Out of character: debating Dutchness, narrating citizenship
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Crafting an approach: composing nationalism and narrating of citizenship

Maar voor het kennen van het cultuurleven behoudt de waan zelf, waarin tijdgenoten leefden, de waarde van een waarheid.

*But for understanding cultural life delusion itself,*
*in which contemporaries lived, maintains the value of a truth.*

— Johan Huizinga, 1919

In view of culture

This study into the recent continuities and contestedness of Dutchness is decidedly *culturalist*: it takes culture to be significant in and of itself. Although I do not follow Jeffrey Alexander and others in their attempts to demonstrate the causal autonomy of culture (Alexander 2004; see Woods & Debs 2013), I do appreciate and employ the idea that it is worthwhile to analyse culture in and of itself, and not – as is so often the case in social science – as some correlate of other supposedly non-cultural processes. Indeed, this study is intentionally structured in such a way: it interrelates culture among itself and takes this intermingling as the empirical problem-at-hand. In the context of this study, culturalism is not a position against something else, but a mode of doing research. That, I think, is altogether more in line with what culturalism ought to promote. It does not presume to replace structuralism or materialism – or any other contender in causal primacy –, but does distinguish certain aspects of social reality to be cultural and seeks ways to make those aspects matter in our accounts of reality. The question, of course, is what that implies.

I start out with this programmatic statement because it is important to address the issue of culture head on. I don’t want to beat around the bush: this study is an exercise in culturalism. Positioning this study in terms of culture is, of

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course, problematic and contentious. Concepts of culture and a politics of culturalism have come under fierce critique. As shall become evident in a moment, I agree with much of that critique. Moreover, I agree very much with the more basic idea of being critical about culture. Much of what has been written by way of such critique is indispensable for avoiding past mistakes and vices of research and theoretical reflection (Kuper 1999; Wallerstein 2004; Geschiere 2009). Moreover, many of such critiques have come in the form of highly sophisticated empirical accounts of our world that more often than not do a far better job of providing answers to interesting questions that those who depend on culture. ‘Cultural explanations’ and accounts in terms of ‘cultural differences’ obfuscate many important aspects of what may be relevant to us. What’s more, the concept of culture often sets us off on the wrong foot entirely. Yet, I will also argue that it is still worthwhile to take up the concept of culture and to set up research appropriate for it.

Although the literature has identified many deficiencies in the concept of culture (Baumann 1996; 1999), for the purposes of this study there are three that stand out: idealism, groupism and an overvaluation of consensus. In the first – idealism – people make the mistake of trying to explain a whole host of social phenomena by referring to ‘ideas’ as if ideas are somehow a root driver or cause of other social phenomena (Garfinkel 1967). This approach to building interesting accounts about our world is flawed for a rather simple reason: it is blatantly unclear what ideas demand of us, what they compel us to do, how their driving work can actually be demonstrated. In fact, this is precisely why ideas are interesting: they are part of disputes, conflicts, inquiries, projects, experiments in which they are at stake and through which their meanings are continuously re-invented. If ideas did not have this inventive property there would be no sense in having them nor would it be interesting to analyse them. This problem is often averted by, first, deciding out of thin air that the researcher, in a groundless wisdom clothed as learnedness, *does* know what ideas demand and, second, projecting back into ideas those meanings that fit the cultural explanation at hand. As long as one can hide the fact that such accounts are circular, one can claim that one has demonstrated something interesting about the world: ‘they do such and such because of their culture (which is defined as that which they do’).

Thus, one doesn’t need to resort to vulgar forms of materialism, relegating ideas to secondary or even epiphenomenal status, to argue that idealism is problematic (see also Alexander 2005). The point is that ideas are always part of interpretative repertoires extended across social relations (Mead 1934; Garfinkel 1967). This is true also for the researcher’s ideas (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992).
Researchers need to think long, hard and out loud about how people, themselves included, are trying to make sense of ideas. What matters is what people are doing with ideas, without suggesting that what people ‘actually’ do does not include making sense of ideas itself. Sense making is in and of itself a practice that people actually do. It need not be perceived in a reflective or explanatory relation to other practices to be a worthy object of study. Making sense is hard enough as is.

The circularity of cultural explanations already takes us into the second problem: groupism. The notion of culture has become immensely important for our speaking of and dealing with human collectivities in terms of bounded and homogenous groups (Brubaker 2006). Particularly over last two century, the very notion of a society has become more or less synonymous with that of a culture (Heilbron, Magnusson & Wittrock 1998; Latour 2007; Calhoun 1999). ‘Society’ is the ‘cultural group’ writ large. The identification of the social and the cultural entailed in this groupist notion of society is, again, circular: sociality consists, in the end, of cultural sameness, while cultural sameness is understood to be the product of societal boundedness. This makes the identification of ‘society’ and ‘culture’ somewhat of an axiom: it need not be empirically demonstrated, merely assumed (Lemaire 1976). The object of social science is always already this compound of integrated social relations and cultural homogeneity. Historically, this approach to social reality constitutes a great break-through as it reformulates metaphysical questions about sociality into practical questions about the too-and-fro of social relations and cultural expressions that can be subjected to empirical inquiry. Yet, it has also enabled a deeply inadequate categorical thinking in both academic and extra-academic discourse as it invites the idea that one has understood a problem when one can determine which group, categorically defined, is responsible for it. Capitalism becomes the doing of capitalists, crime that of criminals, liberalism that of liberals and ethnicity that of ethnics. Collectivities are thus reduced to person-like actors, ‘groups’, that can be held responsible for certain effects because they figure as the ultimate sources of action: ‘Why did this happen?!’ ‘Because they did it.’

Groupism, as Brubaker has aptly explained (2004), is a mistake not because categorisations do not matter but precisely because they do. By irreflexively recanting the social categorisations that people employ social scientist have very effectively black boxed those practices of categorisation out of view, thereby at once and often purposefully legitimating certain categorisations at the expense of others (see also Hacking 2007). Of course, halting this nastiest of habits in social science will be very hard indeed as it is hard wired into some of the most basic assumptions about its object and purpose. While many social categorisations
have been purged over the years, others have come to replace them.

‘Culture’ has come to play a curious role in this respect. Many categorisations have been delegitimised and become suspect, making them appropriate objects of study as culture. That is, it is only when and in so far as categorisations become suspect and illegitimate, no longer our own, that social science is able to comfortably take them as culture, namely in the form of incorrect yet meaningful interpretations by lay people. Culture becomes the name of mistakes by non-experts. In a broader sense, culture is how the other understands the world differently. It is the collection of their (mistaken) interpretations over and against our neutral descriptions. This demarcation operates just as well between researcher and researched as it does between, roughly, the West and the rest. This also means that ‘culture’ becomes a name for group differences. It is culture that makes one group different from another as viewed from the supposedly culture-less standpoint of the researcher. It is in response to a culturalisation of social categorisations that notion such as ‘cultural racism’ (Balibar & Wallerstein 1991) or ‘culturism’ (Schinkel 2013) have become meaningful critiques of the supposedly neutral distinguishing of ‘cultural groups’. As Terry Eagleton (2000) has discussed, the notion of culture has travelled in the 20th century from that which everyone can potentially partake in on a global scale, naming a common humanity through the humanities, to that which separates people into discrete groups, describing their potentially deadly incommensurabilities.

Finally, the notion of culture is associated with an overvaluation of consensus (Koenis 2008; see also Rancière 2004). This overvaluation is directly related to the problems of idealism and groupism as it takes culture to be the consensus among group members about how to interpret the world and what to do in it. Culture, then, is important because it supposedly grants cohesion to collectivities by orienting their members in a similar way and coordinating their actions. It also suggests that consensus is normal while dissensus becomes pathological. Indeed, we may recognise that it is in the deep interest of people who, over the course of two centuries, have been witness to unimaginable violence and destruction that popular consensus is defined as the hallmark of society’s well-being. It is out of this violent disruption that social science and its notion of culture-as-consensus has been constructed. However, we must also recognise that this normal, peaceful society in which order is legitimate and all strife is rendered into deliberation is a fantasy called forth by its absence. The notion of culture thereby plays a trick on our senses as it tends to immediately imply consensus rather than dissensus. Culture is always already thought as consensus even when we don’t see it. Even if we hardly ever encounter societal consensus and it can
hardly be said to be the norm, we tend to perceive matters in light of it. The hope for consensus places concrete situations of coordination and contention in a horizon of agreement, as if it will eventually have to take place. There is much to be said for keeping such a horizon open in apparent contradiction to a dissensual present (Dewey 2012 [1927]; Habermas 1981; Benhabib 2002; Calhoun 2002). What does not help, however, is to assume that consensus is delayed due to a lack in cultural sameness. The idea that people are in consensus because they share in culture is begging the question at best. It also immediately rules out the possibility that people are in conflict because of similarities or, conversely, that disagreements are themselves the stuff of culture. As has been argued by Margaret Somers (1995a, b), it is the concept of ‘political culture’ that often does a lot of questionable theoretical work in presenting both politics and culture in very particular ways. We will return to her argument shortly.

