Everyday autochthony: Difference, discontent and the politics of home in Amsterdam
Mepschen, P.J.H.

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Conclusion

In this dissertation I have developed a non-substantialist approach to the ‘autochthonous’ majority, focusing on everyday practices in and through which culturalist discourses are appropriated, negotiated, and (sometimes) contested. Rather than focusing on public discourse only, I have set out to develop an approach that understands culturalism and autochthony – and populism – as perspectives on the world, as frames or schemas to make sense of a given, overdetermined reality. While I have argued that everyday experience, perception, and sense-making are not neutral, but subject to processes of social formation, an ethnographic approach has enabled me to show the complexity and partiality of such processes. As Sherry Ortner (2005) points out, it is precisely the fact that cultural consciousness is always multilayered and reflexive that makes possible a critical approach to the world. As I have tried to show, the everyday narratives that people develop cannot simply be seen as reflections or effects of some dominant discourse, but must be understood as productive of alternative narratives, forms of social resilience, and sometimes as more or less articulate forms of resistance.

Taking a historical-sociological approach, Jan Willem Duyvendak (2004; 2011) has argued that the rise of cultural ‘assimilationism’ in the Netherlands must be understood in
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connection with a broadly shared moral progressiveness among ‘the autochthonous’. To summarize this position: a moral progressiveness among the Dutch constitutes a perspective on the social world - a shared way of seeing, thinking, knowing and being in the world - that produces a certain autochthonous self-understanding, a sense of commonality, and the demand that newcomers accept and internalize these progressive values. Duyvendak summarizes the widely accepted discourse he points to as follows: ‘If immigrants want to stay in the Netherlands, they have to adapt to Dutch norms, values and emotions. The idea seems to be, indeed that Dutch identity must ‘cannibalize’ other identities in order to turn immigrants into reliable citizens’ (Duyvendak, 2011: 93, quoting Geschiere, 2009a: 166). The progressive consensus, moreover, is mobilized by ethnopolitical entrepreneurs in an escalating politics of alterity, targeting allegedly conservative Muslim (post)migrants in increasingly ‘Islamophobic’ and nativist terms.

The notion of a progressive consensus is an important contribution to the analysis of Dutch autochthony, although in my mind there is a danger that the concept becomes employed in typological, substantialist terms, (re)producing a sense of static, fixed boundaries between (post-)migrant and religious minority ‘cultures’ on the one side and a bounded Dutch majority on the other. Such a substantialist interpretation of Duyvendak’s important theoretical contribution would erase the conflicts, power differences, class struggles, political dissemblances, regional, cultural and stylistic divergences within the ‘autochthonous majority’. What must be avoided is abstracting the notion of a progressive majority from the relational, historical, contextual processes in which it is embedded and maintained. In short, the ‘progressive moral majority’ is not an explanatory variable in itself, to use the parlance of causality oriented social research, but it plays a variable role in debates and social conflicts over integration and thus must be approached as such.
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The approach that I have tried to develop in this book has enabled me to get beyond the culturalist construction and analysis of autochthony and to take seriously other issues - class, social location, populism - connected to the making of autochthony. My argument has been that an understanding of autochthony must take into account its construction and circulation by (ethno) political entrepreneurs who employ a transposed class discourse which ‘frames the autochthonous, Dutch working class as a victim of cultural rather than economic liberalism and consequently espouses cultural rather than economic protectionism’ (Uitermark et al., 2014b: 240). This transposed class politics has been an integral part of Dutch culturalism - and the discourse of autochthony - since the 1980s (cf. Mepschen, 2012; Prins, 2004; Uitermark et al., 2014b). Autochthony has become inextricably entwined with the constitution of a populist (ethno)politics - the political construction of the notion of the people and of an antagonistic relation between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’.

