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Constructing a modern society through ‘depillarization’.

Understanding post-war history as gradual change¹

Peter van Damⁱ

Abstract The term ‘depillarization’ (‘ontzuiling’) emerged in the Netherlands during the 1970s to proclaim the end of a society dominated by ‘pillarization’ (‘verzuiling’). In breaking away from the past, a groundbreaking renewal of religious and civic life through secularization and individualization was proclaimed or deplored. As hopes of an emancipation from the past subsided in the face of a considerable continuity, depillarization became a narrative of loss and frustration. This article shows how metaphors of disaggregation such as depillarization have produced an inability to conceptualize contemporary society, accompanied by a distortion of the past as the presents ‘other’. It demonstrates how such metaphors may become dominant through their ability to incorporate competing visions of social order and integration of scholarly and popular discourse. In conclusion, this article proposes to overcome the narratives of disaggregation by interpreting post-war history as a gradual transformation from the ideals and practices of heavy communities to those of light communities in the domains of politics, civil society and religion.

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The Dutch have fallen victim to a powerful metaphor. Labelling their current society as ‘depillarized’ (‘ontzuild’), they speak of the present as a negation: to live now is to live in a country that is no longer ‘pillarized’ (‘verzuild’), that is: not divided into several isolated communities dubbed ‘pillars’, not shaped by religious divisions which defined these communities, and not politically pacified by a governing elite, imagined to be the roof arching over the divided pillars. This metaphor of loss dominates narrations of the present and its relation to the past in the Netherlands. As such, it has deeply influenced the popular and scholarly perspective on modern Dutch history. Though originating in a Dutch context, it is relevant to scholars beyond the Netherlands not only in order to correct the outside view of contemporary Dutch society. The narrative of depillarization may also be seen to represent a pronounced version of the narrative of emancipation from the past which claims to have produced a modern, secular society made up of autonomous citizens.² Seen as such, the deconstruction of the narrative of depillarization presented here also interrogates the dynamics of the interweaving of scholarly and popular discourse, which are often joined in common socio-political agenda’s.³

The narrative of depillarization presents two significant problems as a self-description of current Dutch society. First, through its negation of the past, it suggests a breaking away from another era. However, neither the societal formations, nor the role of religion, nor the political arrangements belonging to the so-called pillarized society have been annulled since the 1960s, when depillarization supposedly took off. Secondly, the self-description as a depillarized society evokes an image of a unified society of equal and autonomous citizens which is at odds with the societal diversity and inequality which the Dutch face in everyday life. An analysis of the rise and usages of this metaphor thus also sheds light on the ways in which societies have been conceptualized since the 1970s, as conceptions of society as a ‘Großgruppengesellschaft’ (Ulrich Beck) were replaced with images of disaggregation during what Daniel Rogers has dubbed an

‘age of fracture’.⁴ As the analysis of the usages of depillarization will demonstrate, this inability to adequately conceptualize contemporary society was enabled by competing visions of social order, which could simultaneously project their visions onto the same metaphor. The narrative of depillarization and similar conceptions of disaggregation leave us with a distorted image of the past, of the relation of the present to the past, and of present-day society.

Metaphors such as pillarization and depillarization are powerful tools to organize our perception of the world.⁵ Frank Ankersmit has pointed out how they relate different elements of knowledge to each other and thus render the world understandable.⁶ Metaphors, however, also produce what Niklas Luhmann has called ‘blind spots’ in perception.⁷ Such blind spots are inevitable, but may nonetheless become problematic, because they cause parts of social reality to be ignored. Moreover, the acceptance of a certain view of reality is usually intertwined with a socio-political agenda, rendering certain blind spots more acceptable than others. Metaphors such as pillarization deserve special attention in this respect, because due to their figurative nature they aptly connect scholarly and popular discourse. Following Max Black, Rieke Schäfer has pointed out how ‘strong metaphors’ incorporate many different implications into an untranslatable image. Due to their untranslatable nature these lack alternatives and aggravate the consequences of the blind spots they implicate. By historicizing such metaphors, an alternative focus on the societal reality they address is developed, whilst an analysis of their acceptance brings the underlying socio-political agenda’s to the fore.⁸

This article analyses the emergence of the narrative of depillarization. It registers the image it conjures up of the three domains it addresses: politics, social organization and religion. Contrary to the hopes expressed at its inception, a radical renewal of society did not come to pass. As a result, a gap developed between a growing disenchantment with the practical realization of the ideal of a modern society of free and equal citizens and a self-image which continued to

adhere to the narrative of a fundamental break with the past. This produced a blind spot for relevant continuities between past and present. In order to overcome this troubling narrative of loss, this article proposes to re-evaluate post-war history through the lens of a gradual transformation from heavy to light communities.