In summary, the notion of culture is rightly critiqued because it invites the construction of accounts in which bounded, homogenous groups live their lives according to, somehow, compelling ideas about whose meaning the members of such groups agree without effort. Indeed, such accounts of what our world is and how it works suit particular forms of politics and legitimate certain structures of domination. In short, it suits a politics in which authority is based on the claim that one particular group out of many knows how to life well and the aim of politics becomes the protection of that group, its ideas and its supposedly higher form of cultivation, in part through the assimilation of other groups to it (Fanon 1952; Said 1978; Balibar 2004). In this sense, the very notion of culture is racist and is properly rejected. Authority and esteem come to hinge on the extent to which one is able to enact and claim the right kind of culture. Conversely, pathology and deviance are almost inevitably culturalised, i.e. diagnosed in terms of a lack in cultural homogeneity and reverence for proper cultural endowment. Along these lines the notion of culture has enabled and still enables gross injustices, particularly because it helps to transport responsibility for those injustices onto the people that suffer from them most. Culture is used to carve up the world into worthy and unworthy segments, at best granting the cultured the privilege – ‘noblesse oblige’ – to instruct others how to mend their ways. We can already sense the faint sound of Wagner’s *Ride of the Valkyries* swelling beyond the hills and begin to smell the rotten stench of ‘victory’.

If the notion of culture is so strongly entangled with all of this, why hold on to it at all? And why proclaim that this study is itself culturalist? The answer is that ‘culture’ may still be worthwhile. In the context of this study it indicates a crucial aspect of politics that is appropriately called ‘cultural’. Precisely because
this study seeks to create some critical distance between itself and the ways in which ‘culture’ is politically employed, it is worthwhile to explicate its own mode of culturalism (see also Van Reekum 2011). Not only does such a contrast help to clarify what is problematic about the notion of culture, it also avoids the reiteration of unproductive dichotomies. Despite all the conceptual, methodological and normative damnation that can be justifiably flung at ‘culture’, this study will not try to work through this predicament by, instead, presenting a supposedly non-cultural, ‘materialist’, ‘structural’, ‘politico-economic’ or ‘critical’ account. These positionings already exist in view of culture and derive their meaning and impulse from arguments against ‘culture’. They have the tendency to rely on culturalism in the very repudiation of it. Much of what is done under these rubrics is far too sophisticated to remain trapped by this tendency. This already indicates that a pure non-culturalism is a simplistic abstraction. The point, here, is to argue that a straight-forwards escape out of the clutches of culture will not work. We have to repossess it.

**Practice, performativity and particularity**

One way of repossessing the concept of culture – the one I will try to follow – has been to suggest that the reason for culture’s perseverance as a sociological concept is that it addresses some very important aspects of social reality, which one would want to get a handle on even if culture is a treacherous instrument for doing so. The goal should be to explicate what those aspects are and go from there.

One of the reasons that idealistic uses of culture – approaching culture as a separate realm of somehow meaningful ideas – are so unfortunate is that this turn to culture is the very opposite of what makes it interesting. Namely, culture becomes a static firmament of self-contained truths that orient the lives of the people living under its canopy. Yet, culture should not draw our attention to the heavens, at least not predominantly. It should draw and has drawn out attention to the ground: what are people doing? Culture as a sociological instrument can help us intervene in all-too-static and deterministic accounts that account for the social world in action-less correlations and repetitions. As Garfinkel famously said, we should avoid thinking and speaking about people as if they are ‘cultural dopes’ (Garfinkel 1967). Understood along these lines, culture addresses how people actually achieve their lives from day to day (Goffman 1959; Schutz 1967; Mauss 1973).

For instance, let’s assume it makes some sense to say that this or that socio-economic class exists. One could, and should, then still raise the question how it does so. Throughout the history of social science, such exercises invariably
end up discovering that what appeared to be a compact social thing – a class – exists in a highly heterogeneous set of ways (Thompson 1963). Class is multiple. A fuller, more appropriate account of class relations would then come to include this heterogeneity of ways through which class life is executed. Culture matters. Class doesn’t just happen as if it is the product of anonymous social forces. It must be enacted and insofar as it is enacted it cannot be done monolithically. Actually doing things in practice will always entail invention, inquiry, interpretation, doubt, incompleteness, innovation and, thus, heterogeneity (James 1907). In this way, an eye for culture – how people do things – helps create far more sophisticated accounts of social reality. What has come to be known as a ‘turn to practice’ in social science was often apprehensive of the concept of culture, some of the reasons for which I discussed above, but I would argue that the turn to practice cannot do without culture, albeit in a radically new way (see also Somers 1995b; Alexander 2004; Bell 2007). Leaving culture behind in a practical turn would result in a rather flat and boring materialism that inevitably harbours culturalist prejudices, which it is unwilling to reflect upon as talk of culture has become wholly suspect. The heterogeneity we find in practice would be little more than noise, a nuisance, something to get rid of. Yet, it is not just what people do ‘materially’ – what their habits, routines and capacities are – that matters in practice, but also how they make sense ‘culturally’ of all this action by more or less reflexively trying to understand what’s happening. Even after a turn to practice, culture remains of the upmost importance because practice would regress into ‘behaviour’ if we would not include in it the on-going reflexivity with which people engage in practice (Boltanski 2011). Only then does heterogeneity become more than randomness or error, namely the constant figuring out of how to actually do things. Only then can we see that something like class exists in and through heterogeneity in practice. Culture – sense-making, performance, expression – permeates practices. Or, in other words, there are always certain styles involved in doing things to the extent that without stylistic prowess one couldn’t do them. Separating out the ‘actually doing’ from the ‘symbolic embellishment’ is counterproductive. One can’t say anything without sounding a certain way, directly impacting on what one is actually saying. One can’t act towards certain goals without acting in a certain way, directly impacting on what one is actually achieving.

A second aspect comes into view: performativity. It is not just that practices have stylistic qualities. These styles cannot be relegated to a secondary role in working through practice. To use one of the more famous examples of speech act theory (Austin 1962), it is indeed the case that one creates a business
meeting by stating ‘I hereby open this meeting’ in such a way that this statement refers to its own performative work. But included in this is the fact that one is equipped with the proper dramaturgical sensibility to express this statement in the right way. Shouting frantically ‘I hereby open this meeting!!!!’ will, in most cases, not open this meeting. It will initiate a particular kind of engagement, but not a meeting. To open a business meeting one is expected to deploy a certain tone of voice, a certain rhythm, a certain timing, thereby allowing others to also enter the performative flow. By playing around with these gestural qualities, people are able to do very minute and clever things, such as opening a meeting is such a way that the attendants get the feeling that something of great importance is going to happen about which they are expected to be very concerned and earnest (Goffman 1967; Collins 2004). The attendants can then begin to prepare their face work, their emotional work, and their alliances accordingly. The silence before the storm. All of this works just as well when people are aware of the theatrical quality of their actions. Even very attuned sociologists, who have read their Goffman, cannot and will not dispense with dramaturgy in order to get things done. Culture is not an ‘as if’ that loses its magic once people peek behind the curtains of social conventionality. Quite the opposite, it is because people are reflexive about performativity that they tend to take it very seriously. It is not just that my girlfriend is acting ‘as if’ she loves me, she’s acting that way because that is what she is trying to do (and succeeding admirably I might add). Only by playing roles with more dexterity do we break through appearances and attain some measure of veracity, durability and predictability (see for instance Butler 1993; Law & Mol 2002). Not less but more culture is needed to make things natural. Performances, then, are always attempts to get performativity going. Each gesture is a jump into an unknown and open future. It is always and necessarily an open question whether other people (and indeed other non-humans involved) will come to play along. The felicity of gestures – whether they work or not – is always in-the-making.

If, instead, something could be achieved through the application of predetermined rules – as in a closed system –, one would no longer need to be reflexive about the stylistic qualities of one’s gestures. One would no longer be feeling out one’s way through situations, but merely taking certain chances in the context of certain probabilities. Behaviour would be enough. So when we speak of culture, we are concerned with the various ways in which people deal with and navigate through the constitutive unpredictability of their actions within situational horizons. This is also why there has always been a tension between sociological accounts that seek to understand action in terms of strategies over and against sociological accounts that seek to understand action in terms of culture. Social
scientists that work with the concept of culture are fundamentally apprehensive to the idea that action can be merely strategic. To them, strategic instrumentality is always embedded in broader cultural horizons. Once we relate culture to performativity, we can understand why. The problem is not that strategic accounts of action reduce people to cynical chance-takers, while cultural accounts reduce them to culturalised automatons. There are plenty of situations in which people are being cynical chance-takers, while there are many situations in which people are rewriting the scripts of their lives. The problem is that strategic accounts close down the horizon of action to one homogeneous telos: utility, off-spring, power, prestige, reputation, capital, violence, women, death drive, etc. For all their faults, cultural accounts persevere in social science because even if they often reduce people to script-following actors unable to step out of their assigned roles, they at least envision the horizon of action to be something at stake in the on-going performance itself. So, even if people may not be capable of performatively changing the rules of the game – one does not simply mime capitalism out of existence –, cultural accounts at least provide us with accounts in which game changing is an ever present possibility. Through such accounts, we can come to know ourselves and what we do in terms that allow for them to be changed by trying to act out things differently.

