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THE DISCOVERY OF DUTCH IDENTITY

A critical exploration[2]

ABSTRACT

Since 2001, questions of national and cultural identity have become central concerns in the public debate in the Netherlands and in Dutch politics. Although the culture and lifestyles of migrants were socially and politically recognised as a distinct identity over the years, Dutch identity was hardly definable. Gradually, things seem to have turned around. Post-2001, Netherlands migrant identities have become problematic, particularly the identities of people from a Muslim background. At the same time, a substantial number of Dutch have started to emphasise Dutchness, along with a call for an assimilation of difference. In this paper, I trace how and why identity formation in the Netherlands has changed. The Netherlands thus prove to be an interesting example of the understanding that identity is situational and contextual. I conclude with the remark that our understanding of how identity formation works, without precluding a critical judgment of that process.

INTRODUCTION

Processes of identity formation are often studied by focusing on minority groups. This is the case particularly in situations of migration where immigrant groups form the subject of research. This emphasis on the minority fails to see that processes of identity formation are always contextual and involve multiple actors, including, and not in the least, the host society. Host societies are clearly faced with questions of identity as well, and the Netherlands is a case in point. In the course of several dramatic events, which in popular memory are nowadays almost remembered as a *chain* of events, the Netherlands has seen some attempts at radical redefinition of cultural identity in the last seven years. Whereas cultural identity for a long time was foremost implicit, it is now a topic of societal and political interest. Crucial for this change is what many see as the failed integration of migrants, in which feelings of

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fear and resentment against Islam plays an important role. Seen from this perspective, we could see it as a struggle of the Dutch becoming integrated in a transnationalising world as well. This in itself may seem surprising since the Netherlands, as a highly modernised, wealthy and safe country, is an economically successful player on the global scene. However, this economic success does not translate in an attitude that is open to cultural plurality, although the expression of this closed attitude appeared only relatively recently. As such, these sentiments are linked to the constitution of a certain populist group in the Netherlands that not only distrusts the influence of "the world outside the gates", but which is also strongly anti-establishment. We therefore speak of the populist revolt to describe these political and cultural changes. Important for this discussion is the fact that the populist voice, represented first of all by new political movements, has made Dutch identity problematic. In the process, a Dutch ethnicity has emerged that is largely defined in contrast with, and in opposition to, the presumed ethnic and/or religious otherness of migrants. In this paper, the way this changing view of national and cultural identity has developed will be discussed. This will include a discussion of the process of identity formation. It will be argued that the Dutch example shows how identity – ethnic, cultural and religious – is always situational and contextual. It will then be shown that this observation has implications for the way in which researchers can look at identity before concluding that one must look with empathy at the way people cherish their identities, without being afraid to confront these as potential strongholds of exclusion and violence.

QUESTIONS OF DUTCH IDENTITY

One has a variety of choices when looking for definitions of identity formation. Take the following description, which is actually about ethnicity but which easily can be applied to other forms of identity as well:

> To know one's *origin* is to have not only a sense of provenance, but perhaps more importantly, a sense of *continuity* in which one finds the personal and social *meaning* of human existence to some degree. It is to know *why* one behaves and acts in accordance with custom. To be without a sense of continuity is to be faced with one's own death (De Vos & Romanucci-Ross, quoted in Fawcett 2000:3).

