, practiced in transparency, and not as an exercise in rubber stamping or as a service to friends within the academy. In any case, before entering the formal review process, it is advisable to have work discussed in a seminar or commented on by colleagues that can be trusted, also in the sense that they feel safe to critique the text and maybe pose uncomfortable questions.

One of the suggestions by the commission was to perform research in a more collective manner, in line with current European Union funding assumptions on collaboration and working in teams to enhance quality and control. Collective (European)

research projects over the past two decades have in fact reduced isolationistic and authoritarian behaviour, although their conditions do not necessarily enhance the scientific quality of the output, as the research or data collection itself is usually ultimately still executed on an individual basis. And the team system is likely to be less effective within disciplines that have an individualistic research culture – such as the humanities or anthropology. The EU's new General Data Protection Regulation now in fact complicates the keeping and sharing of data. Irony comes in here as the anthropological epistemology of private data, which enabled Bax's misconduct, actually fits with the new legal directives and ethical codes on data handling.

Openness and controllability have to be central issues in this context. Digital technologies currently give us possibilities to increase such control. Some researchers made their fieldwork and other data already directly accessible digitally, for new research or for verification purposes. One example: all of Janneke Verheijen's (UvA) anthropological Malawi field notes and data can be accessed in the digital version of her thesis.³⁴ This means that also informants involved in the research can have access to what the researcher is writing, and this can be an important feedback feature during or after research, as it gives them a possibility to react to notes taken by the researcher. It would be an important change in the anthropological tradition of private ownership of personally gathered fieldwork data. More open data management would then align with the ethnological tradition of archive building and working with data also collected by others in the field, and in this way contributing through fieldwork to an incrementally built public repository of knowledge.³⁵ Openness should however not lead to a situation where everyone is checking everything or where a researcher is drawn into discussions on earlier made statements of informants; the research process is in the first place to be seen as an exchange of experiences, strongly built upon mutual trust.

Scholarly organizations like SIEF and EASA have all quite recently drafted statements on how to deal with the data resulting from research.³⁶ The

recording of (fieldwork) data raises the delicate issue of anonymization or disguising places or situations, which is sometimes necessary for safety reasons or due to privacy laws or informants' demands (Sociaal-Wetenschappelijke Raad 2003). However, after informed consent is given, anonymization must preferably be kept at a low level, and when it is necessary, the keys to the real world must be kept, so that it is always possible to trace the data. In the post-Bax era, the Free University (VU) of Amsterdam has published extensive policies and regulations, also in particular for the social sciences.³⁷ With a newly drafted policy document it is about to compel its researchers to make their data available or traceable for possible verification. In 2018, also the Dutch Anthropological Association (ABV) published a code of ethics.³⁸

In any case, despite current rules and regulations one major diffuse phase will remain part of the whole research trajectory, particularly within ethnology and anthropology: fieldwork. This is the phase in which it is relatively easy to cheat. If every step is not recorded on video, it is almost impossible to check whether what in its interpretive mode is written down derives correctly from what was said or perceived by the senses on the fieldwork site. Moreover, what does the researcher choose not to write down or record, thus excluding it from the research and its underlying sources? What does the researcher choose not to see or perceive and what does he or she simply overlook? Trust in the researcher's quality and ethics thus continues to be a crucial factor at the basic level of fieldwork and data collection, of selecting and interpreting source material.³⁹

It remains to be seen, therefore, whether the various checks and balances will indeed work.⁴⁰ Misconduct cases have affected the integrity and reliability of the academic world. Nowadays, even the scholarly world is experiencing the erosion of authority, as has happened previously to the worlds of journalism and medicine. A leading Dutch newspaper consequently called for the establishment of a "truth commission" to clean up the practice of scholarship, but also to identify insights derived from fraud that other scholars have continued to build upon, and that are

therefore as unsound as the foundation that Bax laid.⁴¹ So far, this suggestion has not been put into practice.

The ethical standards of individual researchers must thus be further trained and informed. As they cannot be imposed, it still comes down to the extent to which researchers choose to apply them: it is a matter of trying to do the best possible, while applying the best skills. In my ethnology teaching, I always address the Bax case to make students aware of the difficulties, ethical issues, and dangers that come with research. Every year anew, students are shocked when they hear it: how could all of this happen at a modern university? We now know that the case emerged out of a context of years of infighting between different schools of anthropologists – for example on the use of fiction in research – and with hardly any control on output.⁴² More importantly, however, what was at stake was the solitary behaviour of an academic who at one point went off the rails.⁴³ His case is part of the (scholarly) culture of everyday life in which solitary excentrics also have their place. However, for the sake of academic trust and credibility, it is expedient to detect them at an early stage and to neutralize any risk of fraud.

