Out of character: debating Dutchness, narrating citizenship

van Reekum, R.

Citation for published version (APA):
1.

Introduction: where to begin?

This is an inquiry into the public and political debates over Dutchness and citizenship in the Netherlands in a period that lies, roughly, between 1972 and 2008. Dates and periodisations are always a dangerous affair. The dates ‘1972’ and ‘2008’ are not chosen because they neatly bracket anything. They do signal two very specific events that serve as heuristic demarcations for what this inquiry is about. As we shall see in more detail in a moment, 1972 was the year in which the Afrikaanderwijk in Rotterdam became the backdrop for a series of violent disruptions wherein native Dutch residents took to the streets and forcible destroyed the migrant labour pensions that were located in the neighbourhood. The events were quickly nominated as ‘riots’ and became the object of public concern by municipal and national government. The events in the Afrikaanderwijk were certainly not the first occurrences of violence in relation to the presence of immigrants, but it did become the occasion for a major shift in the kind of public attention and concern given to the ongoing immigration into the European parts of the Dutch Kingdom. 2008 marks the year in which what would become known as the ‘global financial crisis’ cascaded across the world. This cascade bought with it a number of concerns – increasing inequality; reform of the financial system; the euro; solidarity – that would again profoundly reshape the discursive landscape in which nationhood and citizenship could be discussed.

This inquiry is conceived from the idea that in order to understand what the politics of Dutchness and citizenship will become in the future it is imperative to understand the past. Moreover, it is imperative to understand how such understandings construct what is ‘passed’ and what may lay in the ‘future’. Different reconstructions of what happened evoke different demarcations in time. When focusing on different aspects – electoral politics; public opinion; immigration policy; etc. – we tend to see different arches of development. This study’s focus is squarely on the discursive: when people discussed questions of Dutchness and citizenship in public, how did they do so? This focus in not made because of some strong position about reality-as-text, but because the act of producing different kinds of texts is relevant for understanding what has passed. Lastly, this focus entails that I must first carefully extract my research approach
and question from the very texts that have been produced in relation to Dutchness and citizenship. I do not want to immediately grasp the problem at hand in terms that stem from outside the discursive milieu itself, even though I have inevitably already begun to do so – Dutchness; citizenship. So, I will have to discuss two questions and relate them as directly as possible to public discourses themselves: what does it mean to begin somewhere and what might it be that one begins to reconstruct by doing so?

A different impulse
If change happens, it should have a beginning. If the world has become different, it should be possible to recognise how that difference has begun to call for attention. By recognising such differences we cut time into segments. Suddenly, there is a time before and a time after the intervention of a phenomenon that commands our attention. This idea of an original moment, at which the new is seen in all its novelty and inexplicability, works a particular magic on our ambitions to reconstruct historical social change. If we could locate andanalyse such an original moment, we could gain access to something extraordinary: a situation in which a novel phenomenon is already present but has not yet begun to reshape the world with which it is only just beginning to become entangled. While already present to each other, both sides – the novel phenomenon and the familiar social world – are still unblemished by the mutual effects that will very soon make their distinction impossible. The original moment thereby promises to grant a unique insight into how a new phenomenon made a difference: what was it originally that changed with the coming of something new? Of course, this notion of original difference is a fantasy. As if all could be revealed, all could be elucidated. It is a seductive idea, but it does not develop anything other than a paranoia of truth. The truth about the present comes to depend on one, original moment. When animated by such paranoia not even looking for a needle in a hay stack is enough. The predicament of the researcher is far less merciful: one is forced to look for one yet unidentified needle in a stack of needles!

It is along these lines that I would propose to understand the way in which the issues at the heart of the study before you have become subject to a particular kind of truth finding and speaking. The contention over difference and citizenship in the recent politics of the Netherlands has been analysed as if there can be somehow, somewhere an original moment at which everything changed, at which the difference was made, at which everything was irrevocably transformed. Looking back in this way, the past becomes known as a series of needle points, all of them candidates for the status of originator, of the New. And so, we build
accounts that try to show how the crucial interventions of this or that person, this or that idea, this or that event, this or that governmental decision made the difference. Such accounts may be myopic and deterministic – when all of the difference is invested in one single moment –, but also quite extended and processual – when difference is made through an entire procession of moments that only together have made the difference. These accounts can have a distinctly optimistic ring about them – when it is said that finally the difference was made – or they can be quite pessimistic – when the past appears to be forever lost. In any event, such accounts remain more or less focussed on finding the way in which the difference was made.