1. Constructing pillars

The term depillarization first emerged in Dutch dictionaries around the middle of the 1970s. The influential dictionary *Van Dale* simply stated it to signify ‘the undoing of pillarization’.⁹ By referring to pillarization, the narrative of depillarization was flawed to begin with, pillarization itself being a highly problematic concept. It portrayed the Netherlands as a nation divided into several pillars of segmented organizations, representing distinct social groups such as Catholics, Protestants and Social Democrats.¹⁰ The latter groups had developed a strong sense of separate identity and an accompanying network of organizations from the late 19th century onwards. The image of the pillar had risen to fame in the context of the debate about unity and division in the Netherlands, which reacted to the rise of these groups. In the 1930s, the metaphor served to visualize cooperation between the government and civil society in the form of subsidies to civil society organizations representing distinct social groups, which were thus imagined to be carriers of stability. Critics of such forms of cooperation pointed towards the social divisions such pillars created and upheld. Dutch officials and opinion leaders who called for national renewal during and after the Second World War took aim at the parochialism and the promotion of the self-interest of ‘pillarized’ groups, which had to be transcended in order to accomplish a society which would be based on the ideals of freedom, equality, democracy and social security.¹¹

However, two different roads to national unity were propagated after 1945. Orthodox Protestants and Catholics proposed to create unity by a well-coordinated cooperation of

independent organizations which were to represent distinct social groups. A diverse coalition of Social Democrats, political liberals and predominantly left-wing Catholics and Protestants proposed a more far-reaching unity, which was to be embodied by common organizations and institutions. This renewal was embodied by the call for a societal ‘breakthrough’ (‘doorbraak’). It would do away with the divisions between Social Democrats, Catholics and Orthodox Protestants. In its place, its adherents imagined either a clear-cut division based on socio-economic interests, or, more vaguely, a unified nation.¹² The opposition between proponents of segmentation and adherents to a more far-reaching renewal resulted in a stalemate, which allowed Catholics and Orthodox Protestants to regain influence for their independent organizations. Frustrated by the inability to accomplish their vision of a society unified by common organizations, opinion leaders expanded on the metaphor of pillarization to criticize not just as a depiction of the woeful behaviour of certain groups, but as representation of a social order pervading Dutch society at large. By representing Dutch society as consisting of old-fashioned, immobile, and isolated pillars proponents of change bolstered their claim.¹³

The metaphor turned out to be more flexible than expected. Supporters of the traditional denominational communities of Orthodox Protestants and Catholics took up the same image of a Greek temple buttressed by strong pillars to highlight the importance of unity within their own ranks. In this view not only the own group profited from strong organization and internal solidarity. Dutch society as a whole would also benefit from the strength of the individual pillars. Together, these could muster the stability needed to carry the weight of the ‘roof’ of the temple. Whilst Dutch society as a whole was imagined as the temple in this figurative speech, the roof represented its government, carried by the accumulated strength of the distinctly organized ideological and denominational communities. Elites held a special position within this

conception: they at once represented distinct communities and rose above their differences to govern in the interest of their own community and society as a whole.

The conflicts between those who wanted far-reaching renewal and those holding on to traditional lines of organization cannot be reduced to an opposition of those who wanted to restore pre-war times and those aiming at change.¹⁴ Post-war Dutch politics were marked by a broad consensus on the socio-political agenda which was to be implemented. Neither a need for a more governmental coordination, nor the ideals of social and economic security and the accompanying democracy of free and equal citizens were contested.¹⁵ The conflict was thus neither about the sociopolitical goals nor about the need for national unity, but about the vantage point of this agenda: should it be grounded in the ideal of exclusive communities which had come to dominate Dutch society in the first half of the 20th century, or in a new, more inclusive ideal?

Both critics and advocates of a society dominated by the organizations which exclusively represented separate segments of the population took up the same metaphor of a country divided into isolated pillars to state their case. They constructed this metaphor as a caricature which exaggerated societal divisions to scathe or to recommend them. This caricature also became engrained in the scholarly perception of the Netherlands. Leading sociologists such as Jakob Pieter Kruijt and Jacques van Doorn took up the metaphor to contextualize their findings during the 1950s. The connection between academic research and public polemics was made deliberately. Kruijt had taken up the cause of the new Labour Party, which had tried to establish a catch-all party bridging the divide between liberals, social democrats, Catholics and orthodox Protestants politicians through a party platform aiming for an inclusive welfare state. In the 1950s, he interpreted his sociological data about Dutch society to explain the failure of this political project. To that end, he ignored many of the complexities of his own results and went on to state that the Dutch lived in ‘Hotel Pays-Bas, under whose roof we at least live together, but

well-isolated in separate rooms'.¹⁶ In similar fashion, the political liberal Van Doorn went from analyzing mechanisms of social control to stating that the denominational groups which held on to separate organizational networks regulated themselves in ways dangerously resembling totalitarian societies.¹⁷

The metaphor was taken up by political scientists interested in the way Dutch politics were shaped during the 1960s. Most famously, Arend Lijphart took up the image of the nation divided into several antagonized pillars cooperating at the elite level to enable a 'politics of accommodation'.¹⁸ Lijphart therewith elaborated on a misleadingly oversimplified depiction of the Netherlands between 1917 and the 1960s. Dutch society had never been as divided and static as Lijphart took it to have been. Whilst noting the consensual nature of political elite behaviour, he took this behaviour to be exceptional rather than the result of a combination of political necessity and a consensus on underlying socio-political goals.¹⁹ Thus, an image meant as a caricature used in public debate made its way into societal self-description, then into the social sciences, and was also incorporated into historical analysis in later years.²⁰ It was applied to explain the way Dutch civil society was supposedly organized in segmented networks of denominational and ideological blocks, the societal role of religion as a prime marker of these blocks, and the shape of politics as a means to overcome the dangers of this alleged all-encompassing segmentation.