Evaluation and Reflection

To end this story on a moral note: there is no scholar who is without a single scholarly "sin". Every scholar will sense once in a while: was my perception or interpretation of these words, facts, or phenomena fully correct? Was I as unbiased as I could have been in my interpretations and analysis? Did I see all the things relevant to my research and did I clarify what I did not consult? Did I leave something out which did not fit my theories? Can I justify my sources, have I cited correctly and sufficiently, or does this verge on plagiarism? Most researchers have in fact applied questionable research practices at least once in their careers....⁴⁴ Asking such self-reflexive questions is the right reaction, but they also express what is perhaps every scholar's deeply hidden fear – "are my claims correct?" – and every scholar's lingering nightmare of being unmasked as a fraud.⁴⁵ Due to Bax's idiosyncratic behaviour, his own nightmare came true.

This should not lead to paralysing stress about the research we did in the past or are currently undertaking. Nor must the Bax case turn us into highly suspicious scholars who spend their time investigating each other for possible academic misconduct. Instead, as professional academics, we should remain persistently critical, alert, and cautious. Scholarly work is a dialectical process which is about continuously improving knowledge: due to new data, new research methods, new interpretations, and new accountabilities in relation to new ways of handling and regulating data. That is part and parcel of our innovating academic world. But in our field – a humanistic, non-positivistic research environment – scientific laws, mathematical precision, or full verification are not possible. This means that our paradigm comes with a major responsibility: to deal as precisely, meticulously, and ethically as possible with sources and data and their interpretation. It is clear also that source material and research data do not belong exclusively to the researcher – they are too important in many respects to be left to any single individual. The greater the openness we maintain in respect of our sources, and the more extensive our accountability through open access to them, the more society will trust the academy, ultimately enhancing the robustness of humanities research and the meaning of its outcomes.

Even though many years have passed since I first encountered Bax in 1996 and since his downfall in 2013, it still proved to be an emotionally mixed exercise for me to write down this story. For the sake of scholarship the case needed to be cleared up once and for all, but it is also a tragedy of epic proportions, with too many victims: from the man himself and his family, his competitors for his job, his supervisors and colleagues, his students, the Free University, the affected communities in Ireland and Bosnia-Herzegovina, the discipline of anthropology, journals and publishers, to academia at large and its reputation and credibility, and more... But having said this, as this troubling case is now resolved and we have, hopefully, learned a few important lessons, alluring new research and fascinating fieldwork await. Let's get to work!

Notes

- 1 Thanks to Valdimar Hafstein, Marie Sandberg and Magdalena Tellenbach for their comments and suggestions to the draft version of this text.
- 2 Bax received international recognition for this research theme or perspective. The research program led to two initial publications (Bax 1987, 1988) and to the eponymous volume edited by Eric Wolf (1991). Bax was a cultural anthropologist with a clear affinity to European ethnology, as he published frequently in this journal, and other ethnological journals, and as his central idea on religious regimes was published as a perspective “from European ethnology”, see Wolff (1991). See also on Bax: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mart_Bax.
- 3 At that moment, I was not the only scholar who had some doubts on certain historical facts in his publications on Noord-Brabant, see: Baud, Legêne & Pels (2013: 12).
- 4 Amsterdam, Meertens Institute, BiN-archive: letter from Mart Bax to Peter Jan Margry, November 14, 2003; cf. the disqualification of Neerdonk in Margry & Caspers (2004: 372).
- 5 Amsterdam, Meertens Institute, BiN-archive: email from Professor Arnoud-Jan Bijsterveld (Tilburg), August 18, 2003 and letter from Dr. Jan Peijnenburg (Den Bosch), August 12, 2003.
- 6 For example, the details of the humiliation ritual as described by Bax were directly if eclectically taken from an article by Patrick Geary (1983: 125–126); Geary derived his data from liturgical manuscripts from the thirteenth century or earlier. In a historically naive way, Bax simply transposed the thirteenth-century ritual format to his story set in the 1870s.
- 7 This perspective is in itself not unfounded, as such oppositions existed in the past as they do in the present.
- 8 The synthesis of his work on Medjugorje was published in Bax (1995).
- 9 Norbert Mappes-Niediek, “Die Toten, die es nicht gab”, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, August 28, 2008, online: <https://www.fr.de/kultur/toten-nicht-11589844.html>; also published as “Der Stammenkrieg von Medjugorje”, *Der Standard*, August 27, 2008.
- 10 Emails from Mladen Ančić (University of Zadar), November 26, 2008 and Ivo Lučić (University of Mostar), November 13, 2008. See also one of the very few interviews that Bax has given, on the occasion of the publication of the Medjugorje book: Raymond van de Boogaard, “Antropoloog Mart Bax over de betekenis van buren, oorlog en ethniciteit op de Balkan”, *NRC Handelsblad*, May 27, 1995, p. Z 5.
- 11 Email of Ivo Lučić, November 13, 2008: “These [the Medjugorje research] are all lies concocted by Professor Bax. Why? Where did he get this information from? I cannot even think of a right answer! No similar event

