Le sel de la démocratie : l'accès des minorités au pouvoir politique en France et aux Pays-Bas

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The Salt of Democracy, Minority Access to Political Power in France and the Netherlands

The common denominator of recent discussions on national identity, the crisis of representation and the differences between cultures is the question of minority and democracy (how minorities function within a democratic system). The operative stereotypes of multiculturalism in the Netherlands or the French version of the melting pot are far from corresponding to any real and harmonious inclusion of minorities. Indeed, if women encounter tremendous difficulties in making a place for themselves in politics, one must ask what kind of strategies are constructed by and against the gay community and ethnic minorities engaged in similar struggles?

One might try to measure the extent to which a system is truly democratic by the ways in which it includes minorities. Some of our assumptions concerning minorities would then effectively be open to question and, in particular, our conceptions of participatory democracy beyond simply the right to vote. In this regard, feminist and queer writing may serve as a tool for deconstructing relations of power, while helping to work towards the successful emancipation of minorities, both sexual and ethnic (Chapter 1).

The many paradoxes left in the wake of the French revolution that continue to inform the national conception of alterity, play an important hand not only in shaping the role of women, but also in restrictions entailed in the security enforced at legislative and senatorial elections. In part, this explains the limited amount of attention paid to minorities in France at the structural level (Chapter 2).

On the other hand, the political tradition in the Netherlands, strongly influenced by a (sustained) period of sectarianism (verzuiling), is structurally (voting security methods, the principle of proportionality) as well as culturally (compartimentalism and multiculturalism) favourable to the integration of minorities into the political system (Chapter 3).

On a closer examination of the representation of minorities in the Dutch National Assembly however, it becomes clear that minority access to the political system in the Netherlands is far from perfect. That the representation of minorities falls far short of the mark is evidenced by their dramatic absence from the National Assembly when compared with the Lower House (Tweede Kamer) where minorities are much more visible. Far too often minorities serve as a token presence of ethnicity or gender and in many cases may not be physically and politically present, although there are considerable differences among the various parties (Chapter 4).

Two studies, one on the legal rights of same sex couples (Chapter 5) and the other on the equality of Muslims (Chapter 6), form the basis of my analysis of whether or not minorities are adequately represented in parliament. In the Netherlands, a country known for its pragmatic particularism, the universal acceptance of same sex marriages may be contrasted, albeit paradoxically, with the PaCS in France, which is essentially a particularist measure in a country that thinks of itself as universalist. Religious pressure and political atavism (opposition left/right) in France may be the reverse of pragmatism and exemplary gay lobbying in the Netherlands.
The Muslim case is somewhat more predictable. In France, the major political and administrative blocks that have remained in place are due principally to colonial, cultural and political heritage coupled and partially to a reification of laicism. In the Netherlands the tradition of compartmentalism overrides strong cultural and political reservations towards Muslims, making for tolerance and access to certain forms of religious equality (mosques, head coverings, Islamic schools).

A number of essential points may be drawn from this study on minority access to political power: the importance of state neutrality (less weight given to one particular form of morality, religion or dominant ethnic culture), the utility of a voluntarist mode of inclusion (necessarily sensitive and temporally limited), and above all the importance of methods of inclusion. Methods or techniques for including minorities should not, however, be mistaken for attained goals. Well-intentioned ideas which are meant to be applied universally do not miraculously translate into the significant participation of minorities without the execution of viable inclusion techniques. Likewise, the success of strategies for including minorities does not depend merely on the good will of the majority at a given moment.