A myriad of empirical studies, theoretical models and heuristic summaries have been presented in order to make sense of what irrevocably changed in the Netherlands. Many of them feature in this study and many of them make a great deal of sense. Let there be no doubt: a lot has changed. Each of those studies present their own particular periodisation of the recent decades, involving different pivot points and conceptualisations of how the present was made to differ from the past. Much careful empirical work and argumentative precision has gone into the reconstruction of how and why Dutch politics of difference and citizenship has transformed, turned, broken through, and shifted. The danger in such a research program is that it caters to and acquires a paranoia of truth: accounts are set in competition to each other in order to see which can give the most comprehensive, most cunning, most total understanding of what, how, why Dutch democracy changed. Even if such studies really do not aspire to achieve anything of the sort, they begin to be treated and discussed in that way, as if they are all contenders in the same battle of needle pricking.

The impulse of this study goes against the one described above. It does not seek to present yet another version of how and why Dutch politics of citizenship and difference changed. It seeks to analyse, demonstrate and argue for continuity rather than discontinuity. The current study presumes to show that an appreciation for continuity is just as important for coming to terms with the ways in which the politics of citizenship and difference has played out and is playing out. Yet, this opposing impulse should not be understood as a critical move, nor is it all that original. It is not made because analyses of discontinuity are inherently wrong, haunted as they are with pinpointing the moments in which change really happened. Analyses of continuity, in which it is not change but endurance that figures most prominently, are not presumed to be any better on the whole. They cannot replace accounts of discontinuity in an act of falsification. However, the present study does presume that a proper regard for continuities is needed in order to better understand how the politics of citizenship and difference works.
Everybody knows this, of course. It is obvious that in order to understand politics one will need to appreciate what is made to endure and what is made to differ. Nobody contests that, nor does it need to be defended. Yet, as so much of the engagement with the recent politics of citizenship and difference – scholarly or otherwise – is prompted by a more general narrative of transformation, continuity has become under-thematised and under-theorised.

The focus on continuity is not made for the sake of balance alone. Rather, there is a substantive reason why continuity is important that has to do with how we come to grips with nationhood and nationalism in our politics. Of course, we may try to give endurance a name – ‘political culture’, ‘citizenship regime’, ‘national model’, ‘hegemonic discourse’, ‘power relations’ – but precisely by packing the problem of such endurance into one static term do we beg the question of continuity. It merely states that there is something with a certain rigidity that, thereby, is able to resist change and endures. We still haven’t understood what rigidity is made of and how a resistance to change is actually achieved along the way. Nationhood and nationalism pose precisely this problem. The issue of nationalism, or more specifically Dutchness, already invites an appreciation for continuity. It is precisely about ‘the Dutch’, ‘Dutch society’, ‘Dutch politics’, ‘the Netherlands’, ‘Dutch (political) culture’ that statements of discontinuity are often developed. Dutchness thereby already refers to endurance despite change. We may well critique the methodological nationalism that is present in such statements. That critique is certainly necessary: if accounts of discontinuity are developed, what is actually held constant in those accounts and what is the epistemic or political work that such constants are doing for those accounts? From this critique of methodological nationalism we may proceed to try and rid accounts of the remnants of such unwarranted, unquestioned and politically problematic conceptions of continuity. Yet, another impulse may be to ask how and why the apparently fictitious continuity of a thing-like nation is built into the politics of citizenship and difference. What does it mean that people are constantly busy figuring out what, where, and when to place the discontinuities in such politics? What continuity is nonetheless at play and how is it made to do its performative work? What does it mean that such politics often deal with a phenomenon – the nation – that is conceived to support the very conflicts, tensions and contradictions of politics? We may treat methodological nationalism as an intellectual vice and seek to correct our ways. However, a critical attitude does not preclude to also spend time figuring out how this apparent vice is performed in practice, what it takes to do it well and how it matters. How is the continuity of nationhood made to work? This is a worthwhile question even if one critically resists its distortions and
injustices. Such a project will inevitably come very close to pretending that there actually is a continuous nation, as it seeks to take very serious the endurance of nationhood and the way that the nation enables people to actually make continuities.