For this reason - and to supplement Duyvendak’s approach - I have borrowed and appropriated Muehlebach and Shoshan’s notion of ‘post-Fordist affect’ (see also Berlant, 2007). Most of the interesting research that has been done in the study of Dutch culturalism - research that has not in itself reproduced the assumptions of political culturalism - has been ‘culturalist’ in the sense that it has focused mainly on what happens in the sphere of cultural production (e.g. Balkenhol, 2013; Beekers, 2015; Duyvendak, 2011; Van Reekum, 2014; Uitermark, 2012). Rogier van Reekum, who was one of my partners in the project that led to this book (on the culturalization of citizenship), is completely clear on this issue: his study is ‘an exercise in culturalism’ (2014: 17). I cannot however be fully satisfied with this, because it seems to me that if we want to understand the politics of culturalization we cannot ignore political economy. In my view, the culturalization of politics we are experiencing today is intimately tied up with the
particular moment in the history of capitalism that we are living right now. In that sense, I agree with Slavoj Zizek’s definition of what he has called the culturalization of politics: ‘[P]olitical differences, differences conditioned by political inequality, economic exploitation, and so on, are naturalized and neutralized into cultural differences’ (Zizek 2008, 661). Subscribing to this view of the contemporary historical moment, I have tried to place the culturalization of citizenship in a broader social, political, and socio-economic context: the transformation of Dutch society from a Fordist, industrial and modern society to a post-Fordist, postindustrial and postmodern society. While I agree that we must ‘address the issue of culture head on’ (Van Reekum, 2014), I defend the position that cultural change must, in the last instance, in the context of the transformation of broader social relations in the Netherlands and in Europe in more general terms. What I have attempted is to analyze the powerful emergence of autochthony in the Netherlands - and in Europe in more general terms - in the context of perhaps even more powerful transformations at the level of political economy: the rise of autochthony - and comparable practices of belonging in Europe - is intimately tied up with the transformation of capitalism in the early 21st century.

In his landmark Flesh and Stone (1994), Richard Sennett theorizes what he thinks of as a lack of bodily awareness and physical interaction being the result of a fear of touching that characterizes modern urban life. The multicultural metropole emerges, in Sennett’s prose, as urban space shaped by ‘symbolic fences’. This is found in the passivity of bodies in the urban landscape - the uncommunicative gaze in the subway, bus, or supermarket, the lack of astonishment with the alterity and debilities that meet the eye and, indeed, the other senses. Our versatility in negotiating the tangible manifestations of social marginalization and deep poverty are all central elements of urban experience in late-capitalist times and ‘super-diverse’ spaces. As Sennett says, talking about New
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York: ‘Difference and indifference coexist in the life of the Village; the sheer fact of diversity does not prompt people to interact’ (1994, 357). In Sennett’s view, the problem is as follows:

In the course of the development of modern, urban individualism, the individual fell silent in the city. The street, the café, the department store, the railroad, bus, and underground became places of the gaze rather than scenes of discourse. [...] Diversity [...] is a purely visual agora. There is nowhere to discuss the stimulations of the eye [...] no place they can be collectively shaped into a civil narrative [...] [P]olitical occasions do not translate into everyday social practice on the streets; they do little, moreover, to compound the multiple cultures [...] into common purposes. (Sennett 1994, 358)

Sennett quotes sociologist Mary Pat Baumgartner’s study of an American suburb: ‘On a day to day basis, life is filled with efforts to deny, minimize, contain, and avoid conflict. People shun confrontations and show great distaste for the pursuit of grievances or the censure of wrongdoing’ (in Sennett 1994: 19). Sennett points out that the modern body is a passive body, that sensory deprivation is the curse of modern experience. We live in a perpetual ‘fear of touching’ and shape our lives on the basis of the desire to free the body of resistance, a desire created by the sheer velocity of life under conditions of modernity. Modern urban geography and technological developments reinforce the experience of the world in narcotic terms (Sennett 1994, 18). There are echoes of George Simmel’s approach to the modern city here, obviously (1903) - and of Walter Benjamin as well. To Benjamin, modernity is the condition in which the battlefield has become the norm. As Susan Buck-Morss puts it, ‘Benjamin’s understanding of modern experience is neurological. It centers on shock’ (1992, 16).
Benjamin relies on the Freudian insight that we, as humans, shield ourselves against excessive stimulation of the senses by preventing these external stimuli impressing as memory (Buck-Morss 1992). As Buck-Morss explains, ‘In industrial production no less than modern warfare, in street crowds and erotic encounters, in amusement parks and gambling casinos, shock is the very essence of modern experience’ (Ibid.). Experience becomes impoverished because we must shelter against sensual overload. An anesthetic, desensitized experience of the world becomes the rule, hence the indifference to difference, our ‘weak sense of tactile reality’ (Sennett 1994, 17). ‘Through the sense of touch we risk feeling something or someone as alien’ (Ibid., 20). As a result of this fear of tactility we build fences - physical and symbolic - in the urban landscape.