2. Leaving the past behind: Depillarization and its limits

At the time Lijphart originally wrote his study of Dutch politics and society, he noted that a change seemed imminent. As a result of the growing independence of citizens vis-à-vis their leaders, he expected politicians to become less placable. In later, Dutch-language editions of his seminal book, he went as far as to conclude the 1960s had brought along the end of the politics of

accommodation.²¹ Such proclamations of rapture between the past and the present in the course of the 1960s abounded in the 1970s. In the Dutch context, these became entangled with the metaphor of pillarization, as depillarization was coined to claim its ending. Negating a caricature of the Dutch past, it was invoked to claim the replacement ‘old politics’ by a more transparent and more polarized political landscape, to state that traditional forms of religious practices had lost their social relevance and to assert that civil society organizations were losing popular support as a result of an ominous individualization. ‘At a pace as fast as it was constant the familiar frameworks had fallen away or become instable: marriage, a lifelong job, political party and state. Pillarization had kept this all safe, but upon just the first attack it had not found any defenders and collapsed,’ historians Piet de Rooy and Henk te Velde emblematically concluded.²²

The narrative of depillarization emerged as a rapid increase in individual social security, affluence, mobility and the levels of education conveyed to many Dutch citizens the impression of sudden change. This impression was heightened by the end of the post-war consensus of constructing a free democracy made up of socially and economically secure citizens. In the course of the debate on the future of these post-war ideals some, like labour leader Joop den Uyl, pleaded for welfare politics to broaden their view to the quality of life.²³ Others, like public intellectuals Herman Vuijsje and Hans Achterhuis, called for a reappraisal of the welfare state purportedly expanding beyond desirable limits.²⁴ Some even rejected outright the dominant values of ‘modern’ society.²⁵ According to historian James Kennedy, in between these more radical protagonists, a moderate elite opted for measured reforms. These three different groups all had good reasons to adopt the narrative of depillarization as a break from the past, respectively welcoming, rejecting, or feigning the dawn of a new era. Moreover, by reimagining the past as the present’s ‘other’, it distanced the present from its colonial history and the years of German occupation, conjuring up the image of a society born in the 1960s instead.²⁶

In the realm of politics, social scientists followed up on Lijpharts premonition about a dramatic change in political practice, aptly expressed by Paul Schnabel in 1982: ‘The crumbling of pillarization (...) causes pacification to lose its meaning’.²⁷ Legal scholar Joop van den Berg and sociologist Henk Molleman signalled a ‘crisis in Dutch politics’ in the mid-1970s, which was apparently caused by the dwindling influence of religious affiliations and the growing demand for democratization among citizens. Due to this crisis, the country now stood at ‘grave of “the system”’, they observed.²⁸ Fuelling the hopes of many contemporary activists, sociologist Middendorp tried to make sense of the heralded change. In order to explain how politics might realign, he pointed towards the development of a bi-partisan divide between progressive and conservative citizens.²⁹ His observations seemed to materialize in party politics of his day. In 1972, several left wing-parties successfully drafted a common program for the upcoming elections, proclaiming the advent of a progressive alliance. The centre-left cabinet in power between 1973 and 1977 was dominated by the parties from this alliance and led by labour leader Joop den Uyl. He embodied a more outspoken and informal style of politics, which contrasted sharply with the stately style of many of his predecessors.³⁰ In 1977, the three main denominational parties first presented a joint electoral list and then forged an even closer alliance as they merged into a single Christian Democratic party, the *Christen-Democratisch Appèl* (CDA) in 1980.³¹

The impression of a radical change in the political landscape did not last long. After a coalition of Christian Democrats and Liberals came to power in the early 1980s, many observers noted the compromise-oriented and pragmatic style had in fact not disappeared, but at most been less visible in the 1970s. As Dutch politicians were internationally lauded in the 1990s for their pragmatic and cooperative style, observers often highlighted the historical continuity behind this attitude. This famously allowed the highest representatives of the trade union and the federation

of employers respectively to travel in one car to a festivity celebrating their joint achievement of a ‘polder model’, which symbolized their ability to cooperate with each other and with the Dutch government for the common good.³² Such pragmatic cooperation could be seen to mirror a long-standing Dutch tradition, the public intellectual Herman Pleij argued, since ‘this very workable constellation of giving, taking, respecting and leaving alone’ had formerly produced ‘the pillars as the approved groundwork of Dutch society’.³³

Although the initial connotation of depillarization as a process of politicization did not hold up against actual events, the metaphor did not cease to be used in a political context. In the 1970s, it had been used to refer to a process of reconfiguration, which was anticipated as emancipation from a backward and divided political past towards more efficient and clear-cut politics. As hopes for a drastic renewal of the Dutch political landscape were shattered, depillarization became attached to a less favourable perspective. It was now invoked to provide a background – however vague – for the less stable character of politics from the 1960s onwards. Both the volatile behaviour of the voters and the rapid succession of government coalitions were blamed on the supposed fading away of the pillars, which had held voters and their representatives in check in earlier times.³⁴