**A research approach: Van Doorn on the Afrikaanderwijk**

In order to begin such a study, I will have to upend the central discontinuity that is so prevalently articulated in both scholarly and public accounts of what changed in Dutch politics of citizenship and difference: public discourse itself. In so many ways, accounts of change have presented changing speech rules to be one of the crucial objects of analysis. Whether as cause, effect, mediator or indicator, changing ways of discussing issues of citizenship and difference have loomed large. Precisely because this study is anything but an exception to this tendency in research, it is necessary to try and defuse the time bomb of ‘discontinuous discourse’ before it blows up in my face. How will I show the importance of continuity if this study – again – focusses on the changing patterns of public discussion? I will try to defuse the bomb by introducing this study with an analysis of a short essay printed in the *NRC Handelsblad* of November 4 1972 by one of the key figures in Dutch social science and public debate, Prof. dr. J. A. A. van Doorn. *Will the Netherlands have a race issue?*, written and published long before the most referenced pivot points of what would become known as ‘the integration debate’, nonetheless articulates the problematics of immigration, difference, popular anxiety and governance in the most familiar of terms. The text thereby helps to raise the question in what way the articulation of issues concerning citizenship and difference has actually changed since.

If Van Doorn, as he wrote in his office at the *Nederlandse Economische Hogeschool*, is still our contemporary, writing in ways that are directly recognisable to current readers of the debates on citizenship and difference, how much can be made of the changing discourses in these debates? Well, still quite a lot to be sure. Within specific discursive patterns there can still be some significant variation and those variations actually matter for, to name but one area of consequence, the governance of migration and access to citizenship. It is unlikely, for instance, that anyone would use the term ‘race issue’ – ‘rassenvraagstuk’ – in their title today. Yet, the point of the present study is to not rush past the equally real and equally significant continuities in discursive practice. The goal is to figure out what continuities matter and how they matter, particularly when they pertain to discourses about Dutchness.
An analysis of Van Doorn’s essay helps to correct the untenable view that a problematisation of Dutch citizenship and difference is a recent, post-1990, or post-2001 phenomenon in public discourse. It helps to correct the idea that ‘the integration debate’ has a beginning at all, or is in need one. This idea has been hard-wired into many accounts of ‘the integration debate’ as it does some remarkable work in opening up discursive and political opportunities: a supposedly retarded attention given to issues of differences time and again comes to justify bold and exceptional measures of repression and exclusion in the present. As will become clear throughout this study, the notion of a debate-that-came-too-late is one of the basic constituents of how Dutchness comes to matter in the politics of citizenship and difference. Not only does Van Doorn’s essay dispel the idea that there was a lack of public attention for issues of immigration, difference, popular anxiety and governance – although myths can never be dispelled by empirical argument alone –, it also illustrates how the problem of publicly discussing such matters was already articulated at the heart of the problematic.

Let’s have a closer look at Van Doorn’s own words and get a sense of what he wrote in one of the most established broadsheets of the Netherlands.

Will the Netherlands have a social underclass of second-rate citizens? After the partial emancipation of manual labourers, is a societal class emerging which must lack any chance for emancipation and integration? Have we already accepted this as fact, and will it suffice to point out the economic benefits, for them and for us? Have we already accepted to pay the price of increasing irritation and tension towards these and other minorities, because there is a taboo on the term ‘race’ and Dutch tolerance can’t even be a point of discussion?

If people want it or not, that discussion has been in full swing for at least a year, and it got going because of demonstrably strong irritation. It recently led to an explosion of popular anger [volkswoede]¹ in Rotterdam, but that explosion was royally announced by contentions in the middle of last year. People too easily forget that already in July of 1971 in the Afrikaanderwijk of Rotterdam Turkish boarding houses were besieged and fierce fighting between the tenants and Dutch neighbours broke out; that two days later in The Hague a home of Turkish guest workers was attacked because a Dutch family that was also living in the home was said to have been driven out [weggepest]. (Van Doorn, November 4 1972, NRC Handelsblad)² (#1)

¹ The words used in the Dutch original are given in brackets […] when context or the sheer specificity of their meaning merit such attention. Other comments within the quotes are also given in these brackets.