In the context of Dutch society, the above quote would have been very problematic for a long time. Dutch identity was seen as invisible, unobtrusive, and implicit. In the mid-1990s, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs could say without any problem that he felt like a European rather than a Dutchman. Identifying with Europe meant identifying with a philosophical and political tradition of humanism – and indeed, many intellectuals would agree with him. The Netherlands was simply seen as being part of that stream of thought, going back to the Renaissance. If there was a sense of origin, continuity and meaning, it would have been this humanistic tradition. In turn, others would perhaps point to the Christian history of

the country, telling their own story of origin and continuity.[3] This situation seems to be a remnant of the so-called "pillarisation" of Dutch society, i.e. the organisation of society in different ideological subcultures. Although pillarisation has died down since the waves of democratisation in the 1960s, aspects thereof, in this case – accepting that every subculture in Dutch society has its own view on national history – were still visible until recently. Thus, for a long time there were virtually no real public debates on questions of identity. There are some implicit yet strong cultural notions that people will recognise as Dutch such as, for example, the demand to be ordinary ("*gewoon*") as a way to deal with social and economic differences.[4] However, in general, Dutch identity cannot be clearly articulated. For a long time, national or cultural identity was not an issue that was discussed, and it was only felt to be present in such festive symbols as Queen's Day and the colour orange at football matches.[5]

It was only after 2001 that an awareness of a weak Dutch national identity started to grow. The year 2001 was of course also the year of the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York on 11 September. These were felt by many as real threats to their way of living. Those aligned with the "free world" were faced with an enemy that was prepared to kill and be killed to bring across its message. However, the effect of 9/11 was not political and military isolation of Islamic terrorism, but a heightened consciousness of Islam and Muslims in Dutch society. Discussions gradually shifted to questions of the loyalty of Muslim citizens and the growing doubt about the compatibility of Islamic values with Dutch democratic values.[6] In 2002 the Netherlands saw the unprecedented growth of a populist movement that was expected to turn the political landscape on its head. This movement was led by the politician Pim Fortuyn, who became immensely popular over a very short period of time by way of his confrontational debating style and the fact that people felt that he dared to address the real political issues.[7] With quotes such as "Islam is a backward culture" and the promise that he would stop Muslim immigration to the Netherlands should he be elected Prime Minister, Fortuyn became very controversial (see Colombijn 2007; Van der Veer 2006). However, Fortuyn was murdered shortly before the 2002 elections.[8] This dramatic event put the spotlight

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3   The awareness that the Netherlands was a country organised according to several ideological subcultures (so-called "pillarisation" ["verzuiling"]), which reflected the situation until the 1960s, has not stimulated these debates. There would, for example, have been at least two Christian stories about the nation's origins: a Protestant and a Catholic one.

4   Individual success or talent has to be compensated by presenting oneself as being ordinary/common. This perhaps partly explains other Dutch cultural notions such as behaving very informally in public, and the widespread preference for casual dress.

5   Orange is the Dutch royal colour. On Queen's Day (30 April) it is also common to wear orange.

6   Muslims were continuously asked about their views on the attacks on the Twin Towers and felt pressured into constantly condemning Islamic radicalism.

7   Fortuyn's populist agenda has been more or less copied after his death by several other political parties, including some mainstream parties. This agenda includes at least some of the following issues: reform of government and civil administration, an anti-establishment attitude, the call to restore authority in society (from school teachers to law enforcers), defence of freedom of expression, anti-Islamist rhetoric and xenophobic tendencies.

8   Fortuyn was shot by a radical animal rights activist. His party made tremendous strides in parliament and became part of the government, but was not very successful and disappeared altogether after the national elections in 2007.

on the fact that there was now an identifiable feeling among the Dutch of being dissatisfied with established politics, concerns about the possibility that the Netherlands might disappear in the sea of an ever more globalising world, and of anxieties about a "failing" multicultural society. With the killing of the filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a young Dutch Muslim radical, in 2004, the last possibility became evident to many people, and the nation appeared to be in a crisis (see Buruma 2006).[9]