The concern about volatile voter behaviour was closely connected to the concern about individualization which came to be expressed in terms of depillarization. As the expectations about societal change were first articulated by the metaphor in the 1970s, depillarization as a decline of social control and a weakening of the ties to ideological and denominational organizations was thought to be an important step towards emancipation. Contemporary publicist Henk Hofland spoke of a ‘decolonization of the citizen’ in this respect, suggesting that Dutch citizens freed themselves of the strains of the past just as peoples in Africa, Asia and America had freed themselves of colonial rule.³⁵ Historians of the 1960s such as Hans Righart have

echoed these sentiments, labelling the 1960s a period of liberation, or ‘the end of the prudish nation’ which was characterized by ‘less church-going, more school-going, less working and more sex’.³⁶

Similar to the domain of politics, the 1980s saw a turn of the tables regarding the appraisal of increased individual freedom and equality. Increasing independence had up till then been envisioned as empowering either traditional ideological and denominational communities or a new national or progressive community. Political leaders had hoped to be at the front of these new communities, which they often envisioned as improved versions of the social movements they had been associated with.³⁷ Instead, popular support of familiar civil society organizations such as political parties and trade unions dwindled. Increasingly, the freedom and equality obtained as a result of the politics of post-war reconstruction were regarded as a threat to social cohesion. Next to the growing dependence on the state and the professionalization of non-governmental organizations, the Christian democratic intellectual Anton Zijderveld blamed individualization for the erosion of civil society. Since the 1960s, citizens ‘drew back to their own, private existence, where personal development and individual freedom became the main values. This ongoing individualization practically drove citizens away from civil society.’³⁸

Since its inception, this image of the depillarized nation as society of atomized individuals has been pressured by the imminent tension of imaging a society united in individualism and by the gap between the suggestion of an individualized society and the reality of a vibrant civil society. The 1980s debate about the desirability of a ‘Muslim pillar’ was telling in this respect: on the one hand, many of the structures which allowed for state support of civil society organizations were still intact. On the other hand, many observers doubted whether it was still appropriate to use these, especially if the aim would be to facilitate segregated forms of social organization.³⁹ On the whole, civil society appeared much less disintegrated than talk of

depillarization suggested. Some organizations had lost part of their membership, but remained active, whilst initiatives aimed at issues such as the environment and international solidarity gained large followings. Volunteering in schools and childcare and in the arts and sports has increased over the last decades. Dutch social engagement remains relatively high compared to other European countries.⁴⁰

The connotation of depillarization as individualization has endured these challenges, because it continues to provide several groups with a template to express their frustration with their present situation. In the first place, the discourse serves as an explanation for the lack of popular support of organizations such as political parties. In this line of thinking, it is argued that traditional social structures have steadily eroded during the post-war years. This process of disintegration has devitalized party organizations and weakened the bond between the electorate and politicians. Parties under these circumstances can no longer mobilize or represent distinctive social groups.⁴¹ As ‘victims’ of an objectified depillarization they can not be held accountable for their membership losses.

Secondly, feelings of discomfort about the social cohesion of current society are also connected to the narrative of depillarization, nostalgically claiming society to have been more intimate and sheltered in the days in which the pillars were supposedly still in place. Historian Marjet Derks has called attention to the way the Catholic past has been idealized in recent years. Comparing the way the supposedly ‘rich Roman life’ in pre-1960s days has been remembered in the Netherlands to the way Stephanie Koontz has analyzed idealizations of American family life in the 1950s, she signals: ‘an image of closeness, conformism and traditionalism which is invented by every generation anew. Everyone is supposed to have known his place, to have followed numerous rules and prescriptions and to have cherished the Catholic pedigree and warm seclusion of the own pillar.’⁴²

In the third place, the narrative of depillarization as individualization is used to declare that existing social organizations are in fact out-dated and should be abolished. For example, this is the case in debates about the Dutch public broadcasting system. This system allocates the available broadcasting time to any number of independent broadcasting associations according to their respective number of members. To qualify as aspirant broadcasting association, currently at least 50 000 members are required – 150 000 to gain a permanent position. Critics, who deem this system to produce a scattered and unsubstantial composition of public radio and television programming, often state that this system is no longer adequate in a depillarized society. Ignoring the fact that the current regulations were instituted in the 1960s to counter the dominant position of the Catholic, orthodox Protestant and social democratic broadcasting associations, they hold that a system based on membership numbers does not fit a society lacking strong social ties.⁴³ To reinforce this viewpoint, a system based on memberships is labelled a ‘pillarized’ system, which does not befit a presumably depillarized society.

The understanding of the position of religion in society can be seen to have similarly developed from a predominantly positive to a negative connotation of depillarization. At first, the metaphor was invoked to denote the process of secularization. This was welcomed as emancipation from the ties of religious tradition and paternalism. As it became obvious religion was not gradually declining into invisibility, the continued presence of religion was often felt to contradict the ideal of a democratic society of equal and free individuals.