² Throughout this text quotes will be presented in English. Almost all of them are translated out of Dutch by me. In some rare cases, an English translation was available and it was used. Of course, one’s grasp of these quotes and their discursive particularities is greatly enhanced if one can read them in the Dutch original. They are provided for the reader at rvanreekum.eu. Each quote is given a number (#x) that refers to the quote-list on the website. Full bibliographical information for the quotes is also listed there. In many instances, quotes will contain words that are beyond translatability, particularly when their usage and meanings are specific to discourses on Dutchness. To give one prevalent example, the Dutch term eigenheid is very hard to translate into the English language yet hugely important for articulations of nationhood in the Dutch context. It connotes both selfhood and distinct particularity, while also evoking essence, ownership and appropriation. I have chosen to translate eigenheid into distinctiveness as this is the most crucial meaning, yet it does not do justice to the possibilities that eigenheid affords. In instances where the Dutch term is of crucial significance I give it in brackets after the English translation. So after popular anger we see [volkswoede] as the translation
Articulated by Van Doorn, the ‘race question’ – with explicit reference to the US and British contexts – is a matter of addressing local, neighbourhood tensions between immigrant minorities and the native majority. Its injection into public debate can be traced back to local problems of co-habitation. Such injection appears hampered, however, by certain speech rules: the taboo on the term ‘race’, which Van Doorn ostensibly breaks by publishing his essay. Moreover, the existence and value of Dutch tolerance is precluded from the public forum, according to Van Doorn. Thus, local realities cannot be represented appropriately in the national discussion because of distorting speech rules. Yet, it seems growing irritation cannot be ignored forever as ‘explosion’ after ‘explosion’ forces the public at large to consider the issue. This last point is explicitly the gist of the essay: to begin to broaden the scale of the public discussion and thereby implicate the national government.

Drawing parallels to Enoch Powell’s mobilisations across the Canal a few years prior, Van Doorn goes on to analyse the political side of the issue:

In short: while the politicians responsible felt very uncomfortable and the main broadsheets has nothing good to say about Powell, he did get approval within a segment that he was removed from furthest: labourers and the residents of lower class neighbourhoods [volksbuurten].

The Netherlands currently offers a similar image – luckily, save for a figure such as Powell. The most radical are those directly involved, residents of the old inner cities [oude stadswijken]. The local action groups and neighbourhood committees try to quell the thriving emotionality, but they demand without reserve a restriction of the amount of foreigners in their neighbourhoods. […]

Surveying the whole, we have to recognise a low intensity Enoch Powellism without Powell, alienation between the locality of society and the highest levels of policy making, and a clear attempt by the political left to bridge this cleavage. (Van Doorn, November 4 1972, NRC Handelsblad) (#2)

Established politics, then, sees itself confronted with an issue that it cannot deal with appropriately. Not only does the asceticism of high-level policy discussion not express the emotionality of local life, but it seems to necessitate policies that go
against the very basis of equality and equal treatment. This appears a problem particularly for the left as they are committed to equality and the political emancipation of the locally embedded working classes:

Whoever has made, like the political left has done, ‘political voice at the local level’ into an article of faith, cannot escape this. He finds himself in the uncomfortable company of the spokespersons of the ‘poor whites’ in the United States, who stood up for the popular mass with its unemployment, low pay, and bad housing and therefore could scapegoat the negroes – competitors that work below market price. He is also obliged to sympathise to some extent with the English that sent Powell his fifty-thousand letters, because they saw their already scarce habitations, schools, and medical facilities being occupied by an influx of mass immigration. (Van Doorn, November 4 1972, NRC Handelsblad) (#3)

The problem that these issues pose to established politics go far deeper than the particular dilemmas of the left. Basically, the problem is that local discontent and anger cannot be reduced to economic circumstances. Van Doorn explains:

Alas, we know better. There is sufficient social-scientific research – particularly concerning so-called deviant behaviour and adjacent issues of minorities – to demonstrate that ‘strangeness’ is often experienced as threatening and hostile. This is concerned not only – but still does includes – physical characteristics; behaviour and manners, lifestyle, eating habits and forms of habitation, norms and preferences also play a role. […] Therefore, it is useless to try and retouch the tensions in the old neighbourhoods until economic injustices and political radicalism remain. If authorities can be blamed for anything, it is that they gave grossly underestimated the development of racist tendencies. Their policy – in planning, residential, social – have contributed to the fact that, today, the Netherlands is dealing with a new and serious problem. (Van Doorn, November 4 1972, NRC Handelsblad) (#4)

According to Van Doorn, a new policy direction is needed, one that is not informed by morality, ideology or idealism, but by honesty and factual knowledge. This shift towards honesty and factual knowledge will not be easy, however, because it will involve references to and national discussion of strangeness in physical appearance and particular behaviours. Van Doorn ends the essay by evoking a sense of urgency:

The Dutch people [volk] are learning a couple of tough lessons. Anyway, it has become impossible to afford itself the priggish arrogance that it so abundantly exhibits in front of countries that are struggling with a centuple of our problems. Moreover, they will have to embark quickly on a humane and thought-out policy. Hopefully, there will not be any party-political exploitation. The entire issue is too flammable for that – this as an argument for those who are insensitive to the direct human concerns that are involved. (Van Doorn, November 4 1972, NRC Handelsblad) (#5)
So, we have in this essay the articulation of a number of key notions that have been immensely significant in the last thirty years and are still with us today. There is the concrete reality of local co-habitation, appearing as a seedbed of racist prejudices that cannot be translated in the austere and cautious language of national policy debate without losing what really matters. There is the self-evident interplay between white natives, whom always already count as the majority, and the non-white newcomers whom take the role of minorities. Van Doorn calls their problem one of ‘satisfactory/peacefully fitting in’ [bevredigend inpassen]. Van Doorn also points out that the race issue cannot be reframed in the more comfortable terms of class relations. There is the need to recognise the anxieties and tension that emerge where different people are living together, particularly the inattention to the living conditions of what are called ‘the old neighbourhoods’ [de oude wijken]. For lack of a coherent set of policies, these circumstances erupt into explosions of anger that repeatedly remind us that something will need to be done. Yet, government and the public at large remain apprehensive as a taboo on racial issues prevents them from developing it into the national issue that it needs to be and is about to become. Violent clashes in the old neighbourhoods are nonetheless forcing the Dutch people to learn some ‘though lessons’ [harde lessen].

Now, the point is neither to suggest that it is in fact Van Doorn who should be credited with opening the debate on integration long before Couwenberg, Vuijsje, Pinto, Bolkestein, Scheffer or Fortuyn were branded as candidates for that illustrious prize of public esteem. Nor do I want to claim that Van Doorn expresses the sensus communis at the time. Van Doorn was an atypical public intellectual whose ideas moved and swayed in ways that defy all-too-simplistic mappings of the intellectual field. It is certainly true that the ideas expressed in the essay were not those expressed in the official language of government. Van Doorn’s essay is interesting not because it is typical for or generalisable to a broader public opinion. The point is to appreciate what happens and what has been happening for some time – at least since the early 1970’s – when notable figures of public discussion address the issue of difference-in-the-Netherlands. When we resist for a moment the question whether Van Doorn is right or wrong, original or redundant, we may appreciate the discursive work that goes into articulating an issue at all. What does it take to meld a bundle of observations, ideas, arguments, rhetorical gestures and concepts into the figure of what we routinely call an issue? We may see what kind of work it takes to remake a whole set of social processes and struggles into a way of speaking publicly about them that makes ‘the issue’ something that can be publicised, mobilised, communicated and contested, so at to make it move through newspapers, conference halls, policy reports, bar talk, camera lenses and disputes...
between neighbours. Van Doorn quite reflexively raises that question in the essay itself: will we have the issue or not? Will it become an issue? At the same time, this already appears to be inevitable: explosions are already hurling the issue in the nation’s field of vision. Better to get a handle on it now. Van Doorn’s essay tries to do exactly that: to put forth notions and connections that together weave the fabric of a political object: immigrant integration. What can be done and cannot be done with such a fabric is still unclear. Nor do we need to think of it as a finished tapestry. New threads can be added and others may be unravelled. All of that will take work and none of that is done in isolation or with the luxury of oversight.

A research question: De Swaan on liberal inclusion

In the years following Van Doorn’s essay the Dutch government came to take up the issue that ‘explosions’ were bringing into the public eye and on the political table. Two of Van Doorn’s central concerns – national attention and a focused policy program – gradually but surely came to fruition. Not only did Dutch government come to articulate more and more decisively that a coherent, national policy approach to the indefinite presence of immigrants was in order, culminating in the drafting of the infamous minorities policy of 1980’s, the issue of ‘immigrant integration’ became a recognisable and, to a certain extent, domesticated object of discussion. It now became possible to discuss a question such as ‘how are we going to incorporate all these recently immigrated people into Dutch society and make sure that they will become full citizens of this country?’ and have other participants in such discussions recognise what it was you were addressing and what bundle of problems were entangled with that question – racism, poverty, residential segregation, religion, respect, tolerance, conviviality, extreme right voters, etc.

