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The struggle to belong. Dealing with diversity in 21th century urban settings.

7-9 july 2011

The nation is occupied, the city can be claimed

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Summary

Citizens attach different emotions to the local than to the national scale. The nation is an electrical structure that tends to divide native-born citizens and immigrants. Natives easily claim the nation on the basis of a closed and abstract conception of culture, rather than on actual experiences. Immigrants can touch the nation only at their own risk. But the city is a rather practical, not too emotionally charged unit. The city provides the practicalities of daily life and the joys and sorrows that come with them. As personal experiences are crucial to feeling at home in a city, citizens can tinker with local identity to their liking. We have to rethink criticism of liberalism on the basis of these findings, with more understanding of the engagement that is actually higher than foreseen and longing for dialogue that is actually smaller than foreseen.

The nation is occupied, the city can be claimed

Introduction

Western European countries are heatedly debating how much and what kind of cultural differentiation is to be allowed in the public domain. Many have witnessed the rise of right-wing populist parties that see immigrants as a threat to social cohesion and national identity.¹ The culture debate rages on a wide scale.² Much of this debate has a nostalgic character. A national culture is portrayed as a closed, timeless, and conflict-free whole, carried by citizens who all basically share the same beliefs, norms, and traditions. On the basis of this closed conception of culture, the debate focuses on actual or potential harming influences on society of Muslim minorities, who form the majority of the migrant population in western Europe. Many native Europeans, who increasingly tend to fear Islam, embrace this rather 'restorative' conception of culture.³ Hence, in the Netherlands, the Islamophobic PVV party took third place in the 2010 elections. The building of mosques, the call to prayer, the use of religious symbols such as the headscarf, gender inequality, anti-integration pronouncements by ultra-orthodox imams, and Islam-inspired political extremism as threatening to Dutch culture continue to be popular media subjects.⁴ "These events did not fit the Netherlands's global image . . . as a wealthy, tolerant, and perhaps excessively liberal society."⁵ Or did they? Is it unexpected for the population of a liberal country to turn inwards and uncompromising? Or would that behavior be predictable just on the basis of that very liberalism?

Common conceptions of citizenship shed different lights on this tense situation. Liberalism of course advocates a narrower view of citizenship: debates should not be about mosques or headscarves or culture, as these are all private issues. Citizenship should only be about respecting individual rights and ensuring personal and public safety. Communitarianism, conversely, considers culture to be the cornerstone of citizenship. It is by way of shared practices, values, norms and beliefs that citizenship has meaning at all. This of course restricts citizenship to people who are already know and understand each other. Communitarianism is not prepared for the pluriformity of modern urban areas in which people have to deal with strangers, and in which citizenship therefore has to be constructed with strangers as well as with those who are already familiar. Hence,

communitarianism tends to be rather exclusive: it provides no room to people who do not share each others values.

Neo-republicanism, conversely, is well equipped to dealing with pluriformity: it argues that citizenship is about dealing with differences by questioning and simultaneously enduring differences. Citizenship is about creating *new* communities, which will often be communities of fate: communities created by people who happen to share a particular fate, like sharing the same public space or being faced by the same threats such as increased unsafety or cultural conflict. Neo-republican citizenship is inclusive. Citizenship is constructed together. It is also rather demanding, as people have to develop many competencies to deal with differences and endure and discuss them at the same time. They have to be well spoken, self-critical and open to ideas and people that are very different. Neo-republicanism is mostly directed to the national scale, as is in its name: it is about being a republican in a new way. It focused on deliberation rather than on practical activities.

In the tense situation sketched above, we witness a culturalization of citizenship, to which these views of citizenship react differently. By the term ‘culturalization of citizenship’ we point to a process by which culture (emotions, feelings, cultural norms and values, and cultural symbols and traditions, including religion) has come to play a central role in the debate on social integration. Meaning is attached to cultural participation (in terms of norms, values, practices, and traditions), either as an alternative or in addition to citizenship as rights and socioeconomic participation. These “feeling rules”⁶ have to do with (lack of) feelings of belonging and loyalty that are the product of integration and immigration—they apply both for immigrants and for the native population. As feelings as such cannot be easily witnessed in strangers, some actions can be taken as symbols of such feelings; in the Netherlands, a double passport is such a symbol (of lack of loyalty to the Dutch culture).