Although secularization is often regarded as an anti-religious slogan, the dynamic of religion in the 1960s cannot be understood from this viewpoint. The incorporation of secularization into Christian thought was essential to the self-description and the hopes for the future of contemporary believers. In 1968, theologian Arjo Nijk noted that ‘it is almost impossible to read an essay or to conduct a conversation about the spiritual climate we live in,

without terms like secularization, secularize, secularized, secularism, secular, secularizing playing a role sooner or later.’⁴⁴ Nijk pointed out that both adversaries and supporters of organized religion had taken up these terms to urge for desired changes. The dwindling of the societal hold of religion had often been presented as an inescapable trend in modern societies. Adversaries called for a strong push to complete this process, whereas supporters had appealed to their fellow believers to resist the transfer of religious influence to worldly institutions.⁴⁵

During the Second World War and especially in the first ensuing years of reconstruction, reformers inside the Dutch churches had hoped to effectuate thorough changes within their own communities. The desired innovations ranged from a less prominent role for religion in society to a far-reaching rechristening of society. Secularization could be understood as stronger engagement with worldly matters or as an overturning of the traditional distinction between transcendent and immanent matters. Although a cautious shift in favour of religious communities opening up to the world around them could be seen, by the time of the 1960s many of these groups were dissatisfied with what they had achieved. This led to a more radical tone in the debates on religious change, which was fuelled by debates accompanying the advent of the Second Vatican Council in 1962.

Talk of secularization in religious circles was no longer limited to point to the dangers of the outside world, which should be fenced off by close-knit communities of tradition. It became a key concept for those aiming for a ground-breaking religious renewal within this context. Books like *Honest to God*, published by the English Anglican bishop John Robinson, were widely read in the Netherlands. Drawing on the work of theologians such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Paul Tillich and Rudolf Bultmann, Robinson called for a radical questioning of existing Christian categories. These existing traditions were so strongly established among believers that they left little room for personal experience. They should therefore be melted and forged anew to make room for a

more personal faith. In his view, such a ‘reluctant revolution’ was essential even to the survival of Christianity at large: ‘It will doubtless seem to some that I have by implication abandoned the Christian faith and practice altogether. On the contrary, I believe that unless we are prepared for the kind of revolution of which I have spoken it will come to be abandoned.’⁴⁶ Books such as Robinsons’s or Willem Hendrik van de Pol’s, *The end of conventional Christianity*, which similarly called for reconfiguring Christian traditions, resonated strongly with Dutch believers in the 1960s.⁴⁷ These fuelled the vision of a revived Christianity sustained by the faithful who would find new ways to express their personal belief. The emancipation of church’s flock to a group of individually committed Christians was essential to the message of such publications.⁴⁸

Adversaries of organized religion had set their hopes on a different kind of emancipation. To them, realizing the ideal of enhancing freedom and equality meant annulling the influence of religion on public life as much as possible, in favour of a unified, secular nation. Adherents of this perspective thought their hopes were about to become true during the 1970s. ‘It is hard to precisely and entirely indicate why the decay of Christian institutions became clearly visible in the beginning of the 1960s, then continued more rapidly to result in an apparently unstoppable process of dissolution in the 1970s,’ journalists Martin van Amerongen and Igor Cornelissen remarked in exemplary fashion about what they perceived to be ‘the end of a Christian nation’.⁴⁹ Secularization thus was seen as an essential and an inevitable part of the transformation of Dutch society which was summarized under the common denominator of depillarization. This image has been steadily reproduced by historians ever since, who have spoken of ‘a sudden and almost total de-Christianization of Dutch society’⁵⁰ and of the genesis of a secular nation, where people have little sense of religion anymore.⁵¹

Although proponents of these views could point towards the steadily diminishing number of regular churchgoers, the growing number of people who deemed themselves to be ‘non-

believers', the narrative of secularization was of little help in dealing with a present in which even today around 45% of the population is a member of a Christian church.⁵² The growing visibility of Islamic and African Christian groups in Europe additionally pressured the self-perception as a predominantly secular society, all the more because the perceived threat of Islam led other groups to stress the Christian (or even 'Judeo-Christian-humanist') roots of European societies.⁵³

The self-image of a society in which religious traditions are not supposed to or can no longer play a meaningful part has persisted, because it is still useful. Secularists use it to argue for a minimization of the societal influence of religious groups. In debates about the possibility of local government cooperating with religious groups, adversaries have remarked that such a public role for religion is unfitting for a 'depillarized society'.⁵⁴ Some religious minorities refer to the 'depillarized society' to express nostalgia for times when religion supposedly was a more foundational element of society.⁵⁵

This persistence has caused a stalemate in thinking about religious diversity and the public impact of religious groups. Instead of re-conceptualizing views about the 'post-secular' society, religious differences and public expressions of religion have been ignored or outright rejected. The current consensus appears to be that religious groups may participate in public life but only as long as religious beliefs do not cause social divisions. The resulting lack of orientation was aptly illustrated by the recent formulation of a guideline for cooperation with religious groups by the association of Dutch municipalities. According to the guideline, religious groups may be involved in activities and financially supported by local government as long as their involvement promotes social integration across denominational boundaries.⁵⁶

The rise of the metaphor of depillarization can thus be regarded a prime example of the inability to conceptualise essential features of contemporary society after ideals of organization

within separate, exclusive social groups lost their appeal. It highlights the post-war shift towards the ideal of a society made up of autonomous individuals.⁵⁷ By uniting views on politics, civil society and religion this metaphor is even more problematic than other instances of views distancing the present from well-ordered, but restrictive past circumstances. Morten Reitmayer has suggested these images succeed in gaining acceptance exactly because of their lack of precision, enabling different hopes and experiences to be projected upon them.⁵⁸ The foregoing analysis has shown that such societal self-images derive their success not just from their ability to absorb different expectations and experiences, but also crucially on their ability to harbour competing preferences for the ordering of society and to integrate scholarly and popular discourse.