The growing polarisation showed that certain leaders of Dutch public opinion were likely to look for identity markers in a shared pattern of values, in the debate often summarised as that on "culture". The inarticulate nature of Dutch identity was gradually perceived as negative and indeed weak. Cultural boundaries were too vague, porous, and not taken seriously by the Dutch themselves. In the end, any sign of Dutch identity would dissolve and stronger identities would take over. If one listens closely, one will understand that these ideas of the "other" is foremost the fear of the "other" becoming numerically dominant. Of course, this is a problem only because the definition of who is the "other" is a problem. In open and inclusive societies such as the Netherlands, "otherness" principally points to the freedom and the possibility of expressing different identities in public. The fact that some forms of "otherness" are currently seen by some as problematic shows that there has indeed been a real change in the debate and that it has brought certain conservative voices and populist sentiments to the surface.[10] Interestingly, however, there the debate continues. Whilst populist movements have become visible as a political force, there is also another movement that is very critical of the new populism.[11] An opinion leader from the latter group is the sociologist Dick Pels, who has turned the argument of weak identity around by showing that the "weakness" of Dutch cultural identity in fact means versatility, creativity and inclusion (Pels 2005). According to Pels, "weak" identity boundaries are strengths if they communicate that freedom of the expression of identity goes hand in hand with the realisation that my freedom is only guaranteed by the freedom of somebody else. Clearly, there is nothing weak about this view because it in fact displays a strong faith in liberal (and secular) democratic values, inviting others to become liberal democrats. It is also a view that can only succeed through upholding an agreement of tolerance between citizens and a healthy constitutional state to back this up.[12] With the emphasis on tolerance, one of the few values that Dutch people identify with re-enters the debate. The image of a tolerant society was the strongest self-representation of Dutch society since the 1960s – a mostly positive image that Dutch people

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[9]   The public outcry at to both the killing of Fortuyn and of Van Gogh was intense, very emotional and sometimes violent. After Fortuyn's assassination, death threats against ("leftist") politicians became very common. After November 2004, the number of attacks on mosques increased and there were also some attacks on churches.

[10] Although the populist revolt used to depend foremost on middle- and lower-class voters, neo-conservative intellectuals certainly exerted an influence also.

[11] The most important right-wing populist voice is that of the Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom), led by Geert Wilders, a renegade from the (mainstream) Liberal Party and known for his critical film Fitna (see Moore 2008). Wilders is winning in every political poll and seems to be gaining popularity among higher educated people.

[12] Interestingly, both the populist view and the liberal view share the fact that they look for identity markers in defence of liberal democracy. It is noteworthy that they both are totally secularist and, for obvious reasons, anxious about religious influences in the public domain.

saw constantly corroborated by outsiders, e.g., tourists, European media, and migrants. When people believe that their national character can be summed up in the word "tolerance", it should not come as a surprise that they should feel disappointed or even betrayed once they feel that this value is threatened. However, this is exactly what happened in the course of events after 2001. The Muslim "other" was suddenly an uncertain element; Muslims were possibly abusing the tolerance of their host country. What happened in the populist revolt was that it exposed the "other" as a potential threat, thereby subverting dominant forms of social conduct – such as political correctness in relation to religious and cultural differences, and the taboo of creating antagonism between groups. Populists and liberals alike are now trying to redefine the value of tolerance; liberals by re-embedding tolerance in an attitude of inclusion of differences, and the populists through the exclusion of people that are seen to fall short of being tolerant themselves. In practice this means that populists want to silence radical Muslims, while at the same time claiming free speech for their own radical agenda.