Dismissing this culturalization as irrelevant or as an unnecessary threat to integration—ritual among left-of-center politicians and thinkers and among downright liberals—ignores the fact that culture in this broad sense plays a substantial role in determining individual life chances. Citizenship as a mere socioeconomic mechanism to organize fair and equal membership of society has lost its self-evidence. On the individual level, knowing and, to a certain degree, adapting to norms such as when to shake hands, how to apply rules of honesty and secrecy, when to look people in the face, are helpful to finding and keeping a job, to say the least.⁷ On the collective level, the intensity of the culture debate under conditions of relative economic prosperity underlines not necessarily the legitimacy of this cultural argument, but it does suggest that the cultural mechanism for inclusion and exclusion have become much stronger.

We discern *restorative* and *constructivist* notions of culturalization. This concerns the issue whether culture is treated as set and fixed or as dynamic and in the making. The restorative idea of culture is that as culture is already given, it is either familiar or should otherwise be (re)discovered, for example, by looking for a canon and decisive moments in history. Both classical republicanism and communitarianism are restorative. The constructivist idea of culture is that culture is a process in the making by those involved. On the one hand, this process builds on traditions; on the other hand, it incorporates changes produced by cultural mixing. Neo-republicanism is clearly constructivist. The culturalization of citizenship can be found in the utterances of both politicians and academics.⁸

Focus groups

In this paper, we examine the struggle to belong in the tense context sketched at the beginning, by analyzing debates on belonging that citizens reproduced in focus groups. We do this on the basis of focus groups. These are not common in social science. However, this method has clear advantages in this particular area, as the discussions are among equals, and focus groups allow participants to use their own language, rather than react to an interviewer.⁹ “Focus groups have a unique niche for obtaining information as tension between groups begins to rise. In such circumstances, surveys and other ways of obtaining information may be ineffective because neither party trusts the other’s intentions.”¹⁰ Hence, the method of focus group discussions allows participants to feel relatively safe debating identity matters, which might be considered dangerous when talked about in the public sphere. However, rather than produce clear and supposedly unambiguous answers, focus groups help to understand schemata citizens use or develop to make sense of interactions that may or may not require a reaction. Focus group discussions do not tell much about the degree of the problem of polarization, but their strength lies in exposing the character of the problem of polarization.

The focus groups for this study consisted of between five and ten participants in two cities in the Netherlands: Amsterdam and Arnhem, a smaller city in the east. Six of the groups consisted of active citizens taking part in civil organizations and were randomly chosen from a larger pool of citizen initiatives used for previous research.¹¹ In two groups, (migrant) participants’ religious (mainly Muslim) background was central in their civic engagement; in two groups, (migrant) participants had an explicit nonreligious background; and in two (native Dutch) groups, backgrounds were mixed. Two groups consisted of individuals who were randomly selected on the streets, with a criterion that they were no member of any organization at all. Two groups consisted of policy makers, that is, of people who were professionally involved in promoting active citizenship on the local level. The focus group transcripts of up to thirty-five pages were analyzed in three complementary ways: we looked at the debates by group, by question, and according to selected themes.

Apart from the set of questions on cultural practices and on loyalty and belonging, we also presented a broader set of daily life conflicts and dilemmas, of which we reported elsewhere in a study of civic engagement in a more general sense.¹²

Belonging to the nation

Asked with what geographical part discussants identify as citizens, native-born Dutch would argue in a so to speak ‘restorative’ manner, particularly concerning the national (and somewhat less the regional) scale. They do not hesitate a second to say they feel Dutch, or maybe “Twents” or “Achterhoeks” (Dutch regions), or a combination of these:

“Well, I feel more Dutch than Arnhems. I come from the countryside and I’m happy to go back there, but to feel comfortable I also have to be at least twenty-four hours a month in Amsterdam. I’ve got a beautiful house, a very sociable neighborhood. . . .But I don’t feel any bond with Arnhem.”

“I moved thirty times in my life. I lived in the west, in the east, over sea, but I am just Dutch, I don’t feel any, I mean, I like as well to be in Maastricht, and Amsterdam is of course lovely, but I do not feel something special for the city.”

Even though they express a strong attachment to the nation, it turns out to be difficult for the native Dutch to articulate in a concrete fashion what this attachments means and why the national and/or regional identity they value so much. They treat Dutchness in a self-evident manner and scarcely relate it to individual experiences. They argue along vague, general lines, reflecting abstractions known from popular history rather than personal

experience. If prompted to define the content of national identity, they do so mostly in terms of what is lost, what the Netherlands or what the Dutch used to be like. If prompted to define what the nation exactly is, they tend to answer in emotional, nostalgic terms: what defines the Netherlands are things that have gone missing. Both citizens who throughout the discussion saw immigration as problematic and citizens who consistently tried to argue in favor of what they see as “the multicultural society” react in the same fashion. Tolerance, respect, liberty— classical Dutch values—were once the core of the national identity, but nowadays they are seen as very hard to connect to. They are perceived as disappeared or diminished, either due to loss of homogeneity or due to fear for this loss. Recent research in the United Kingdom also showed that the theme of national identity inspires sentiments of nostalgia rather than ambition or hope in native citizens.¹³