3. From heavy to light communities: a new perspective

The image of a unified nation of modern, secular and autonomous citizens which contrasts with a past which was divided, socially restrictive and dominated by religion conjures up an image of the present which is neither real, nor realistic. It is conducive to the inability to conceptualize the current political landscape, to deal with religious diversity and public expressions of religion and to comprehend current processes of social organization. Therewith both the narrative of depillarization and the ideal of a modern, secular society consisting of autonomous individuals supporting it, are constant sources of doubt and frustration. In coming to terms with this impairment of present-day vision, this metaphor has to be abandoned as an analytical tool to understand Dutch society. A more adequate conceptualization has to reconsider the balance between continuity and change in post-war history.

In order to achieve this balance, it is helpful to turn to the distinction of time spans which Fernand Braudel has developed. Next to the history of individual events (*histoire*

événementielle), Braudel has pointed to the possibility of discerning a history of slower changes within social and economic cycles (*histoire conjoncturelle*), and beyond that, a history of the long-term structural change (*histoire longue durée*).⁵⁹ Braudels observations allow for a more nuanced view of changes in post-war history. Acknowledging the slow and gradual nature of changes in the structure of politics, civil society and the societal role of religion, a more balanced account of the structural changes in these domains can replace accounts focussing on short-term events and sudden ruptures. Such a change of perspective provides a coherent focus to existing disparate attempts to venture beyond the narrative of loss.

In the realm of Dutch politics, such reappraisals have above all been attempted regarding practice of political elites. Reconsidering his earlier predictions, Lijphart acknowledged the fact that his analysis had not foreseen this degree of continuity in 1989. The expected transition from the politics of accommodation to so-called ‘adversarial politics’ had not taken place.⁶⁰ A similar insight had by then already led his colleague Hans Daalder to describe the politics of the 1980s as similar to the 1960s, only ‘in a different coat’.⁶¹ Most recently, Maarten Prak and Jan Luiten van Zanden have claimed that after a short period of crisis during the 1970s, Dutch elites rediscovered the benefits of socioeconomic policies based on accommodation between the government and employer and employee representatives.⁶² Whilst many observers still unconvincingly present the 1970s as a political anomaly by succumbing to the fiery rhetoric of the 1970s instead of focussing on ongoing practices of accommodation, gradual change now dominates the picture of Dutch post-war politics. Similarly, recent historical research tends to stress continuity in the landscape of Dutch political parties.⁶³

Concerning the relationship between political parties and their voters, the narrative of erosion has held pace with the decline of party membership since the 1950s and the increasing volatility of voter behaviour. These alleged consequences of depillarization destabilized

traditional political parties, whilst creating opportunities for new left- and rightwing populist parties.⁶⁴ However, this perspective tends to mute the question as to why politicians and scholars have held onto the ideal of a stable and exclusive electorate.⁶⁵ Although voter behaviour has indeed become more volatile, with a notable increase since the 1990s, policy preferences among voters have remained relatively stable.⁶⁶ Dutch political parties, on the other hand, often bear considerable programmatic resemblance. Voter volatility might therefore also be interpreted to reflect the critical behaviour of voters choosing between relatively similar options.⁶⁷ The increase in volatility thus should not be reduced to a narrative of loss of citizens' loyalty to political parties, but should also reflect the transformation of patterns of voter preference in relation to the changes in party alignment.

The anxiety over a process of individualization which is visible in many presentations of voter volatility is also regularly expressed about other parts of civil society.⁶⁸ Here, the spectre of individualization has reinforced a one-sided view of the post-war years as a period of continuous erosion of social cohesion. Regarding Germany, much has been made of the dissolution of the social democratic and Catholic milieus. The organizations holding these groups together accordingly lost their secure footing as older members doubted their continued relevance whilst their children could usually not be enticed into joining them at all.⁶⁹

This notion of a loss of social cohesion has been criticized for failing to come to terms with the continued relevance of social ties.⁷⁰ Historian Benjamin Ziemann has noted that the focus on milieus resulted in a one-sided history of loss and failed to explain developments after the 1960s. Though many organizations which had been central to ideological or denominational networks had in fact lost their standing, these networks on the other hand had not altogether lost their relevance.⁷¹ The Dutch case raises similar questions, because many organizations traditionally associated with the denominational and ideological milieus have remained active,

whilst new civic organizations mobilized large crowds and the volunteering has even increased in childcare, schools, and sports.⁷² Except for a gradual decline of the adherence to traditional institutions such as churches, political parties and trade unions, no conclusive evidence for individualization could be found in Dutch post-war history has been presented. The Dutch have not emancipated themselves from the influence of social groups and institutions, and heterogeneity among the population has not notably increased.⁷³