As I have derived an initial approach to such debate from Van Doorn’s essay – the discursive work of weaving an issue –, I want to now derive an initial question from another intervention in the ongoing discussion. I will do so by analysing yet another essay by a prominent sociologist and public commentator, Prof. dr. Abram de Swaan. The fact that I choose to introduce this study through the public writings of two prominent social scientists is no coincidence. It speaks to the fact that the articulation of social problems in Dutch politics has been and to a certain extent still is strongly inflected by the arguments, concepts and discussions of social science. The interplay between social science practice and public debate in the Netherlands will return regularly throughout this study. De Swaan did not approach questions of difference and citizenship in the same way as Van Doorn. Whereas Van Doorn articulates the problem as one of social problems, policy change and governance, De Swaan articulated the issue by attending to
globalisation, cultural hybridity and western cosmopolitanism. Here, the role of the sociologist is not to point out policy directions, but to provide orientation and critical distance in what is becoming a world society. This means that De Swaan places far more emphasis on questions of cultural difference and the social relations between people who were no longer situated in fairly homologous domains of nation, state and culture.

Throughout the early 1980’s De Swaan devoted a whole series of columns in, again, NRC Handelsblad to such matters. A recurrent theme of these columns is the now classic multicultural problematic of reconciling an openness for ethnic, religious and cultural particularity with a liberal-progressive subscription to equality, liberty and solidarity. The sociologist and public intellectual De Swaan thereby seeks to provide insight into what it could mean to be a cosmopolitan today. Indeed, a collection of his essays from this period was entitled The sorrows of the cosmopolitan (1987). Within larger debates about the postcolonial and multicultural circumstances in Europe, De Swaan’s engagement falls squarely at the side of universalism. Openness to the wider world was not to be based in a rejection of Western universalism, but instead could only emerge out of a universalism that is an intellectual product of the West, so argued De Swaan. In a three-part treatment, published on February 9, 16 and 23 1985, De Swaan discusses precisely this problem. In part one, entitled Civilisational judgement [Beschavingsoordeel], De Swaan opens the discussion:

To the achievements and corruptions of western civilisation belongs a highly curious doctrine that is widely adhered to but appears to be untenable in almost every separate case, cultural relativism: what is good or evil can only be determined from within a certain civilisation. It is impossible or senseless to make judgements upon one civilisation with the norms of another. (De Swaan, February 9 1985, NRC Handelsblad) (#6)

Right away, the reader is confronted with the civilisational particularity of cultural relativism. De Swaan presents it as a product of the West. De Swaan goes on to display how this doctrine is internally contradictory and practically suspect. He concludes with somewhat of a confession:

I have fallen away from disbelief: I have renounced cultural relativism and I have taken on a conviction. About civilisations with very different technology and organisation – primitive societies – I still choose not to make judgements, they are too alien to me. But a societal form with approximately the same condition of technology and mode of domination I understand all too well and when something happens in them that goes against the norms that I apply in my own society I will denounce them with the certainty of a recent convict. Of the Papua not a word, for or against, but the workings of the Iranian regime I can more or less understand and those I denounce. In the name of
the new doctrine, in the name of cultural substantivism: Tremble, Khomeini! (De Swaan, February 9 1985, NRC Handelsblad) (#7)

De Swaan played around with the terms of debate. Cultural relativism appears a zealous doctrine and a form of stubborn disbelief. Over and against religious orthodoxy, exemplified by Khomeini, is placed an equally substantive belief system: that of a progressive liberalism. The entire column is thus written in provocation of what, according to De Swaan, is a widely adhered doctrine that is nonetheless never really applied consistently in practice. The closing paragraph of the column drives home this effect: as one of the main protagonists of a worldly, cosmopolitan and progressive politics in the Dutch public sphere De Swaan professes openly to his readership that he has fallen away from the faith. The column is much more than an argument. It is a publicly enacted, theatrical gesture, at once playful, joking and earnest. The significance of De Swaan’s argument cannot be understood if one were to omit this performative, stylistic aspect of his intervention.