Religion, however, is not the only way in which inhabitants of the Netherlands are differentiated. Recently Hafid Bouazza, a Dutch writer of Moroccan descent, appeared as a guest on a Dutch late night show to talk about his latest book. While concluding the conversation one of the talk show hosts said: "You write more beautiful Dutch than a lot of Dutch people". To this Bouazza replied: "I don't see that as a compliment. It's my Dutch, too!" Similarly, Maryam Hassouni, Dutch actress of Moroccan descent, gave an irritated answer to a journalist who asked her whether she felt more Dutch or Moroccan. According to Hassouni, she no longer wanted to call herself Dutch, because nobody would allow her to be Dutch.[13] These are examples of how in Dutch society, identities are increasingly seen as exclusive and how, on the basis of (assumed) cultural differences, people can never be completely included, even when they are fully "assimilated" (Davis & Nencel 2009).[14] Although I believe that Dutch people have always been very sensitive towards cultural differences, the populist revolt has made differences more problematic. As a consequence, Dutch identity is now far more and self-evidently ethnicised: to be Dutch is to be "Dutch-Dutch" – whatever that means. Everything that is "other" becomes ethnicised as not (completely) Dutch. The difficulty faced by the "other" is that the conditions for becoming "truly Dutch" can never be fully met – or so it seems. What these examples show is that it is not only religion that becomes an identity marker of the insider, but everything that is perceived (by many) as "different" from the "real" Dutch. A hyphenated Dutch identity seems to be virtually non-existent. The creation of "otherness" is subtle and hardly recognised by the people who create it.

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13   "I was born in the Netherlands, studied Dutch law at a Dutch university, and speak the language better than Moroccan and yet I'm still a foreigner ... a newcomer ... Until I was 16, I tried my best to be accepted as a Dutch person, but that meant I was always having to defend myself. I'm just tired of having that discussion. I've decided that I'm a Moroccan and that's that" (interview with Maryam Hassouni in *NRC Handelsblad*, 17 November 2006; translation by Davis and Nencel).

14   Davis and Nencel (2009:286) comment on the example of Hassouni that when even the most assimilated people are not credited for their efforts to integrate, something is "clearly wrong in the Netherlands".

MAKING IDENTITIES EXCLUSIVE

Clearly, the Netherlands is facing the question of what it means to identify oneself with someone or something. However, it is fair to say that not every aspect of contemporary Dutch identity formation carries the heavy political weight that I have described above. The discussion about a Dutch canon of history to be taught in schools, the election of the greatest Dutchman of all time and the decision to build a National Historical Museum, all happened after 2001.[15] There is a historicising way of dealing with a self-image that is fed by insecurity on the one hand, and a feeling of belonging on the other. The latter is not negative, of course, and we can see how it is expressed in, for example, the popularity of genealogy and the growing interest in local history and dialects in the Netherlands. These things do not necessarily imply the exclusion of "difference", as opposed to feelings of insecurity, which do see the "other" as a constant threat. As is clear from the examples I gave earlier in this section, the tendency to see identities as exclusive rather than inclusive is strong: one is either this or that and cultural boundaries determine what one can be. We have seen that simply having a "different" background can be understood in everyday interaction as a cultural boundary. Similarly, accents can become boundaries because they point to that same "difference". A persistent view on identity in the Netherlands is to see difference in a problematic way, in relation to an illusory Dutchness that is construed as "national", "cultural" or "ethnic". Eventually, the problem of difference leads to a simplification of identity, in which overlapping roles and styles are denied. From this point of view, multiplicity and plurality in society are confusing or even impure elements that are in need of cleansing (see Douglas 1966).

At least since the time of decolonisation, anthropologists have been among the first to point at identities being emphasised for political and economic purposes, repressing other identities (see Van Binsbergen 1999). This implies repressing groups of people, but more often repressing difference *within* certain cultural groups. In the social sciences this view of identity being a contextual and situational process and an object of political interest has become almost common sense. The people we study, however, continue to defend and construct, for all sorts of reasons, "timeless" realities and fixed identities. The "discovery" of Dutch identity makes this point clear. At stake here is a form of popular essentialism that needs to be addressed just as critically as any other form of essentialism. A culture or an identity does not exist as a single marker of a person or group, because that would obscure the fact that people have many different roles in social life. But, of course, essentialism is not just a grass roots phenomenon; it has been and still is to a certain extent a scientific perspective in the humanities and social sciences. However, in the light of what I have argued, I think that for students of identity formation processes, essentialism or constructivism can never be a real choice. After all, a choice for essentialism means a choice for consciously ignoring the *practice* of identity as a way of *making* social persons, thereby supporting the suppression of other roles and cultural dimensions that people can claim. A contribution that scholars