- ever took place in Herzegovina. Nothing that slightly resembles his accounts occurred, and when I say this I do not refer to Herzegovina only, but also Bosnia, Dalmatia or South-East Europe in general.”
- 12 Email of Ivo Lučić, November 13, 2008.
 - 13 Bax even claimed Carla Del Ponte considered him as a potential expert witness for the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague.
 - 14 I contacted Jojada Verrips, professor emeritus of cultural anthropology of Europe at the University of Amsterdam, and Oscar Saleminck, then professor of political anthropology at the Free University.
 - 15 At that moment there was at the Free University no neutral committee or an independent confidential contact person to which I could turn, and moreover, without the backing of a formally trained anthropologist I felt it problematic to bring up the suggestion of misconduct just by myself. I had, however, informed the head of the anthropology department about my suspicions.
 - 16 Another Professor Bax appeared in this study, a cardiologist at Leiden University. Van Kolschooten only discovered later that this man, Jeroen Bax, was Mart Bax's son. A commission had discovered that Jeroen Bax was mentioned as co-author of hundreds of scientific articles, while only a few could actually be ascribed to him with certainty: Van Kolschooten (2012: 260–266).
 - 17 In his article, De Boer interestingly points to the experimental practice that the department of anthropology at the VU conducted in the 1990s to create ethnographic fiction to support theories: “to gain insight in the way of thinking and lifestyles of people with the help of imaginary constructions” (De Boer 2013a: V5; cf. Meijers 1996).
 - 18 In September 2013, I also appeared before the commission and was questioned about my experiences with Bax and my suspicions on his work.
 - 19 Baud, Legêne & Pels 2013; the title of the report refers to Bax's qualification of scholars who were critical of him. Bax said that they were mistaken and blind to real reality because they had become giddy due to riding “Catholic merry-go-rounds”, Letter to Jojada Verrips, June 19, 2005.
 - 20 Diederik Stapel is a former professor of social psychology at Tilburg University who was unmasked two years before, in 2011, see on his case: Van Kolschooten (2012: 230–256); Yudhijit Bhattacharjee, “The Mind of a Con Man”, *The New York Times*, April 26, 2013, online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/28/magazine/diederik-stapels-audacious-academic-fraud.html> (accessed May 23, 2019). See on Stapel: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diederik_Stapel.
 - 21 Letter from Mart Bax to Jojada Verrips, June 19, 2005: about contaminating (*contamineren*): “verwante gegevens uit analoge context inwerken, zodanig dat er wel een vervangend geheel ontstaat, dat echter empirisch slechts ten dele is te traceren”. Verrips gave me a copy of this letter to inform me about Bax's views.
 - 22 This comes to the fore especially in Mart Bax's long letter to Jojada Verrips, June 19, 2005.
 - 23 Letter of Mart Bax to Jojada Verrips, June 19, 2005.
 - 24 Former students of Bax's still recall the stories Bax told them about his Ph.D. fieldwork: due to the sensitivities that existed in respect of the Irish case, he could only make field notes by taking refuge from time to time to the toilet, and at one point he had become so contested as a researcher that he had to hurriedly flee Ireland in a rented helicopter....
 - 25 Baud, Legêne and Pels mention in their report (2013: 31) that the *judicium* of *cum laude* would be incorrect, this claim is however based on a mistake, as Susan Legêne explained to me in an email of 2 September 2019. The online official *Album Academicum* (<http://www.albumacademicum.uva.nl>) of the University of Amsterdam mentions indeed *cum laude*.
 - 26 Email from Karin Bijker to Peter Jan Margry, May 21, 2013.
 - 27 See on the varieties, costs, and growth of academic fraud: Eckstein (2003); for some detailed cases: Robin (2004).
 - 28 See on previous (anthropological) cases: Spencer (2002) and Robin (2004).
 - 29 Various statements and codes of conduct of fraud and misconduct had already been published in the Netherlands: Heilbron (2005).
 - 30 Communicated in the emails by Oscar Saleminck (then head of the Department of Anthropology) to Peter Jan Margry, September 15 and 23, 2008.
 - 31 In 2019 at least thirteen of Bax's articles were retracted, for example: <https://retractionwatch.com/2014/04/03/first-retraction-appears-for-dutch-anthropologist-mart-bax/>; <https://retractionwatch.com/2014/12/29/second-retraction-appears-mart-bax/>. VU University Press has informed me that they did not react to the case in 2013 because although they regretted the matter, Bax's book had already been out of stock for years, email VU University Press (Dorien Keus) to Peter Jan Margry, May 23, 2019; cf. Baud, Legêne & Pels (2013: 44).
 - 32 I have myself also republished (parts of) texts from time to time, although I always specifically referenced the previous publication. I now avoid doing this as much as seems possible or desirable.
 - 33 The issue of self-plagiarism raised another breaking-news case of fraud: <https://vkdata.wordpress.com/2014/04/04/professor-at-the-vu-university-of-amsterdam-plagiarized-himself-a-lot/>. Professor Peter Nijkamp was later cleared of the charge of data fraud: <https://www.erasmusmagazine.nl/en/2016/01/14/vu-hoogleraar-nijkamp-vrijgepleit-van-datafraude/>;