In the follow-up to his first piece De Swaan goes one step further. It is provocatively entitled *Civilisational advantage* and opens with:

There is no attack of western civilisation that does not use the arsenal of that civilisation itself. There is nothing to be said against the West that isn’t said in western terms. The western civilisation is the first and the only that has formulated and propagated its own resistance. Capitalism is western, imperialism too, but anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism are equally western. (De Swaan, February 16 1985, NRC Handelsblad) (#8)

De Swaan aims to unmask all those voices that speak of eurocentrism and seek to resist assimilation to the West as, in fact, heirs to central aspects of its civilisational development. It is here that the domestication of the issue of integration reveals itself. Without any specific explanation, De Swaan moves to the question of minorities:

The crucial idea [*kerngedachte*] of western civilisation is the idea that there are norms that apply to all people, irrespective of the person at hand, irrespective of origin, birth mark or conviction. But minorities that claim their own law have to do so in name of their particularity. If they give this up they will dissolve as a group into the surrounding society without residue. For each member taken separately this may be either a tragedy or a liberation, but not for the minority that wants to manifest itself as a group. (De Swaan, February 16 1985, NRC Handelsblad) (#9)

De Swaan goes on to discuss the contradiction in which minorities may find themselves when they seek to maintain their particularity in the face of ‘norms that apply to all people’. The core of this contradiction, according to De Swaan, is the
fact that western universalism grants minorities the right to be particular, to retain
difference. Minorities are thus drawn into a double bind: by claiming and
maintaining their particularity minorities are, in fact, affirming the universalism
that has recognised their particularity. De Swaan concludes:

For Dutch sensibilities of justice Islam is precisely not special and thus a faith which may be practised amidst the many others.

That one, universal principle is precisely not what those believers, each within their own sect, believe. They deem themselves excellent, graced with the one, true faith. At the same time, they can only maintain themselves in their particular position, because they are not special for their environment, and because they claim a principle that counts for everyone, irrespective of its validity or faith, and they, already for that reason alone, cannot accept unreservedly.

This paradoxical relation shall turn out to instigate considerable misapprehension in the future, because it has not yet dawned on every minority that she does not obtain her right from something special [eigen] that others lack, but precisely from an abstract principle that ignores all particularity and counts for everyone. (De Swaan, February 16 1985, NRC Handelsblad) (#10)

This final quote, published in early 1985, gives this study its question. How? First of all, it illustrates once more how familiar and engrained a whole series of notions and arguments were well before the main empirical work at stake in this study. Yes, De Swaan’s arguments are quite different from Van Doorn and many other voices at the time. Yes, he writes in a context in which the whole problematic of integrating minorities has become an entirely familiar topic of public discussion. Yet, there are also significant resonances. The very idea that something like ‘integration of minorities’ was a question of, at the very least, negotiating the distance between western, Dutch universalism that grants people the freedom to be different and others, often recently immigrated, who found themselves at the margins of this liberal order and whom could do little more than dissolve into it or, in an act of self-contradiction, maintain their particularity against all odds. The problem is always already one of cultural lag, of particularistic resistances against a liberal order that cannot be resisted without accepting it, of fitting others in as peacefully as possible. Again, De Swaan’s position cannot be generalised to public or political opinion at large. That’s not the point. The point is that this discursive elaboration of the issue, as it is articulated by De Swaan, needs little to no explanation or justification. De Swaan can rely on a whole web of associations available to himself and his public. The issue already has a texture to which it is enough only to elude. Moreover, this texture resonates in important ways with that of Van Doorn: the issue of ‘immigrant integration’ is always already the problem of incorporating – i.e. fitting in – others into an established order, for which certain cultural divides will have to be breached.

In his third column of the series De Swaan discusses the contradictions of
this process and the ways in which ethnic identities are created as function of the incorporation process and an ‘ethnic resentment’ operates along the way:

It is precisely those who are about to blend into the surrounding society who eagerly cultivate a resentment towards the majority; in this way they pledge their loyalty to their own group in negative terms, even though there is little else that still keeps them there.

[...] The ethnic resentment also has a public function: it paralyses the opponent by identifying him with what he despises most: racism and fascism. And only because the opponent himself hates those follies so much can it work. Only because the opponent lives with a universalistic mentality of western civilisation does he keep listening, does he give in and notices later on that to his dismay he has promised more than he can offer. So, a second round in the spiral of indignation follows. (De Swaan, February 23 1985, NRC Handelsblad) (#11)

De Swaan’s series of columns is not interesting because it may reveal how many others also thought and felt about issues of difference and citizenship at the time, but because it puts forth in well-explicated terms what can be said of it to begin with. It shows us how an issue can be dealt with, how it works, what its possibilities are. Writings by participants of public discussion, such as De Swaan’s, are interesting because they are the product of concerted effort to carefully and precisely articulate what an issue is and how it may be argued about. More specifically, writings like this one allow us to recognise that if we would suggest that there is, at a certain period in time, a culturalisation at work in the politics of citizenship and belonging in the Netherlands, we risk forgetting the extent to which the issue was not always already culturalised. This need not mean that debates over citizenship and belonging in the Netherlands have not become curiously invested in the notion of culture at certain moments and in certain periods, but it does mean that it is important to recognise that something like culturalisation was already a constitutive possibility of the issue-at-hand. Even though De Swaan may take up quite specific positions within this ongoing debate over time, he is always already arguing in the vicinity of concepts such as cultural difference, backwardness and incorporation. He needs to position his argument in relation to such concepts in order to even make an intervention.