Finally, this brings us to the importance of particularity. As discussed above, culture has been an important concept for thinking about particularity. One often encounters culture in plural, as in ‘different cultures’. More often than not, ‘cultures’ thereby indicate ways of doing things, close-knit social relations and group boundaries all at the same time. As said, this often involves a hierarchical ordering of ‘cultures’ that is, at once, a hierarchical ordering of peoples (Lemaire 1976). There is apparently an observer of cultures whose own culture enables him to differentiate and order other cultures. This observer culture, invariably European in descent, is thereby the supposedly neutral yard stick beneath cultural diversity. This intellectual habit, while politically productive, has posed an immense obstacle to speaking clearly about culture. Although it won’t be easy, it has to stop. Some social scientists have tried to go cold turkey and kick the habit of using culture altogether. Yet, if we follow the re-articulation of culture along the lines already put forth so far, I think we might proceed with more recognition of where we’re coming from.

Instead of identifying particularities by looking for difference between ‘cultures’, thereby reifying culture and essentialising difference, we may think of culture, in the singular, as that aspect of practices that makes differences. Culture becomes something that we all partake in, rather than something that certain people
have to a greater extent than others. So, it is not that people are different because they ‘have’, ‘are part of’, or ‘act out’ different cultures. In line with my arguments about practice and performativity, in order to actually achieve anything people necessarily need to make sense, enact, and stylise. For instance, one cannot merely be bourgeois, one has to find a particular way of doing it. One always finds oneself within an already moving field of semiotic relations in which there is no neutral position (Hall 1973). One is always already making sense, enacting and expressing in a particular way. There is no ‘working class’, ‘Turkish’, ‘male’, ‘black’, ‘cosmopolitan’, ‘radical’, ‘left-wing’, ‘professional’, or ‘environmentalist’ as that would mean that these positions exist as stable states independently of each other. All of these differences are being made, are in-the-making. That is, in order to take up any of these positions one will need to continuously re-invent what they actually involve. As the scholarship of cultural studies has so expansively demonstrated, culture is this entire landscape of particularising, of making difference, of cultivating culture. To attribute to people a specific culture – A has culture B – is entirely begging the question. It is to indicate a mere moment in a process perceived from the most particular of viewpoints, nothing more.

Take, for instance, a frequently observed attribution in the Dutch context: ‘Moroccan culture’. According to politicians, bloggers, journalists and social scientists alike, ‘Moroccan culture’ is making ‘Moroccans’ do all kinds of things that others, who do not have ‘Moroccan culture’, do not do. As already discussed, the trick is simply to define ‘Moroccan culture’ as that which one would like to attribute to ‘Moroccans’. If ‘Moroccans’ are found not to do things that were included in ‘Moroccan culture’ they have apparently become less ‘Moroccan’. This way of reasoning is what passes for serious discussion, not only in the Dutch context. Only very rarely are cultural arguments made to actually give interesting accounts of what is happening and how people come to develop their ways of living (see for instance De Jong 2007). Most of the time, the overriding concern is who one can blame, punish and discipline: how do ‘we’ make ‘Moroccans’ less ‘Moroccan’?

Does this mean that a notion such as ‘Moroccan culture’ is vacuous, a mere veil for prejudice and racism? I would think not. It is much more than that. It is the entire ensemble of ways in which people deal with the differences implied in nominations of Moroccan-ness. At the very least, it indicates that people are engaged in making differences, in particularising nationalities and ethnicities. People find themselves in already moving fields of national and ethnic differences that categorise them and through which they categorise. Thus, ‘Moroccan culture’ indicates that people are inventing and re-inventing ways to do nationhood and
ethnicity. This, indeed, helps understand and explain why people do certain things. For instance, it helps explain why public intellectuals can make a living writing long, earnest exposés about the threat ‘Moroccans’ pose to ‘society’ as publics are interested in material that helps them navigate the moving fields of nationality and ethnicity in which they find themselves. In such exposés, they may well find socially acceptable narratives that help them explain to themselves and others how it is that they are different from ‘Moroccans’ or, instead, how their Moroccan-ness is understood by others. In a social environment in which one’s standing is closely tied up with ethnic hierarchies, it is to be expected that such writings – good or bad – will circulate widely. Just as the immigrants that came from Morocco and now live out their lives – caring, stealing, shouting, shitting, praying, fucking, voting, writing – in the Dutch Kingdom, culture-bashing intellectuals are equally partaking in ‘Moroccan culture’ as they – together with the rest of us – are inflecting the ways in which it is possible to be Moroccan today. To take on culture in one’s analysis, then, is to be attuned to the ways in which people particularise and differentiate, how people become capable of making, sustaining and re-arranging differences.

Doing Dutchness

When we take practice, performativity and particularity on board, we can say that there are ‘different cultures’ after all. That is, different practices involve a constant stylistic work – performing and interpreting – that particularises them. There are cultures of democracy, cultures of cycling, cultures of love, cultures of scholarship, cultures of dwelling, and so on. In this light, the somewhat strange habit of connecting tribal, ethnic, national, religious and racial modifiers to the word ‘culture’ – as in ‘Dutch culture’ – can also be repossessed. Of course, there is Dutch culture, meaning: there are a multitude of practices in which people, willy nilly, are performatively trying to get a handle on what it actually involves to be different in the particular way of being Dutch. People do Dutchness…and then they do it some more differently (see for instance Margry & Roodenburg 2007; Stengs 2012; Krebbekx et al. 2013; Gouda 1995; Galema et al. 1993; Schinkel 2013; Guadeloupe 2010; Mepschen 2012; Balkenhol 2014). The point is that the suggestion of homogeneity, determinism and singularity immediately seems rather ridiculous when viewed in this way: why on earth would we expect that people figure out what it involves to be Dutch in one, repeatable, rule-driven, and resembling way!? It not only seems improbable but also immensely impractical. People would have to go around living their lives and constantly thinking to themselves “wait a minute, I’m Dutch!” and then somehow adjust their actions
according to some one-size-fits-all performance model of what that would look like in this particular moment and situation.

The improbable goal of coordinating all the heterogeneous practices that involve doing something like Dutchness is linked to the ways in which tribal, ethnic, national, religious and racial modifiers are intimately associated with highly valorised and charged boundaries of in- and exclusions, of recognising and affirming human-cum-civic dignity. In all kinds of ways, our liberal democratic vocabulary of rights and sovereignty constantly refers to a ‘political community’ that is more often than not presumed to be bounded, composed of resembling members and in a state of consensus underlying more superficial disputes (Calhoun 1999). Where to find this community of resemblance and agreement? Nationalism is, among other things, the attempt to find the political community by way of national differences. Yet, this means that we ought to take culture very serious indeed (Leerssen 2006). Dutch culture, i.e. the multitude of practices in which people do Dutchness, is thereby of immense importance to projects of nationalism as it involves the presumption that there is some method to this madness. It should be possible, so nationalisms propose, to compose out of the multitude of practices a coherent overview of how they hang together, follow out of each other and exists as one integrated body of cultural life.

In Foucault’s discussion of such compositional work, he argues that the recurrent dispositif is a biopolitical one (Foucault 2003). A particular way of composing nations recurs: nations are those entities that persevere, that are able to withstand the many forces that threaten their existence, health and ability to care for themselves. Nations, then, are known by a capacity to exist on and out of themselves. They draw their capacity to endure from within. They entertain some internal distinction, the worthiness of which is demonstrated by its very resistance to force. This historical diagnosis of nations is at once a moral and political claim: ‘Society must be defended’. The fact that nations exist through force, i.e. war, at once means that we are called to war through our national affiliations. If the nation exists, it must have enemies and these enemies must be kept at bay.