So the imagined national community appears to be based more on history lessons or on public claims of politicians about the character of the Netherlands than on events or feelings respondents could claim as their own. To be sure, the debate on identification has a very public character. Respondents were all to a certain degree aware of the ongoing discussions in the media that were going on at the time, on the “suspicious loyalty” of cabinet ministers carrying double passports and “cosmopolite royalty.” Even though these discussions were not nostalgic themselves, this debate only fed the nostalgic character of national identification: invoking an idea of the Netherlands – any idea whatsoever – invariably means invoking the past, not the future. Loyalty among the native Dutch is simultaneously obvious and nostalgic

The native Dutch express intense feelings of warmth or sometimes anger concerning the nation, but these were void of individual experiences other than listening to the national anthem preceding soccer matches or other national sports events. These feelings of national identification occur sometimes at a distance—on holiday or when one talks to friends from another country.

In short, national identification among native Dutch is strong and of a ‘restorative’ character: it has to do with something already present but vague and nostalgic. It is something that is theirs, no doubt, but hard to grasp, and hardly or not related to tangible, everyday experiences. It is something to dig up and polish, not something to tinker with.

This restorative notion of national identity implicitly excludes immigrants, particularly because it is hardly related to everyday events or experiences they could join in. It is therefore not surprising that immigrants do not claim to feel Dutch: they do not have the power to define it themselves, and the way it was defined by the native Dutch does not invite them to join in. So the national scale in general met with a shrug among immigrants. Respondents would not come up spontaneously with strong emotions attached to the Netherlands. The interviewees would shy away from the subject.

“Why feel Dutch? You can connect to many nations.”

“You are automatically attached to the country where you are born, where you live and where your spouse comes from.”

Of course, all participants mentioned that they had some connection to the Netherlands, but during the discussions there we were very reserved and hesitant to stress this connection. Respondents with a migrant background found it hard to connect events in their daily lives to the Netherlands. It was, in other words, hard for them to develop emotional bonds with the national scale. The nation is an entity that has little meaning to them since they do not travel much in the country, their social and economic needs are fulfilled at other levels, and they experience little connection to national public debates. Immigrants from former colonies did mention the royal family as a connection to the nation, but this found little echo

among younger and Muslim immigrants. Above of that, the thinness of the connection can be striking, as in the next example.

We heard a lot about the Netherlands, also at home from our grandfather and grandmother, about Queen Wilhelmina and the princess. At our school, money was raised for the marriage of Princess Beatrix. So we have always been connected with the Netherlands, but when people ask me what do you feel, I feel Hindustani, a Surinamese from Hindustani descent. It depends who asks and where.

The nation has a strong though vague meaning for the native Dutch, much stronger than their hometown. It invokes nostalgia. Native Dutch miss either the tolerance they were used to or tolerance as such. Either way, stressing the nation excludes immigrants more than it includes them. In this sense, the nation becomes a “political claim” more than an imagined community.³⁸ Native Dutch have the power to identify where and how they want, and even to claim something as theirs, without a real say about it and with very little experience with it. It is both attractive and possible for them to argue in a ‘restorative’ manner, thereby excluding immigrants from national identification.

Immigrants are aware of this nostalgia. This already cautions them not to claim the nation as theirs. Moreover, they also lack concrete experience to claim the nation for themselves. This puts them in a double bind: they have to prove feelings of loyalty and belonging while at the same time being mistrusted and running the risk of rejection if they do. Immigrants do not always dare to claim the nation as theirs. They do, however, identify with the city in a more or less ‘constructive’ manner, simply because neither the nation nor the restorative way is accessible to them. The only ‘restorative’ culturalization that is accessible to them is to relate to their own culture and country of origin.

Local identification

Concerning identification with the local level, the picture was almost the reverse. Native Dutch expressed less intense feelings concerning the local scale, while people with a migrant background, expressed stronger and more positive feeling towards the city. Moreover, immigrants were much more self-assertive about them.

To city identities like “Amsterdammer” or “Arnhemmer,” the native Dutch attached less meaning, or if they did, it would repeatedly be a more or less negative. As a middle-age native Dutch man said:

I feel Arnhemmer, I have been born there and lived their the larger part of my life and I do live there with pleasure, but this has nothing to do with the Arnhemmers, . . . because Arnhem is a troublesome, difficult city. I agree with the [previous participants who mentioned] surliness, the resigned character of the Arnhemmers. They are little curious to new things . . . which goes for me as well, by the way, but it is easier talking about others. However, it [Arnhem] is not something I’m proud of in that sense of the word.