Charles Taylor argues: ‘[T]he key to facing the dilemma of exclusion [is] the idea of sharing identity space. Political identities have to be worked out, negotiated, creatively compromised between peoples who have to or want to live together under the same political roof’ (Taylor 2002). Sennett plays Taylor’s tune, but goes one step further. To him, the solution to the moral conundrums of the global, multicultural city is ‘bringing the body to moral sensate life’, making people more physically responsive (1994, 17), producing something of a common narrative in times of complex difference. ‘Lurking in the civil problems of a multi-cultural city is the moral difficulty of arousing sympathy for those who are Other’, Sennett argues (1994, 376). We can only become aware of Others when we become aware of our own inadequacies. We need to understand and accept ourselves as ‘exiles from the Garden’, Sennett says. We are incomplete beings, struggling, suffering, sometimes at war with ourselves. In order to understand the world as a place of Others, as contradictory and incomplete, we need to come to terms with the fact that we ourselves lack coherence and ‘wholeness’, and that there is no such thing as a body ‘freed from resistance’. We must let in, approach, those whom we may experience as threatening.
to the integrity of the self. Hence, there is a moral promise, for Sennett, in ‘the craggy and difficult urban geography’ of difference, complexity, and strangeness (1994, 25).

[T]he body accepting pain is ready to become a civic body, sensible to the pain of another person, pains present together on the street, at last endurable - even though, in a diverse world, each person cannot explain what he or she is feeling, who he or she is, to the other. But the body can follow this civic trajectory only if it acknowledges that there is no remedy for its sufferings in the contriving of society, that its unhappiness has come from elsewhere, that its pain derives from God’s command to live together as exiles. (Sennett 1994, 376)

In these last words of his book, Sennett is not making an argument for a turn to Christian faith; he is doing exactly the opposite by suggesting that the exiled might make for themselves, and thereby find, a home in the 'secular' city - the city as we live it. This is where, for Sennett, actual ‘urbanity’ begins: when difference comes to be viewed by people as a chance to find out something that they did not know before. Sennett has a program for a multicultural urban future. Unlike that suggested by the master narratives of wholeness and coherence that characterize Western modernity, ‘every human body is physically idiosyncratic and every human being feels contradictory physical desires’ (1994, 24). To come to terms with globalization and multiculturalism - with super-diversity (understood as a reality or condition, not a sociological lens) - in the city today, to be able to tolerate each other, to shape a collective narrative in the context of complex plurality, we must mobilize the impulse to revolt against the imposition of equilibrium and order. We must actively embrace the ambivalences and conflicting frames of meaning that produce ‘cognitive dissonance’ (cf. Sennett 1996).
Sennett’s argument is compelling and good to think with. However, it seems to me that his call for a particular, ‘progressive’ sensuous community - in which the body has been brought to moral sensate life and people embrace difference - stands in stark contrast to the autochthonic sense of community that I encountered among the ethnicized, autochthonous Dutch in Amsterdam New West. To put it in another way, the crisis of multiculturalism in the Netherlands is associated not with a lack of ‘physical awareness’, but with a strong sense of the ‘bodies of others’ and a politicization of difference, which has its effects in the realm of the quotidian. Both Sennett’s agenda for the multicultural city and the culturalist dissatisfaction with difference and diversity that we are confronted with in the Netherlands today, are concerned with ‘lived experience’ - and with the ways in which proximate Others are encountered. Moreover, both perspectives rely on the fact that human beings are endowed not only with the gift of language and knowledge, but with a “sense for sensing” (De Vugt, 2015: 241).

Following Jacques Rancière, we may argue that what ‘presents itself to sense experience’ (Rancière 2004a; Meyer, 2012) and how alterity is perceived, is structured by the political field and public discourse. As Meyer puts it when discussing the politics of aesthetics:

Aesthetics [...] authorizes a particular distribution of the sensible that opens up a space for [...] experience, yet excludes—or even anesthetizes—other possibilities. Everyday experience and ‘sensation’ is not neutral, natural or immediate, but subject to social processes of formation and to ideology. (2012, 755)

This implies a political process of governing the possibility of sensation. Following Meyer’s anthropological appropriation of Rancière, we can thus argue that the culturalist common-
sense dominating the Dutch integration discourse produces the experience of alterity and structures everyday life. If everyday experience and ‘sensation’ are not neutral, natural or immediate, but subject to social processes of formation and to ideology, we are able to study how this process of producing the everyday takes place. Focusing on (the structures of) white, autochthonous perceptions of alterity, in this book I have suggested that the politics of culturalization in the Netherlands shapes and structures what in and of cultural alterity presents itself to sense experience, how ‘Others’ are seen and encountered, and how people interpret what they see, perceive, feel, sense. In the culturalist context, Dutch people perceive and construe a landscape of alterity in everyday life, in their daily habits (Shoshan 2008). This constitutes a daily practice of self and Other in and through which people construe a sense of community, identity, and place for themselves. Rather than commonplace diversity, the dominance of culturalism in the Netherlands leads to a politicization of difference - what becomes commonplace is the politics of culturalist boundary construction, constituting lived realities.

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