From a critical standpoint, we can and should say that nationalism thereby involves the violent and unjustified differentiation between enactments of nationhood that are included in the dominant narrative and enactments that are unmasked as ‘not really coming from within’. Certain performances and interpretations become indicative of national distinction while others betray even the most skilled impostors. Culture becomes a treacherous terrain of shibboleths. As has been repeated over and over in critical treatments of nationalism, the inclusion of certain enactments is only possible through the exclusion of others.
The insiders use the outsiders to get to know themselves. The interiority of the national body exists through the very expulsion of ‘alien elements’ (see for instance Schinkel 2007). In this way, it is possible to unmask the naturalised distinctions between in- and outsiders as politically productive of contingent power relations. The discourse of nationalism, composing an internal cultural distinctiveness, is shown to be little more than a myth as it must repress and disavow parts of its historical becoming, which should therefore have been included in it. Nationalism is unmasked as it appears to refuse its own rules. It is a false game played by those who are in the position to determine the application of the rules.

While this style of critique is, I think, entirely justified, it also rushes past a lot of concerns that are not easily combined with it. Most notably, by all too quickly interpreting struggles over nationhood in terms of power relations, one almost inevitably forgets the cultural aspects of what is going on. Even if we accept – which I do – that nationalism involves the contingent imposition of boundaries, excluding certain ways of doing nationhood, as a way to legitimate inequality and justify violence, we should still be interested in how people are performatively capable of doing so. Boundaries do not get drawn around something like ‘authentic Dutchness’ because certain people have the power and interest to do so (Lamont & Molnár 2002). Even if they have the power and interest to do so, they will still need to get out there and do it. Importantly, they will have to find ways of doing so that make sense, to themselves and others, and can become part of certain repertoires. Only then can they hope to achieve what we may think power and interest afford them. Only then does the mythology of nationhood attain any kind of plausibility and does a multitude of enactments begin to resemble something approximating what the biopolitical logic of nationalism posits: an enduring, internally coherent cultural life of the nation. The fact that this project of national formation must remain provisional and is never entirely true to its own values does not give people engaged in it free range, no matter how powerful and cynical they may supposedly be. Even if people reflexively understand that the composition of a national culture is a theatrical enactment that produces the very unity it purports to reveal, those people will have to delve into the cultural complexity of said enactments and build up the capacity to perform well. No matter how often we tell ourselves that it is merely ‘as if’ a national culture exists, this realisation does very little in changing the reality of its on-going performance and particularisation. Many critiques of nationalism therefore have the effect of re-articulating it. Unmasking national narratives as partial and hegemonic often suggest that they should be performed better: more expansively, more democratically, and more inclusively. So, neither the purported ideologues of nationalism nor their critics can easily side step the
cultural practice of performance and particularisation. In order to have any impact on what people do when they do Dutchness, be it constructive or deconstructive, one will have to engage with the material.

We are finally ready to see fully why a culturalist study of public and political struggles over Dutchness is warranted next to an approach that would take nationalism to be an instrument of and struggle over power. The problem is not that nationalism isn’t such an instrument. It is. Nor are struggles over nationhood in anyway a-political, as if culture is not political. The problem is that a critical perspective, aimed at unmasking the power effects of what is going on, cannot deal with certain questions that still need to be addressed, even after one has thoroughly unmasked and antagonised power. By seeking to unmask, critical approaches cannot deal with performativity as such. In the end, performativity must be reduced to power differentials: the difference is made by who does the performing, not by how the performance is done. Culture in itself doesn’t do anything. It is merely a very circumvented, disorienting means to an end. Instead, a culturalist perspective seeks to demonstrate that while power differentials are, indeed, immensely important, power play is always complicated by the performative demands and ambiguities of unpredictable situations.

To focus on this aspect is not to suggest a competing explanation, but rather to suggest that interesting accounts of what is happening in the world tend to include multiple pieces of the puzzle that never congeal into a uniform ‘theory’ of what is actually happening behind the veil of complexity. Of course, if one feels that such reduction is precisely what sets ‘scientific’ accounts apart from others, one will not agree with my approach. Here too, I would propose to be as eclectic as possible: reducing complexity and broadening our scope of it need in no way be in competition with each other. We need both. My main aim will be the latter as I will try to interject the understandings of citizenship politics and struggles over Dutchness with considerations of the cultural, i.e. performative problems faced by its participants. I will focus on how Dutchness is done, done differently, and then done again. Finally, this means that I will also focus on the question how Dutchness is being particularised, set apart and contrasted. In short, how national difference is being recursively maintained by inventing ever different ways of enacting such difference.

Doing Dutchness in public
By now, it has become clear that in order to get a handle on the politics of citizenship and the struggles over Dutchness I will study how participants in such practices enact Dutchness. As I’ve been arguing, there is no other way to study
such enactment than in the particular. That is, in a particular situational setting, in particular kinds of practices with their particular performative possibilities and problems.

I will study such enactments in public and political debates about Dutchness and citizenship. In no way are these practices representative for, reflexive of or generalisable to some greater set of facts about ‘the Netherlands’, ‘the Dutch’, or ‘Dutch politics’. If the reader is interested in any such facts, she will be greatly disappointed. As I will argue in more detail, to think that such national nominations describe social phenomena that can be generalised to – as one generalises from a sample to a population – is to misjudge what one is dealing with. Much social science has, of course, done precisely this: generalise factual instances to a national population of facts. It is today rightly rejected as methodological nationalism, although the institutional embeddedness of sociological research seems to prevent its practitioners from effectively ridding themselves of it. In any event, my reason for looking into debates about citizenship and nationhood in the Dutch context is not that they reveal the whole in the part. Indeed, such an approach would draw my own analysis into the very controversies I seek to understand as it would seem to be a mechanism whereby the national community could be found and described. Of course, getting involved in the debate itself will be inevitable in the end, but proposing a mechanism for finding the nation is not what I will aim for. Indeed, the argument that public discourse is a superior resource for finding out about Dutchness is, as we shall see, itself a crucial and deeply problematic part of doing Dutchness today.

**Studying public discourse**

Why then study public discourses? I take public and political debate to be one practice among the multitude of practices in which Dutchness is at stake, resonating and refracting what is happening in others. As such, it merits attention. However, there are specificities to practices of public discourse that make it of particular interest.

First of all, I will focus on a number of public arenas – parliament, opinion pages of the most established newspapers, news magazines, policy documents, white papers, books, scholarly publications, manifestos, lectures, announcements and other forms of esteemed public commentary and intervention – in which participants not only voice opinions and claims, but also seek to justify those positions while critiquing others (see De Haan 2008a). This means that participants in these arenas will tend to be highly reflexive about the kinds of reasoning that is going on around them and how to intervene in ways that are understandable for
opponents and proponents alike. Many of these participants make a living out of writing, commenting, publicising, ridiculing, critiquing and defending in public. I mainly focus on one, quite particular corner of publicity: the arena of publicity that purports to achieve national generality and be the focus of mainstream attention (see Emirbayer & Sheller 1999: 161). This fragment of publicity is profoundly selective, mainly accessible for and occupied by those who can lay claim to the dominant side of a wide array of differences: male, white, heteronormative, native, rational, representative, normal, learned, famous, etc. Yet, instead of focusing mainly on this selectivity, its changing dimensions and the silences it entails, I aim to focus on the justificatory work that participants in these arenas nonetheless engage in, even if they hoard the right to speak and obfuscate their particular privileges by discourses of generality (cf. Uitermark 2012; Benson & Neveu 2005; Bourdieu 1991). What is striking about this segment of public engagement is the attempt to provide arguments that anyone could or should be able to agree with. One might unmask such discourses to be, in fact, particular and selective, but that doesn’t change the fact that the practice of participating in these arenas is done through carefully crafted enactments of generality (Boltanski & Thévenot 2006 [1991]: 35). Participants, more often than not, presume to do, even if they pretend, what Immanuel Kant proposed to be the crux of public reason and public address: ‘But by the public use of one’s own reason I mean that use which anyone may make of it as a man of learning addressing the entire reading public.’ (1970 [1784]). There is in these arenas the repeated presumption to project claims towards certain general criteria, to have them hold for everyone, whatever that may mean at any one occasion.

Insofar as participants justify and critique they set up criteria and judgements that have a wider, public significance. Subsequently, this tends to involve attempts to organise and rationalise what is, in most conversational settings, a tangled mess. By this I do not mean to say that public discourse is actually better organised and more rational than, say, your last conversation with your aunt at birthday. Indeed, your aunt may be a very organised and rational interlocutor. What I mean is that participants are engaged with discourse in a way that is peculiar to the setting of public discourse in that publicity is purposefully equated to generality. Participants explicitly worry about the definitions of terms, they try to make sense of the cleavages between opponents, they explicitly signal their alliances, they try to corroborate their claims in ways that are accessible to others, and, most of all, they are in search of consistency across a range of arguments. The arenas I focus on are marked by the perplexing and odd precept that one ought not to contradict oneself, a highly impractical notion in most
situations but highly valorised in the ones at the heart of this study. All of this means that public discourse tends to bring out explicitly the articulatory logic of what they and others are claiming as participants test out the implications of discourse to a far greater extent than is usual in other settings. What participants claim about rights, grievances, injustices, privileges, problems, diagnosis and solutions will tend to be stretched, by themselves or others, to see how well an arguments is put together and what range it may cover. Crucially, participants will evaluate each other’s performances and explicitly articulate ways of valuing the positions and persuasiveness of interlocutors. One might say that public discourse forms one of the settings where it is not so much this or that statement that is put to the test but also the logic by which such statements can be associated into more or less consistent chains of positions (see also Laclau & Mouffe 1985). Public discourse is not just a confrontation of disparate claims, but enacts an explicit contest between ideologies, criteria, standards, world views and orientations.