Even when they still live in the city they were born, native Dutch see the local level as far less emotionally meaningful than the national level. Association with the city is obvious, or coincidental, compared to the country one lives in. Many native Dutch like the place where they live, but they assign more a functional than an emotional value to it. Amsterdam or Arnhem is merely associated with living a comfortable life. The city is seen as important for work, shopping, friends or neighbors. It has much less meaning, in relation to other citizens.

Moreover, when debating the reasons why their identification with the city was less strong than with the nation, invariably experiences of loss would be recounted among the respondents of the native Dutch groups. Consider the argumentation of this elderly woman:

In Amsterdam I no longer feel at home. Take the developments in the center and all attention to the city, politically, for the large economic interests and for yuppies in the city center and just for big companies. And socially everything is retarded. And when I'm in Bos and Lommer, that's where I live, just like my neighbor here [points at respondent next to her] well, I think, in the Kolenkitbuurt, yeah, it's just 90 percent immigrants. A few percent white, and the rest are immigrants. Completely different than in Zuid.

Yes, maybe that has to do with the fact that I don't feel Amsterdammer. . . . When you live in an area with lots of immigrants, in my street there are still a lot of Dutch because you're in privately owned houses and that is a difference, rent or ownership, but as I pass the corner I see more immigrants than Dutch. . . . It is not to say that I don't feel at home, because I do, but I don't feel Amsterdammer.

The city, these last respondents implicitly argue, is not theirs because has been "taken over" by immigrants. The country may still be theirs, but the city is not anymore. However, even though this is a reason for de-identification, the fact that the natives do not claim the city so much as theirs may create room for immigrants to develop and express feelings of identification there.

Migrants indeed predominantly express local forms of attachment. They hardly have trouble feeling "Amsterdammer" or "Arnhemmer," regardless of the degree to which they are active in the public sphere. On the contrary, they tend to feel comfortable with it. They are sometimes outright proud of being inhabitants of the city. This contrast between national and local identification among migrant was also found in a quantitative study based on a survey among young citizens (aged 18-25) of Moroccan, Turkish, Surinam and Antillean descent in Amsterdam.¹⁴ While 55 percent of Turkish and Moroccan Dutch say they are proud of the Netherlands, 83 percent of the Turkish and 88 percent of the Moroccan Dutch express pride in the city. And while 80 percent feel at home in the Netherlands, 93 and 92 respectively feel at home in the city.

The debates in the focus groups shed some more light on the reasons for these discrepancies between local and national belonging. At first sight, the functional character of this loyalty appeared to be stronger than the emotional character. Local institutions appeared to be of substantial importance as they kept occurring in the narratives about the degree to which the city was important. Encounters at work or at school, at welfare institutions, but also discrimination at the work place or at the doctors, would be mentioned as instances of belonging or not belonging to the city.

However, there is also a more emotional side to this local citizenship that has most often to do with the family. One belongs to the city because one's family lives there, because one's children are born there, and sometimes also because it was the first place where one was welcomed after having fled a country of origin. The new welcoming ceremonies were also perceived as real entries into the city. A letter or even a handshake of the mayor, alderman or alderwoman, or a regular public servant is repeatedly seen as the starting point of an unambiguous emotional connection. "The moments when you feel Arnhemmer are during events and activities that Arnhem has, and other cities don't, like the remembrance of the Battle for Arnhem, because the city is worldwide known for it. But during Queensday, for instance, which is celebrated nationwide, you feel more like a Dutchman."

Moreover, the nostalgia as felt by the native Dutch is well noticed by immigrants, and makes them cautious to develop let alone express identification with the national scale. The Netherlands as something that primarily has to do with everything “nonmigrant” creates wariness. Aspiring to adhere is in that perspective not the most logical of reactions, as this may invoke rejection (“Who are you to claim you are Dutch?”).

This is not to say that national citizenship is a void construction for immigrants: apart from institutions as the royal family and national holidays as Queensday—on which the entire country is turned into a flea market—popular television shows as *Idols* and sports events all generate a certain bond. Also, mastering the Dutch language is considered a logical step among all respondents (tautologically, to a degree, as the meetings were held in Dutch).

Rather, the issue of ethnic diversity contributes to a straightforward distinction from citizens’ perspective between the two levels on which immigrants can create citizenship. On the local level, immigrants enter public life relatively easy. This emphasizes the national level as a dearly desired identifier of last resort, not necessarily because of the jingoistic character of the native Dutch, but because of the interplay of chauvinism and resentment of that chauvinism caused by immigration.