Loose connections between institutions and citizens, who nonetheless retain relatively stable preferences, can similarly be observed in the domain of religion.⁷⁴ In this domain too, narratives of rupture and loss are being challenged by perspectives favouring gradual change. In the realm of religion, both the notion that secularization should be regarded as an inevitable process and the impression that the Netherlands were becoming a secular country have increasingly been doubted. A broadening of the geographical scope of research and a sceptical approach towards the notion that religion would necessarily decline through modernization led scholars to fundamentally doubt the notion of steadily progressing secularization.⁷⁵ A focus on the transformation of religious traditions themselves reinforced these doubts. For instance, sociologist of religion Danièle Hervieu-Léger concluded amidst a growing distance between believers and institutionalized religion, religious traditions had not simply disappeared from post-war France, but had in many cases been continued in different forms.⁷⁶ Her Dutch peer Joep de Hart, who discerned a similar trend in the Netherlands, has labelled this phenomenon the rise of ‘floating believers’.⁷⁷

Historiography witnessed an equivalent shift towards attending to the transformation of religious traditions. This shift has been most remarkable in the history of Dutch Catholicism. Ever since the 1970s, scholars had concentrated on how the seemingly indestructible ‘Catholic pillar’ had collapsed in dramatic fashion.⁷⁸ In recent years, this picture of sudden collapse has

been quietly undermined. Historians have pointed out the diversity of Catholic life before the 1970s, the new interpretations of Catholic tradition which took shape since the 1950s and the many conservative believers who quietly but influentially remained faithful to their church since the 1970s.⁷⁹ Concerning Dutch Protestantism, a focus on transformation has brought the post-war push to cross denominational and territorial boundaries to the fore. A new focus on inclusivity spurred ecumenical initiatives, and especially during the 1970s and early 1980s, the support for third-world- and peace-causes. At the same time, Dutch Protestants displayed ever less enthusiasm for traditional political and social organization.⁸⁰

Scholars engaging the history of the civil society organizations traditionally associated with the orthodox Protestant and Catholic milieus have also pointed towards the importance of a perspective of transformation. They have demonstrated how a new interpretation of religious inheritance led the leadership of some organizations to strive for an ecumenical cooperation among all Christian citizens.⁸¹ Others argued for organizations which would not be based on religious affiliation, but on common interests and goals beyond religious identities. They therewith stressed the need for active believing individuals to reach out beyond the boundaries of denominations or even Christianity.⁸²

A more adequate view of social ties in post-war history has to do justice to the persistence of social groups, organizations and institutions which have come to the fore in these reappraisals. At the same time, it should be able to accommodate the different shapes of the social which have occurred within these domains. The conceptualization of social ties by Mark S. Granovetter provides a useful point of departure to this end. Granovetter proposed to differentiate between different social ties according to their 'strength': 'the strength of a tie is a (probably linear) combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie'.⁸³ In the same vein, Wuthnow analyses new

forms of civil involvement as demonstrations of ‘loose connections’.⁸⁴ Sociologists Jan Willem Duyvendak and Menno Hurenkamp speak of a shift from heavy to light communities to conceptualize the continued significance of social ties whilst acknowledging their qualitative differences.⁸⁵

Taking up this line of thinking, an idealtypical scale from heavy to light communities can be constructed. Modelling the heavy community after the work of Granovetter and the collective dimensions formulated to identify milieus, it is then characterized by a high level of mutual social obligations, a strong organizational concentration and an extensive definition of the identity of its members.⁸⁶ Its idealtypical counterpart, the light community, is marked by a strong emphasis on personal freedom, few common identity markers and a low degree of exclusivity. The aforementioned disparate attempts at countering narratives of loss by analyses of social transformation can be integrated within this perspective of a shift from such heavy to light communities in the ideals and practices of social organization.

Once the post-war transformation in Western Europe of politics, civil society and religion is conceptualized as a shift from heavy to light communities, it appears as a gradual shift rather than a fundamental break: neither of these idealtypes of organization could claim total victory before or after the 1970s. This shift can be regarded as the counterpart to the rise of the ideal of the autonomous individual, which had fuelled the rise of metaphors of disaggregation such as depillarization, as has been discussed above. The ideal of the autonomous individual thus was not only expressed through the relatively concordant construction of post-war egalitarian and democratic welfare states, but also in the way politics, civil society and religion took shape within these states.

The transformation could be observed in the practices of organization, the accompanying ideals of organization, and in the ways civil society was governed by states and transnational

institutions.⁸⁷ As has been tentatively demonstrated in the aforementioned recent research, it took place inside traditional organizations. Political parties changed their outlook to include not a single social group, but a diverse coalition of voters, sometimes even any citizen. Churches stressed inclusivity and the need to reach out across territorial and denominational boundaries. Trade unions included more and more different ideological and denominational groups and widened their range of potential partners for cooperation. New organizations such as Greenpeace or Amnesty International, which focused on a single issue and welcomed any member regardless of ideological preferences and affiliations with other organizations, epitomized the shift to light communities. In accordance with this new dominating outlook, governing bodies at the local, national and international level increasingly demanded inclusivity based on respect for personal autonomy as a condition for financial support.