Much of what is said about public discourse here resonates with the characterisation given by Jürgen Habermas (1989). Habermas’ sociology of public reason has taken up the study of public discourse in precisely this direction: public discourse is interesting because it is there that people put their claims making to the test of generality. This is what sets public discourse apart from other discursive settings. While Habermas’ theory of public discourse is most certainly performative, building on speech act theory and pragmatist linguistics, I want to argue that it presents unnecessary limitations for the study of discursive enactments. Habermas’ conceptual scheme offers, in principle, only two modes of speech: instrumental and communicative reason. This means that all properly public speech is performed in view of possible agreement and intersubjective understanding. Even if participants are not aiming for agreement – an attitude that is not unknown in public fora –, their speech acts can always be unmasked as mere manipulation and not properly public reasoning. However, the question is which kinds of agreement are at stake. Of course, Habermas differentiates between a variety of systemic domains in which communication proceeds in light of different regulative horizons: truth, justice, morality, beauty, etc. What is thereby precluded, is the idea that in any one practical setting multiple ways of valuing, judging and criticising may be at stake at the same time. It seems to me that such an approach to public discourse would allow for much more stylistic plurality. Debates are never only about who or what is right, considered within one and the same horizon of agreement, but very often also about what ‘being right’ actually means or entails. At stake are multiple notions of what an actual agreement would sound like. It is this room for multiple valuations that is opened up by Boltanski & Thévenot’s
theory of justification (2006 [1991]). By differentiating many ways of judging worth and justifying claims, they effectively offer a much richer, pluralistic theory of dissensus (see also Stark 2009). They show empirically how people creatively compromise, compare and switch between a variety of worths in one and the same situational horizon.

Their initial theorisation of the economies of worth, for instance, is based on conflicts and agreements in labour relations. Out of these conflicts, they have extracted a variety of worths – spiritual, domestic, civic, that of fame, of market, and industrial. These are demonstrably available to participants across their contestations. In this way, Habermas’ communicative reason is pluralised as it is not only that actors argue in view of different modes of agreement, but also that in one and the same setting – public debate for instance – these different forms of worth are themselves to be coordinated. In fact, one and the same utterance may enact a compromise between many of them.

By showing which kinds of compromises and critiques can be performed in dealing with a variety of worths, Boltanski & Thévenot have devised a pragmatic sociology in which the practical senses of the participants are not – in the end – given by power relations that they do not reflexively grasp. Conflicts are not steered by anonymous social forces that only trained sociologists – say, Pierre Bourdieu – have the tools to bring to light and the concepts to understand. Just like trained sociologists, participants have the capacity to do (self-)critique. That is, they are able to deploy one way of evaluating against another. The question is no longer that of competing ideologies and their sociological unmasking in view of the ‘actual’ social determinations. In fact, to suggest that there are social forces that only certain experts understand is to already begin to enact a specific way of evaluating, namely a style that Boltanski & Thévenot call ‘industrial’. Boltanski & Thévenot do not seek to unmask social reality through the cunning of a sociological reduction. What matters is describing how it is that participants are capable of comprise and critique and what is made possible by doing so. For instance, it might mean that certain tests of expertise – doctoral theses – will come to play key roles in dealing with certain questions of what is and is not justified.

While the forms of worth described by Boltanski & Thévenot are certainly evocative, I will not directly apply them as one would apply a model to a case. Only some of the forms of worth will turn up in the analysis because they turn out to be useful (cf. Diken 2002). This is only to be expected as I’m working with very different material and settings from the one at stake in the initial study by Boltanski & Thévenot. The forms of worth found in their work should not, I argue, be seen as a fixed conceptual framework to be applied everywhere in the same way. They are
meso-theoretical: conceptual constructions that work better in some cases than others. It would be rather odd to think that they could be supplanted from the context of labour struggles to that of national identity debates. How Boltanski & Thévenot actually arrived at their constellation of worths is far more important than the specific worths they have orchestrated out of specific material.

What is important for me about a pragmatic sociology of worth is the more basic assumption that participants in debates are dealing with the double problem of evaluating and maintaining forms of evaluation. This assumption helps to avoid analyses of discursive contests regressing into verdicts of who is better, or better placed, to manipulate and enforce the illusions that accord with their positional interests. In such analyses of domination it is no longer possible to analyse how people come to know and judge that which interests them, as if ‘interests’ are impervious to the on-going discourses about them. Of course, public contestations are also conflicts between differentially positioned people that try to dominate each other via the manipulation of what are considered legitimate ways of judging. However, as soon as we try to understand public discourse in mere power terms – ‘which discourse favours which positions and vice versa?’ – we lose the possibility of analysing discursive enactments and their performative effects on what it is that people think they are arguing over. Over and above Habermas’ sociology of public reason, it is Boltanski & Thévenot that provide me with a mode of analysis in which discursive enactments matter in and of themselves. These enactments are not to be unmasked as so many manipulative gestures, nor are they to be unified under one communicative reason. They can be understood as creative, on-going attempts to devise, establish and revise ways of ordering worths. Public discourse is never merely an occasion for legitimating certain claims above others, but always also for articulating, maintaining and rearranging an issue and the ways in which judgments of it can be made (see also Marres 2007; Dijstelbloem 2008).

A second reason why public discourse is of particular relevance has to do with the formation of political concepts and the kinds of politics that they enable. Public discourse in the aforementioned arenas tends to proceed under the assumption that it has a focal role to play in publicly representing the political community to itself. In these arenas, the concepts ‘public’ and ‘citizenry’ are almost always used interchangeably. This homology of concepts is more often than not followed by another conflation, namely with ‘the nation’ (Kennedy & Suny 2001; Boyer & Lomnitz 2005). What is discussed in these arenas is presented and dealt with as ‘national concerns’ of ‘what is happening to the nation’. Even if participants vehemently disagree over whose voice actually speak from the nation’s point of view, public discourse is thereby already performed in search of it.
We are reminded here of the crucial connection between publicity and nationhood in the emergence of the particular mode of social relations that ‘the national’ designates. Although it has been part of theorising nationalisms for a very long time (in particular Renan 1882), it is Benedict Anderson who has developed a way to capture this connection most effectively by crafting his concept of imagined community (1983). His approach helps to describe the specificity of national community in contrast to other kinds of relations. Only via the engagement with publicly dispersed images of community, e.g. through print media, can people begin to partake in *indirect* social relations that involve them – their hopes, dreams, fears and desires – into a common past, present and destiny. It is in this way that people may begin to act towards themselves and others as *simultaneous* parts of a community while only ever encountering the vast majority of those others through imagination. Sites of public imagination, such as the arenas of public discourse I will study, are therefore immensely important in the ongoing struggle over and maintenance of imaginary practices that grant something like Dutchness plausibility in people’s lives.

These arenas can thereby be seen as specific sites in which entanglements between the political concepts of ‘public’, ‘citizenry’ and ‘nation’ are being tested and refined. What does it take to present, speak about and contest a ‘public’ issue of ‘national’ proportions and who are the ‘citizens’ that are thereby being envisioned and recognised? The effective meanings of these concepts are at play in the contestations at the heart of this study. Instead of deciding beforehand what they should mean and subsequently reconstruct the way in which their meanings are being disfigured under the stress of dominant powers and cynical manipulation, I seek to reconstruct the discursive work that they are doing and the politics they thereby enable.

In somewhat different terms, one might say that I will study the role of nationalism in democratic political culture, as long as we make sure that both nationalism and political culture are understood performatively. To do so, I follow an argument set up by Margaret Somers in her 1995 articles (Somers 1995a, b). In these seminal texts, Somers not only deconstructs the concept of political culture, demonstrating how it presumes and predicates precisely that which it purports to explain, namely modernist democratisation, but also proposes an alternate way of analysing and thinking about the historical formation of political concepts and their role in the politics of citizenship, an empirical route that was hitherto blocked by the very concept of political culture.