Decisive in the difference in loyalty appears to be the (lack of) positive experiences and direct contacts that confirm or legitimate membership of the national community. Hence, local ceremonies confirming the legal attainment of citizenship in city halls (as are recently introduced) were highly appreciated by those who participated, as they were considered “welcoming.” Hence, calling for more national identity as such is probably meaningless or counterproductive.

In short, native Dutch exhibit predominantly ‘restorative’ culturalization concerning the state—for them, is it the most important scale to emotionally attach to—which leaves immigrants very little room to join in. Yet native Dutch do not claim the local level to the same degree. Probably not coincidentally, the local level is where immigrants, necessarily in a more constructivist manner, develop feelings of attachment and loyalty.

Conclusion: inclusive citizenship as local citizenship

It was clear that at a certain point in time, the prevailing liberalism of the last quarter of the 20th century would cause conflicts in society. Neo republicanism and communitarianism anticipated on this conflict by reframing citizenship. Neo republicanism suggested more dialogue to overcome conflicts, there should be more talking between citizens. It prescribes a rather broad medicine. It was too optimistic. Communitarianism suggested more community; there should be more commitment among citizens. It prescribes a rather narrow medicine. It was too pessimistic.

Communitarians do value and cherish practical, local citizenship. We need to recognize the engagement pointed out by communitarians to make local citizenship a productive lens. But communitarianism also holds that at current citizens are disengaged rather than engaged. This is not what we found. Most people want to do something for society some of the time. A substantial part of the explanation why they do or do not become active must be institutional. This we explain elsewhere.¹⁵ Here it is relevant to note that the plural setting of everyday citizenship has explosive effects. In the Netherlands during the last decade a big community clashed with a small community, basically about the right of the small group to exist. There is no ‘communitarian’ answer to this phenomenon. Not a lack of engagement but an overdose of culture drove citizens apart.

The idea of neo-republicanism is that citizenship is indeed constructed together. We need the do-it-yourself approach of neo republicanism to make local citizenship a productive lens. But it is focused on deliberation rather than on practical activities. This is not what we found. People celebrate community rather than talk differences. Our research indicates that deliberative (nationally) oriented citizenship is rather difficult to attain, particularly for immigrants. Citizens today do construct inclusive citizenship around practical activities rather than around deliberation. To the degree that national citizenship is constructed, this is mostly done by native born citizens, and since it is rather vague and nostalgic, it tends to exclude immigrants.

The weakness of this deeply culturalized, not too dialogically oriented community comes to the fore in the understanding of respect. Citizens tend to be well equipped to passively tolerate each other, but will not spontaneously enter meaningful dialogue about their differences. They understand respect to be about leaving other people to mind their own business. This is not only a matter of mere education. The liberalism they seem to be infused with contains a rather narrow conception of respect, conflict and politics. Respect is restricted to tolerating others as long as they do not do harm, and let everyone mind their own business. Only when harm is done, a reaction should follow, and because of this harm done, it can also be a harsh reaction.

The actual identification of immigrants with their Dutch hometowns hints at the possibilities of inclusive citizenship for all. Citizenship at the local level is accessible to immigrants and native born. Citizens can construct it themselves it, both individually and together. They can infuse it with meaning and emotions by gathering and sharing experiences. There is a role for professionals and policy makers too: citizens can be supported in their efforts in such local (constructivist) culturalization. By promoting local participation that aims at constructing culture together.

This has been done in many cities. Cities like Amsterdam and Rotterdam put a lot of effort in local campaigns that stressed urban citizenship, such as IAmsterdam and 'People make the city' ('Mensen Maken de Stad') in Rotterdam. There was a marked local element in this and it has made participation by immigrants easier.¹⁶

This inclusive local conception of citizenship however failed to influence the national debate. Helping neighbors, sweeping the street and greeting strangers were supposed to be more important elements of the local citizenship as it was put to practice than bearing differences, managing incompatible ideals and talking politics. On the national scale, a closed, restorative notion of citizenship prevailed, with explicitly exclusionary overtones, while strikingly vague in its contents. Local citizenship and local citizenship practices deserve broader recognition, particularly on the national level. To make this possible, it has to be thought through more properly, as the differences between local and national citizenship are about more than scale. They are about crafting versus posing, about learning by doing versus quoting from textbooks. It is in the crafting of citizenship that both the problems of the restorative, exclusive citizenship unleashed by liberal neglect and the too strong theoretical focus of alternative ('republican', 'communitarian') models of citizenship can be overcome.

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