The second reason why this final quote by De Swaan raises a question for me is because it quite succinctly presents the paradox of liberal inclusion. Liberality grants space for difference, yet to what extent can differences be recognised and is their recognition sufficient when this same liberality must refuse to understand differences on their own terms and, conversely, recognises not their particularity but merely an abstract principle that counts for all. Quite a bit has been written on such questions of recognition and accommodation since, both in
normative and sociological terms. However, what interest me about De Swaan’s quote is that he, not entirely without justification, seems to think that the proponents of minority recognition will encounter the greatest trouble in negotiating the paradox of liberal inclusion. De Swaan suggests that they may not have realised yet to what extent their inclusion into a liberal order is actually indifferent to their particularity. Minorities be warned: the recognition of particularities may have next to nothing to do with an actual appreciation of them and all the more to do with an appreciation of what sets the majority apart, its distinctive liberality. Recognition of difference in the process of integration is not a ‘love of the other’ but precisely the opposite, a ‘love of the self’. De Swaan was not incorrect in suggesting that much confusion could be expected as too what exactly motivated and justified the integration of minorities. ‘Love of the other’ and ‘love of the self’ can often be hard to distinguish. Yet, what of the majority itself? Could it not be, as De Swaan seems to overlook, that it is first and foremost the status of the majority that will become the object of much confusion? Does not the abstract norm of liberality play an equally confusing trick on the self-proclaimed majority? Could it not be that the most thorough confusion would emerge among those voices, questions and debates that revolve around what it may actually mean to be Dutch, precisely because it is so difficult to distinguish between what one is presumably doing in view of the other – taking her difference into account – and what, in fact, one does precisely in view of what one assumes is distinctive of one’s self.

Assuming that De Swaan did indeed think that it would be the minorities who were to be confused about what inclusion into a liberal order actually entails, the remainder of this study aspires, if anything, to demonstrate that De Swaan was wrong. That is, I purport to demonstrate that it is precisely the notion of what, already in the 1980’s, was called ‘the autochthon’ that would come to evoke the most dizzying confusion and, thus, public contention. The most thoroughly confused and elaborately perplexed would turn out to be those people who tried to speak about and often on behalf of the people who were understood to already be Dutch, already self-evidently citizens entitled to belong. Such speaking and debating became an increasingly impossible and self-defeating task, disfiguring the self-evident image of ‘the nation’ through the very attempts to describe it. Against De Swaan’s suggestion that the minorities may not be aware of what they were getting themselves into as they were, willy-nilly, incorporated in a liberal order, I will argue the opposite. The paradox of liberal inclusion is all the more confusing for those who imagine themselves to be already included, to speak from that position and who presume to see ‘others’ coming towards them from the margins,
for better or worse. It is precisely by imagining themselves at the heart of the
nation and infusing debates about citizenship and difference with all kinds of
notions of what that means that participants in public and political debates have
constructed for themselves an insoluble object: Dutchness. As participants from all
sides came to load that object with more and more significance and esteem, its
insolubility became more and more of a problem. On the one hand, it appeared all
but impossible to solve the puzzle of defining Dutchness, often because many
agreed that it should not be defined. Yet, into what were ‘we’ then presuming to
welcome those others who would come to learn what it meant to live in this liberal
society? Thus, it also appeared all but impossible to dissolve the problem of
Dutchness, often because many agreed that national belonging is, in the end, a
good.

So, my question will be what kind of public confusion, otherwise known as
‘debate’, emerged over the Dutchness of Dutch citizenship since the interventions
of Van Doorn and De Swaan. My approach, extracted from Van Doorn’s
intervention, focuses on the discursive fabrication of a string of interrelated public
issues and, more specifically, the performative aspects of such work in the public
sphere. Finally, my aim will be to better understand the importance of continuity is
the politics of citizenship and difference, particularly insofar as ‘the nation’ is made
to endure. Let’s begin.