Somers is able to show that ‘political culture’ naturalises ‘the private’, thereby placing the patriarchal domination – ‘families’ – and capitalist exploitation
– ‘rational adults’ – of what goes on in ‘private’ beyond reproach. This is how citizenship tends to be narrated in discussions of political culture: Out of the private domain inexplicably appear property owning adults-cum-citizens with fully formed convictions able to perform political culture. Political culture never really takes place in public. It is already formed in private. ‘Political culture’ also denaturalises the state as an artificial and provisional solution to antagonisms. The state may be tolerable but should always be kept at bay. Its only real justification for acting is the private security of citizens. The concept of political culture splits democratic politics in ‘real’ and ‘less than real’ sections through a social naturalism of private society. What property owning men do with their dominion is somehow to be considered more real, more natural and more just than what people do publicly. True freedom is always without the state, without the public and without others. Insofar as politics is articulated through the concept of political culture it will delegitimise arguments for ‘state intervention’ as a normal part of what citizens organise together. ‘State intervention’ is only legitimate as a form of emergency action, securing the safety and well-being of what is private. It never appears as a form solidaristic organisation of what is public. Political culture turns out to be not merely a concept but a preformed conception of what it purports to question.

Beyond a denunciation of the market fundamentalism and contractual citizenship enabled by the concept of political culture, Somers subsequently proposes a new way to study that which was formerly black boxed by ‘political culture’. Somers suggest that we may study the actual narrations of citizenship enacted through certain public and political discourses. In this way, we no longer presume to know what democratic politics and citizenship are before we set out to study them, but rather study what people are able to make of it when engaging with each other. Public discourse is then understood to be performative of citizenship, and not a mere instantiation of an underlying politico-cultural script or model that can be copied and imposed on others. Thus, Somers constructs the logic of what she calls an Anglo-American citizenship narrative that is enacted and re-enacted through the antagonisms that occupy political agendas. For instance, while pleas for fiscal conservatism may be countered by discourses about the need for more public assistance both political gestures enact the social naturalism that divides the haves and the have-nots. Neither gesture is able to argue for or against the apparent self-evidence of property relations, let alone the very institution of private property that the American republic was built to protect. Yet, the narrative approach to citizenship does not lapse into cultural determinism. In Somers’ account, the United States are far from destined to remain the republic of ‘free men’. In fact, it
is because a hegemonic narrative can be reconstructed that it can also be changed. As I’ve argued, it is precisely a performative notion of culture that opens it up to change as performative styles can always – by definition – be performed differently. Of course, the question how it would be possible to begin to enact citizenship differently in the American context is thereby not answered. As I’ve argued elsewhere, the performative aspects of the Occupy-protests may have begun to do so as they made ‘homes’ and ‘communities’ precisely where they should not be according to the hegemonic division of private and public spheres, namely in the public square (Van Reekum 2011). In no sense does Somers’ approach imply that American democracy cannot and will not be re-invented. It can and it will.

By taking this route towards an analysis of political culture, I am sympathetic of post-Marxist discourse theory develop by Laclau & Mouffé (1985). They also demonstrate that it is principally impossible to determine what signifiers such as democracy, justice, freedom and citizenship mean. Their meanings are contingent upon the ongoing articulations of discourse and it is precisely undemocratic to suggest that they only mean what we think they mean. While hegemonic discourses may temporarily settle their meanings into predictable ways of making and recognising claims, e.g. rights, they are principally underdetermined. Or, in terms of strategy, it is up to people themselves to articulate the equivalences and differences that mark out the terrain of democratic antagonisms. It is no use waiting for ‘true’ class relations to manifest themselves or preparing for a clash of ‘essentially’ different cultures: politics will have to be invented.

Yet, where my approach differs from their particular brand of poststructuralism is that, in following Somers’ performative approach, the indeterminacy of political signifiers does not stem from an irredeemable lack of meaning, which Laclau locates in the impossible fulfilment of desire (Laclau 2006). Instead, discursive enactments always involve an expressive excess, the meaning of which is yet to be determined. There is already more that can be done with performative repertoires, no matter how hegemonic a particular discourse may be. While I do not think too much effort should be put in such ontological questions here, I do think it is relevant to highlight this difference between a dialectical poststructuralism and a pragmatist one. While the first holds that any claim to universality must be unmasked in its particularity, the latter holds that universality must always be done differently. As the principle exponents of the latter position, Deleuze & Guattari, have said: ‘le multiple, il faut le faire’ or, the many must be made. Unlike Laclau and Mouffè, I do not think universality is out of reach at all (see Laclau 2010). Of course, we should renounce the homogenising
universalism of liberal political theory, which thinks of universals as principles that one can write down, preserve and impose. This does not mean that we can only ever have a negative, just-out-of-reach relation to universality. Universality is firmly and concretely in our grasp. It is, however, in-the-making and it is in the making that it happens.

**What is national about citizenship politics?**

Having considered an approach to public discourse and reworked the concept of political culture, we ought to consider the role of nationalism in citizenship politics. The study of citizenship politics has, in the last decades, seen a re-appreciation of national particularities (Favell 1998a; Calhoun 2007; Duyvendak 2011). Far from a tendency to global citizenship, whereby actual citizenship regimes would become more and more alike, it seems national differences have remained pronounced. The idea that it would matter less and less where one enjoys civic status has not held up. In Europe, issues of post-colonial, labour and asylum migration, religious diversities, welfare reform and European state formation have been most significant. In light of these issues, national particularities remained important, not only in the sense of differences between actual regimes (Vink & Bauböck 2013) but also in the sense that nationhood and national belonging became a more strongly pronounced issue in citizenship politics (Yuval-Davis 2011; Geschiere 2009; Lithman 2010; Duyvendak 2011). Hopes for a mutually reinforcing relationship between citizenship and cosmopolitanism had to be reconsidered. Even if citizenship regimes are becoming post-national in a number of ways (Soysal 2012a), these developments have made national differences relevant in new ways as well. How to describe and study the differences in citizenship politics and what to make of nationhood in them?

This study seeks to improve upon some of the ways in which national particularities have been analysed and addressed in the study of citizenship politics (Brubaker 1992; Schnapper 1994; Bauböck et al. 1996; Favell 1998b; Koopmans et al. 2005; Howard 2009; Goodman 2010). The overriding problem has been that studies into citizenship politics often conflate ‘national differences’ with ‘differences between states’ (Van Reekum et al. 2012). In this way, the subsequent questions of enduring differences, convergence and/or conversion are, more often than not, answered by looking at states and the citizenship regimes and institutional politics that they can be said to contain. Quite literally, states become methodological containers as variables and indicators are aggregated within them to give outcomes that can be compared. Differences, whether understood to be national or not, are thereby always already differences between equivalent
totalities: state A has citizenship regime B with political culture C…all of which is subsumed under a national nomination X. The question of how participants in citizenship politics actually enact, reiterate and contest national particularities becomes principally unanswerable. What can be demonstrated is that a host of legal codes, procedures, concepts, discourses, measures and policies, associated via certain national nominations, develop and change in certain ways over time. Whether or not it makes sense to aggregate data in this way cannot be answered without considering how and why nations matter (Duyvendak et al. 2013). The reasons for a focus on national differences in the research field are varied. A few of those reasons deserve special consideration.

First, we should appreciate the way in which research is never indifferent towards the problematic under study (Favell 2001). In the context of citizenship it is not surprising that research has taken on the assumption of integrated nation-states. The reproduction of the nation-state project under new circumstances of mobility, diversity and political contention is often the very reason for studying citizenship politics to begin with. This engagement with the empirics-at-hand invites a basic research design: first describe (comparatively) the distinct regime of citizenship that historically characterise countries and, second, see to what extent this regime is currently reproduced. From here, one might pose questions of cross-national convergence (Joppke 2007), enduring regime differences (Koopmans et al. 2005; Jacobs & Rea 2007; Finotelli & Michalowski 2012) or postnational tendencies (Habermas 2001; Soysal 2012a, 2012b).

A second, noteworthy reason for the prominence of the national in the study of citizenship is the fact that much research has been done in service of or in cooperation with national or international state actors (Delfs et al. 1997; Scholten 2011; Bijl & Verweij 2012; see also Boersema & Schinkel forthcoming). Here, the question of national integrity is quite simply the very reason for doing (and spending public resources on) research. A number of research initiatives explicitly set out to provide state institutions with the knowledge, data and evaluative feedback to help governments manage the problem of national integration more effectively.4 The attempt to supply adequate knowledge for good governance is not straightforward and need not be an uncritical endeavour. It is, of course, bound by the horizon of governance in service of which it takes place (Duyvendak et al. 2011; Van Houdt 2014).

Thirdly, we might observe that in many cases citizenship politics is expressed in a universalist discourse that holds the laws, regulations and policies

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4 For example, MIPEX (see: www.mipex.eu) or the yearly reports on ‘integration’ of the SCP in the Netherlands.
concerning citizenship to be expressive of universal human and civil rights, equality and dignity. The fact that these ideals are realised in many distinct ways in distinct countries therefore prompts an interest into the national particularity of what should, at least ideally, be universal. How can it be that the expression of what is understood to be universal – citizenship – is always only found in the particular? Why is the emancipation of Man-cum-Citizen realised differently in different places and times? What are the normative, political and philosophical lessons that we might draw from the enduring fact of civic heterogeneity?