- <https://retractionwatch.com/2014/07/02/retractions-arrive-in-plagiarism-scandal-involving-economist-nijkamp/>.
- 34 <https://dare.uva.nl/search?identifier=8a7811ec-66ff-4aef-aefa-2859006f6424> (accessed May 23, 2019).
- 35 Public indeed, but with varying degrees of restriction for privacy and other reasons.
- 36 In the context of The European Union's General Data Protection Regulation, EASA (<https://www.easaonline.org/downloads/support/EASA%20statement%20on%20data%20governance.pdf>) and SIEF (https://www.siefhome.org/downloads/publications/statements/SIEF_Statement%20Data%20Management.pdf) drew up statements on data management protocols and ethics.
- 37 General: <http://libguides.vu.nl/researchdata/policies-and-regulations>; social sciences: http://libguides.vu.nl/ld.php?content_id=32045927.
- 38 Cf. <http://antropologen.nl/app/uploads/2019/01/guidelines-for-anthropological-research.pdf>.
- 39 This type of “everyday sin” occurring in academic work is missing in the types Dutch anthropologist André Köbben mentioned in a KNAW lecture “Cheating in science”, Januari 9, 2012. He distinguishes two main categories: *mortal sin*, the big cases like D. Stapel, J. Darsee or J.H. Schön, and the *everyday sin* practice of changing research results under pressure of the client or not being sincere about one's publications.
- 40 Norms for research have been published for the Netherlands: Anon. (2001).
- 41 Chief editors' comments: “De wetenschappelijke wereld van Von Münchhausen”, *NRC Handelsblad*, September 24, 2013.
- 42 See Vlasblom (2013). A lack of interdisciplinarity is also a factor in this case. The disciplines of history and anthropology worked separate from one another. If that would not have been the case, Bax's colleagues might have smelled smoke sooner as from early on his work and the controllability of his sources was questioned by historians (Baud, Legêne & Pels 2013: 12).
- 43 Köbben (see note 39) connected those cases to usually ambitious and vain brilliant personalities, possessed with two syndromes: the “I am always right-syndrome” and the “I know how it works, although I did not research it-syndrome”. Both seem indeed applicable to Bax.
- 44 <https://retractionwatch.com/2017/03/31/many-researchers-admit-questionable-research-practices/> and <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10869-016-9456-7> (both concern psychology research), although real fabrication or falsification of data seems to be more limited (about 2%); cf. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/26250057_How_Many_Scientists_Fabricate_and_Falsify_Research_A_Systematic_Review_and_Meta-Analysis_of_Survey_Data, although this is probably a conservative estimate given the sensitivity of the matter.
- 45 See for example an interview with Professor Jojada Verrips (UvA), August 3, 2010: “I recently wrote a piece that was discussed during a lecture. While this was happening I felt what I've always struggled with: I felt uncomfortable. Just as I always felt uncomfortable when one of my texts was discussed by my colleagues. This also happened whenever students had found a text of mine and were working with it. It's a feeling of: O God, you really shouldn't be reading that at all. [...] It's probably because I'm afraid of getting criticism that I don't know how to respond to. [...] A certain hesitation that can probably be traced to a kind of fear that my argument will be undermined.” At: <http://www.floralisalberse.nl/2010/03/08/in-de-kerk-begon-ik-de-meest-bizarre-dingen-te-zien/> (accessed May 23, 2019).

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