Deconstructing the metaphor of depillarization thus highlights the need for reflection of the terms used to describe present-day society in popular and scholarly discourse and their interconnections. It also demonstrates the need to reflect critically on the way desired social orders have been imagined and have been associated with other agenda's through the use of powerful metaphors. Positioning images connected to the post-war re-ordering of society within the analytical framework of a transformation from heavy to light communities may lead to a better understanding of the gradual structural changes that took place in Western Europe after 1945.

¹ The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for *JHS* as well as Bram Mellink for their helpful comments and insights regarding earlier versions of this article.

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³ Morten Reitmayer, 'Politisch-soziale Ordnungsentwürfe und Meinungswissen über die Gesellschaft in Europa im 20. Jahrhundert - eine Skizze' in: Lutz Raphael ed., *Theorien und*

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⁴ Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of fracture* (Cambridge 2011). Ulrich Beck discusses the end of the 'Großgruppengesellschaft' in: *Risikogesellschaft. Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne* (München 1986). See Reitmayer, 'Ordnungsentwürfe', 63.

⁵ Cf. Hans Blom, 'Vernietigende kracht en nieuwe vergezichten. Het onderzoeksproject verzuiling op lokaal niveau geëvalueerd' in: Hans Blom and Jaap Talsma eds., *De Verzuiling Voorbij. Godsdienst, stand en natie in de lange negentiende eeuw* (Amsterdam 2000) 203-236; Janneke Adema, 'Verzuiling als metafoor voor modernisering' in: Madelon de Keizer and Sophie Tates eds., *Moderniteit* (Zutphen 2004) 265-283.

⁶ Frank Ankersmit, *History and tropology. The rise and fall of the metaphor* (Berkeley 1994) 12-13, 29.

⁷ Niklas Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main 1997) 426.

⁸ Rieke Schäfer, 'Historicizing strong metaphors. A challenge for conceptual history', *Contributions to the history of concepts* 7 (2012) 2, 28-51.

⁹ *Van Dale groot woordenboek der Nederlandse taal* (10th edition; Den Haag 1976) 1675; Jacques van Doorn, 'Verzuiling' in: *Grote Winkler Prins. Encyclopedie in twintig delen. Deel 20* (7th edition; Amsterdam 1975) 327.

¹⁰ See Peter van Dam, *Staat van verzuiling. Over een Nederlandse mythe* (Amsterdam 2011).

¹¹ Nele Beyens, *Overgangspolitiek. De strijd om de macht in Nederland en Frankrijk na de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Amsterdam 2009).

¹² Jan Bank, *Opkomst en ondergang van de Nederlandse Volks Beweging (NVB)* (Deventer 1978); Madelon de Keizer, *De gijzelaars van Sint Michielsgestel. Een elite-beraad in oorlogstijd* (Alphen aan den Rijn 1979); Bram Mellink, 'Tweedracht maakt macht. De PvdA, de doorbraak en de ontluikende polarisatiestrategie (1946-1966)', *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden – Low Countries Historical Review (BMGN-LCHR)* 126 (2011) 2, 30-53.

¹³ Cf. Jan Blokker e.a., *Verzuiling. Een Nederlands probleem, al of niet voorzichtig benaderd* (Zaandijk 1959).

¹⁴ Herman von der Dunk, 'Tussen welvaart en onrust. Nederland van 1955 tot 1973' in: Herman von der Dunk e.a., *Wederopbouw, welvaart en onrust* (Houten 1986) 9-35.

¹⁵ Cees Schuyt and Ed Taverne, *1950. Welvaart in zwart-wit* (Den Haag 2000) 287-302; Sociaal-Economische Raad, *Rapport inzake een onderzoek van de economische situatie van Nederland* (Den Haag [1956]). Cf. Peter Baldwin, 'The welfare state for historians. A review article', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34 (1992) 4, 695-707.

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¹⁸ Arend Lijphart, *The politics of accommodation. Pluralism and democracy in the Netherlands* (Berkeley 1968).

¹⁹ Rinus van Schendelen, 'The views of Arend Lijphart and collected criticisms', *Acta Politica* 19 (1984) 19-55. For an elaborate critique of Lijpharts misreading of Dutch history, see Marcel Hoogenboom, *Standenstrijd en zekerheid. Een geschiedenis van oude orde en sociale zorg in*

Nederland (ca. 1880-1940) (Amsterdam 2003); Huub Spoorhans, “Met uitsluiting van voorregt”. *Het ontstaan van de liberale democratie in Nederland* (Amsterdam 1988; Van Dam, *Staat van verzuiling*.

²⁰ Hans Blom, *Verzuiling in Nederland: in het bijzonder op lokaal niveau, 1850-1925* (Amsterdam 1981); Hans Blom and Jaap Talsma eds., *De Verzuiling Voorbij. Godsdienst, stand en natie in de lange negentiende eeuw* (Amsterdam 2000).

²¹ Arend Lijphart, *Verzuiling, pacificatie en kentering in de Nederlandse politiek* (Amsterdam 1968) 120-138, 181-219; Arend Lijphart, ‘Time politics of accommodation. Reflections – fifteen years later’, *Acta Politica* 19 (1984) 9-18.

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²³ Joop den Uyl, ‘Om de kwaliteit van het bestaan’, *Socialisme en democratie* 28 (1971) 4, 226-228.

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