In summary, there are a range of reasons for the tendency of research to focus on the extent to which the integrity of nation-states is reproduced through citizenship politics. Moreover, none of those reasons should be disqualified absolutely or callously. Yet, the overall tendency does push other questions, concerns and approaches to the margins. This can be seen most sharply when countries are attributed distinct, coherent and relatively inert models of citizenship. What started in research as a historical reconstruction of the contentious process in which state, citizenship and nationhood were more or less but never perfectly aligned in different cases – most poignantly the histories of French and German citizenship – ended up in an all-too rigid approach that seeks to place countries in categorisations or multidimensional spaces of possible philosophies of citizenship. The tautology between ‘country’, ‘nation’, ‘state’, ‘political culture’ and ‘citizenship model’ that such an approach introduces is not just a superficial effect of heuristic terminology. As the reproduction of nation-state integrity is already assumed to be the problem-at-hand, these tautologies do not appear as methodological problems. In fact, they can be an asset as they hold the very idea of a ‘society’ constant. Yet, the very fact of citizenship politics demonstrates that these concepts are not tautological.

The consequences of tautology reappear when heuristically sorting differences between countries reverts to flattened descriptions of countries-as-wholes. In its most banal form, this is when politicians, policy makers, researchers and public commentators begin to speak of ‘French republicanism’ or ‘Dutch multiculturalism’, thereby reiterating these tautologies (Bertossi 2011). The result is what Ian Hacking has called a ‘looping effect’ (1995). There is nothing inherently wrong or bad about looping. One cannot fault people for trying to loop together their world. Yet, the process of looping should itself be studied and should be part of our discussions.

One of the most problematic effects of studying, understanding and discussing citizenship politics in this tautological way is that claims come to be made and reiterated about the very continuity and discontinuity of nations. By
describing citizenship politics in terms of ‘models’, ‘philosophies’, ‘regimes’ and/or ‘political cultures’ and their differences, it becomes possible to suggest that distinct nations are characterised by distinct ways of dealing with citizenship that are – somehow – typical or befitting them. The fact that citizenship politics changes over time can then every so inaudibly come to sound like the suggestion that nations are no longer themselves, as if there ever was some static consensus about citizenship now – rudely – interrupted. Equally, it becomes possible to say that countries have entertained citizenship politics that were – somehow – unbefitting, forced upon the people by ‘elites’, ‘outsiders’ or ‘cosmopolitans’ who were out of step with national-cum-popular convictions. The fact that citizenship politics changes over time can ever so inaudibly come to sound like the suggestion that nations are becoming more themselves, as if citizenship politics should tend toward popular consensus. The academic and public ways of describing national citizenship and its political contestation is not only too limited – as it pushes to the margins considerations of how tautologies are actually created –, but also productive of certain, deeply worrisome rhetorical possibilities. It becomes possible to talk, discuss and disagree about the continuity and discontinuities of national citizenship across time. Moreover, these continuities and discontinuities become loaded with national meaning as they may come to suggest national pasts, presents and futures. That is, the academic and public debates over citizenship politics – ‘we are no longer multicultural!’ – becomes a site for imagining the passage of nations through history. They are part and parcel of the ongoing narration and naturalisation of citizenship by prescribing how citizenship was, is and is going to be. Debates like these, as they cross the boundaries between conference papers and newspapers, allow for claims about national demise, danger and redemption. Academia are thereby part of the vast infrastructure of nationalistically legitimated violence.

I want to address these tendencies in studying, describing and debating national citizenship with the concept of *imaginary*. By using this concept, I not only seek to emphasise that any concern over national differences is involved with practices of imagination, but also that such differences are often implicated in what Castoriadis has called ‘the institution of society’ (1998). That is, nationhood is not only imagined community but also socially *imaginary*, as it provides some very basic delineations of the totalities in which people imagine their lives to take place and their actions to make sense and take effect. By looping states, citizenship models, political cultures and publics into tautologies – they all become national –, totalities take shape and it becomes possible to say something like “In the Netherlands, we…” without anyone having the feeling that it is unclear what one is
talking about and everyone having the capacity to imagine what is being suggested and what might be done (see also Schinkel 2013). At stake in contentions over nationhood are not merely the imagined attributes of some collectivity vis-à-vis others, but also at once imaginaries in view of which social action, particularly governmental action, attain significance and have specific effects. More specifically, I will speak of a *public imaginary* to indicate that I analyse imaginaries of nationhood as they play out in public discourse and are constitutive of public contestations over Dutchness.

**Composing nation, people and public**

How to conceive of imaginaries of nationhood? If we accept the above argument about citizenship politics – certain ways of categorising national differences in citizenship are performative of them –, we should also reconsider how we might study and conceptualise nationalisms. Categorising nationalisms has been at the heart of research (Calhoun 1997a: Brubaker 1999). By doing so, scholars have hoped to get a handle on its conspicuously varied existence, thereby also trying to get closer to what actually defines it. They have tried to characterise and define nationalisms by reference to the determinants that have pushed them along (Van Reekum 2012a). So, there is discussion of political nationalism, cultural nationalism, state nationalism, civic nationalism, ethnic nationalism, liberal nationalism, cosmopolitan nationalism, etc. Also, we can encounter sustained discussion of the differences between patriotism and nationalism (Canovan 2000). Usually, such discussions are occupied by the idea that there is a certain limit across which justified partiality transforms into more or less blind loyalty (e.g. MacIntryre 1984; Primoratz 2002). Categorising and defining nationalisms is not merely a question of getting a grip on a social phenomenon, but often also a question of diagnosing when and where people’s associations become undesirably one-sided and begin to involve mutual distrust, animosity or worse. Indeed, in much public discourse to call someone or something ‘nationalist’ is to suggest that he or it is dangerous and irrational.

Much in the same way as ‘populism’ has become a political epitaph in many European contexts without very good methodological reasons (Canovan 1999; Laclau 2006; Oudenampsen 2010), scholars of nationalism sometimes go so far as to only speak of nationalism insofar as its effects can be deplored. The -ism should indicate that people have gone beyond ‘reality’ or ‘reasonableness’ and lapsed into ‘ideology’ and ‘blind trust’. Nationalism, then, is the deployment of nationalist rhetoric with deplorable effects as it is said to blind people to the truth. All other enactments of nationhood thereby get excommunicated out of
‘nationalism’ as if there are – somehow – coherent ways of making the difference between blinding rhetoric and enlightening commentary. Of course, we can and should have normative debates about nationalism. Moreover, any proposal for a definition of nationalism inevitably partakes in such debate. There is no way around it. Thus, we may wonder whether the scholarly ambitions to define and categorise nationalisms are not directly related to our normative attitudes towards it. Aren’t social pathology and conceptual categorisation intertwined here? In this view, to know nationalism is to trap it, thus enabling treatment and a return to social health. Or, conversely, to know nationalism is to be loyal to it, thus enabling the identification of those who are not. Yet, is it at all necessary to think of nationalisms as discrete entities that can be prescriptively defined and subdivided into categories? Is this a helpful way to develop an imaginary conception of nationhood? I don’t believe so.

Instead of searching for the essential character traits of nationalism, hiding somewhere behind its variable appearances, it is possible to consider and theorise its variability as such. We may then leave behind the rather unproductive debates about what is and what is not ‘really’ nationalism as we have come to recognise that such debates are themselves implicated in nationalisms. Instead of a taxonomic approach, I want to argue for what we might call a compositional approach to imaginaries of nationhood. What matters in this latter approach is not whether a particular practice falls within the confines of a definition, but how nationhood is composed in particular practices. Of course, this will still involve certain theoretical prescriptions about what happens through such compositions but no longer with the effect of setting apart and subdividing ‘nationalism’ as a distinct, possibly pathological or redemptive form of knowledge. It makes no sense to oppose nationalism to, say, cosmopolitanism. Or to subdivide nationalism into distinct, oppositional kinds, such as ethnic and civic nationalisms.

In taking this compositional approach I am building on work by Craig Calhoun (1997a; 2007). As a basic starting point, Calhoun conceptualises nationalisms as discursive formations (Calhoun 1997a; Foucault 1972). Nationalisms are composed out of a wide variety of discourses none of which are necessarily more characteristic than others. However, in composing nations and nationalisms such discursive formations do involve a number of recurrent problematics, allowing us to generalise about what happens in such compositions. Calhoun’s work on nationalisms can be read as an analysis of what these problematics are. Although there may be more, I will deal with three of them here and show how they are interrelated: the emergence of a people, national equality, and public mediation (see also Van Reekum 2012a).
Nationalisms are involved in constituting a people, its dignity and agency. It involves the problem of individuating a collective agent. Multitudes of people – communities, sects, families, cliques, tribes, kings, castes, gilds, classes, etc. – are to be composed into a people. In the case of Europe, Calhoun stresses the role of republican thought, the Protestant Reformation and ethnic and localist traditionalism for the entanglement of ‘nation’ and ‘people’ (Calhoun 1997b: 77-8). A host of different social and intellectual currents helped to conceive of a people as a singular agent, claiming agency politically, expressing itself culturally and persisting historically (Leerssen 2006). As already noted, individuating peoples into such a singular life entity became possible through a biopolitical governmentality that recognises and cultivates the life of a body politic (Foucault 2003). The concept and science of populations has been immensely important for addressing the problem of how a nation has such a life of its own and how it could be governed and defended.