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15 The election of the greatest Dutchman was won by Pim Fortuyn, although this turned out to be a counting error. The real winner was William of Orange. On the basis of votes, Fortuyn came second, and thus ahead of Johan Cruyf, Erasmus, and Rembrandt.

therefore can make is to direct attention to this contextual practice of identity that will make questions of identity not unimportant but, on the contrary, relative. Seeing identity as a process also means inviting people to become more reflexive of their own layered identities.

CONCLUSION

Much has changed since the Minister of Foreign Affairs mentioned earlier confessed his primary identification with Europe rather than with the Netherlands. When in 2007 Princess Maxima stated that she had not found a particular Dutch identity since she had arrived in the Netherlands, she was heavily criticised by many people in parliament.[16] The spirit of the age suddenly dictated a different political correctness in which national identity had to be affirmed. But not only did Dutchness become identified as national identity. As I illustrated with reference to the belonging of people with a "different" background, Dutchness has become ethnicised as well. At the same time, these more excluding forms of identity formation are balanced with the idea that a narrowing and simplification of identities is undesirable. An inclusive way of thinking that leaves room for overlapping identities is still present in the Dutch public debate.

Besides an attitude of empathy towards the right of people to belong, a critical anthropology of identity needs to be confrontational and to question fixed identities, showing how identities are always constructs that serve particular interests – personal or political. The case of the Netherlands clearly shows how in a very short time invented notions of Dutchness started to dominate the public debate, at the cost of an increasing alienation of fellow citizens. The societal consequence of discovering "Dutchness" meant at the same time imposing a "different" identity on "others", most notably Muslims, whose inclusion in the Dutch nation was somehow compromised. We can also say that this exclusivist form of identification hinders the space for people to project their own identities. Ironically, this space becomes just as narrow for the excluders as it does for those who are excluded.

It is obviously easier for us to critically enquire into the essentialism of identities that we find repulsive, such as overtly xenophobic and racist-motivated identities. Yet we should have the courage to question the fixity of any kind of identity claim, even if it goes against the political correctness of the academic or political communities that we are part of. If we fail to do this we run the risk of reifying the fixed reality people communicate to us, with the possible consequence of leaving unquestioned issues of unequal relations that are legitimised by a fixed group identity. The more exclusive an identity is, the less reflexive it is and the less self-critical it will be able to be. Exclusiveness is expressed in upholding group boundaries, which relate to moral categories, roles and power, and beliefs and practices. An anthropology of identity, together with other hermeneutic approaches, will have to reveal the potential

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16   It was, in fact, criticism on a report by the Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR 2007). However, the symbolic value of having this study presented by the most popular but foreign-born member of the royal family, and married to the heir to the throne, could not be taken lightly. For the mainstream parties, too, questioning Dutch identity was not called for, let alone when this questioning was scientifically legitimised by a government institution. Interestingly, Princess Maxima has been part of the (governmental) advisory committee Participation of Women from Ethnic Minorities.

reflexivity of identification, because it is in this perspective that we show to ourselves that we make our reality. What has been created can be undone again.

I have discussed the difficulty for Dutch people to articulate their cultural or national identity. Seen from the perspective of constructed identities, however, this should not surprise us. The struggle to define and to articulate is after all at the heart of identity formation. The fact that some groups and nations can instantly demonstrate symbols and narratives that express identity does not change this observation. On the contrary, it shows that under certain conditions people are urged to position themselves as a distinct group by choosing the appropriate cultural frills. Most of the time, an element of exclusion is involved in this selection process, but sometimes people may strive to make identity inclusive. Since we, as human beings, have a choice to identify with a huge variety of roles, styles, symbols and stories – albeit restricted by situations of inequality and trauma – we should choose wisely.

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