Related to the emergence and perseverance of a people is the problem of national equality. How is it that those belonging to the nation are the same, laying claim to national membership simultaneously and in equal measure? People are precisely a people insofar as they are equal to each other and their belonging to the nation is interchangeable (Calhoun 1997a: 42). Also, how is it that people long dead and people yet to come are equally part of the nation? The nationality of one is precisely equal to the nationality of another. Nationhood concerns precisely the kind of community in which all members equally and immediately participate. Calhoun draws a distinction here between relational and categorical identities. While the former hinges on certain relational circumstances, the latter are immediate. Just as each body is part of a population equally and immediately, so national members are part of the nation in and of themselves. Here, liberalism, and the Enlightenment more broadly, cultivated the notion of common wealth, the individual and citizenship, which proved to be immensely effective ways of conceiving each other as equal, without recourse to any intermediates and on the basis of one’s proper civic dignity.

Finally, all of this would be inconceivable without public mediation. A people equally participating in nationhood does not make any sense without the imagination of community across indirect relations (Calhoun 1999; 1997a). The nation’s past, present and future can only come to life in publicly mediated imaginations. What’s more, the institutionalisation of public spheres is crucial for the creation of publics that may begin to concern themselves with national matters, with what is happening to the nation. Mobilising in public as citizens take up their political prerogatives, the nation can be seen to act. A people thereby also becomes
a public to its own concerns, interests, desires, fears, threats and historical arch. Citizenship has been of crucial importance here as the institutionalisation of civic status allows people to mobilise around shared issues and problems. Although Calhoun’s account follows closely that of Habermas, he also makes an important intervention. Habermas all too readily presupposes the identity of ‘the’ public sphere. The idea of one public sphere that is representative of society and authoritative for settling public disputes often depends on nationalist rhetoric that speaks of one people that recognises itself as one public. Yet, political communities are always composed of multiple, intersecting publics (Calhoun 1999; 2007). The question how multiple publics might be brought into a common exchange, ergo what constitutes the right to speak publicly, cannot be decided before public deliberation begins. Rather, ‘determining whose speech is more properly public is itself a site of political contestation’ (Calhoun 1997b: 85; Isin & Nielsen 2008).

In summary, the compositional approach described here does not seek to prescribe how the problematics of people, equality and publics should be dealt with in order to merit the label of nationalism. Nor does it seek to categorise nationalisms according to the basic solutions that are found. Rather, it seeks to reconstruct how in particular practices nationhood is more or less well-composed in view of a set of recurrent and interrelated problematics. None of these problematics are ever really consolidated. It is never entirely clear where the people came from or how they came together out of disparate groups. However, people do find ways of agreeing and disagreeing about these questions that produce more or less recurrent ways of articulating nationhood in particular practices.

For instance, people may start excavating archaeological sites and developing accounts of how certain tools and ornaments indicate the origins of a people (see Eickhoff et al. 2000; Henkes 2005). Invariably, they will begin to disagree about how to rank, order, interpret these findings, but by doing so they will nonetheless enact the emergence of a people to be something that is located in a past that can be encountered through certain material objects. Similar, yet different enactments can be performed through the quarrels over literatures, words, fragments of letters found in the carefully and less carefully preserved archives. Even though the past seems to demand considerable attention in matters of a people, it needn’t be decisive. People can also begin to disagree about a people with reference to distinctly contemporaneous matters. For instance, the people may be presumed to come out of a distinct pledge of alliance or certain aspirational spirit lived out in the here and now, an American dream for instance. As always, actual compositions of nationhood involve mixtures of these performative
repertoires, complex combinations of buried and dug up pasts, lived out presents and yearned for futures.

The same is true of the way in which the problematics of equality and publicity are dealt with. It is never really clear on what basis people are equal and what guarantees their immediate membership to the nation, nor is it ever entirely certain which speech and which political mobilisations are to be recognised as part of the public life of the nation. Yet, imaginaries of nationhood need not settle these questions at all to have effects. Insofar as theories of nationalism try to do just that, they miss a crucial part of how nationalisms have performative effects. Most importantly in the context of this study, nationalisms have performative effects through the very disagreements that certain problematics entail. Dissensus is quite effective enough. The idea that nationalism only has effect insofar as it can be said with certainty what the nation essentially is – an ethnic group, a language community, a culture, a race, a political alliance, a democratic revolution, a way of dancing, an aptitude, a collective trauma, a taste, a dream, a truth that can no longer be remembered, etc. – misses the way in which it is precisely how people come to deal with these questions and interrelate their possible solutions, i.e. composition, that has effects in particular practices.

As said, any theory of nationalisms partakes in normative debate as it asks us to take on a certain attitude towards it. The compositional approach argued for here is no different. Again, I’m building from work by Calhoun here. He argues, rightly, that we shouldn’t denunciate nationalisms callously. Theories and categorisations can invite us to do so and we should be cautious in this regard. What Calhoun argues about the distinction between ethnic and civic nationalism has a broader relevance:

It encourages self-declared civic nationalists, liberals, and cosmopolitans to be too complacent, seeing central evils of the modern world produced at a safe distance by ethnic nationalists from whom they are surely deeply different (Calhoun 2007: 146).

By rejecting nationalisms as either wrong about the world or a mere tool of power, we not only disregard those normative aspects of nationalisms that should be taken very seriously indeed, but also act as if it is praiseworthy to disengage from the problematics at stake in nationalisms. For all its violence and injustice, the nation is about the dignity of people, their equality and the means through which they may attain some say about how they live together. Denunciations of nationalism should be ready to explain how it is that people should conceive of dignity, equality and voice if not through the composition of nations. Of course, this is not to say that
such alternative philosophies are non-existent and nationhood is our only hope. It is, however, to take very seriously what is at stake in struggles about nationhood and not presume that we can somehow judge these struggles from the outside. As Calhoun argues in detail, nations matter to people, to us, to me because through them we conceive of and try to bring into existence forms of living together that merit affirmation, the re-invention of which is still worthwhile. As I’ve already noted, many denunciations of nationalisms come down to arguments about better compositions of nationhood. They argue against them precisely because they seek to affirm dignity, equality and voice.

Particularly interesting in the context of this study, Calhoun argues for what one could call the promise of a plurality of publics: ‘... the crucial question remains to what extent the constitution of a citizenry and the idea of nation reflect the notion of differentiated public or that of a unitary people’ (Calhoun 1997b: 99). ‘Nationalist rhetoric has generally stressed the essential similarity of the nation’s members. It is rare to find comparable emphasis in the constitution of the national through the discourse of a public of highly differentiated members’ (Calhoun 1997b: 94). For Calhoun, a crucial issue is to what extent citizenship is reduced to a homely similarity between co-patriots, thereby disabling the expression of public difference. ‘Citizenship, by contrast to community or categorical nationality, is a specific mode of belonging directly dependent on public space’ (Calhoun 2007: 106). Calhoun’s normative considerations are consistent with what I have termed a compositional approach to nationalisms as this approach foregrounds the way in which nation, people and public are composed, entangled and looped together but are never reduced to a self-contained identity in which citizenship would come to be identical to nationality. The compositional approach not only holds that entanglement provides a more adequate account of how nationalisms take effect in particular practices, but also prescribes such entanglement to afford a better, normative assessment of what is justified in nationalisms.

In general, the compositional approach holds that nationalisms can only ever be justified insofar as they tend to entangle but do not homogenise a people, national equality and public plurality. It is therefore meaningful to question to what extent nationhood is being composed as never identical to itself and always in the process of entanglement – in the making – allowing for and, in fact, demanding a plurality of public articulations. As will become clear throughout this study, it may be quite difficult to judge when and how this demand of justification can be satisfied in practice. In fact, as I will demonstrate in a moment, the Dutch context provides somewhat of a critical case (Flyvbjerg 2006) for gaging the applicability of this normative outlook. While it may be possible to argue against the slippage
between citizenship and nationhood from a general normative-theoretical stance, it may be quite difficult to ascertain when such slippage is avoided in actual empirical practices and how people may come to do nationhood in ways that keep the entanglements of nation, people and publics open. It is to the entanglement of Dutchness and citizenship that we now turn.