Out of character: debating Dutchness, narrating citizenship

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Citation for published version (APA):

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Dialogical Dutchness: enacting Dutchness through debate

In the previous chapter, we have seen how Dutchness as a public problem was constituted by a rather anxious and unresolved confrontation with questions of race and racism. While these debates firmly placed a post-racist notion of Dutchness beyond any doubt, this also meant that such debates left little to no room for considering what it might actually take to work through the legacy of, confusion about, and contemporary significance of race and racism. In short, the question whether Dutchness could, would or should be post-race could hardly be expressed, let alone extensively considered as the answer would always already be yes. So while race and racism had played crucial roles in mobilising and forging Dutchness as a public issue, the ensuing debates were to pose the question of what could safely and affirmatively be deemed Dutch in public and this question was to be worked out and posed in relation to often ostentatiously non-somatic differences.

This chapter deals with the kinds of debates that emerged out of this evasive movement. It shows that such evasion is not merely negative and concealing. That is, evasion is never merely avoidance of something but also very productive of new discursive repertoires that begin to play their own role in citizenship politics. So while it is true that there is a considerable silencing of race and racism, this silence is never actually void but filled with words and arguments that never merely serve to talk over an uncomfortable silence and begin to constitute the public problem of Dutchness in new ways.

This chapter deals with the emergence of a specific kind of national imaginary. The diminishing self-evidence of a white/European nation demarcated by some kind of national character is layered with new concerns and engagements. Within a nexus of concerns about Dutch nationhood, immigrant integration, conceptions of citizenship, and European unification the issue of Dutchness acquires new possibilities. Most notably, the public dissensus over Dutchness itself becomes highly significant. The enactment of dissensus will begin to play an increasingly constitutive role for how the issue of Dutchness is sustained. Public contention over Dutchness becomes public enactment of Dutchness. This reflexive tendency, in a nutshell, is what is meant by dialogical Dutchness.
Dialogical Dutchness: a national mythology of public expressiveness
In order to see how the image of citizens speaking out and disagreeing publicly became central to public typifications of Dutchness in the early 1990’s we need to reconstruct a web of notions about speech, liberty, citizenship and modernity. Dialogical Dutchness finds its imaginative inspiration in a narrative about the Dutch that foregrounds their aptitude for debate and their commitment to dialogue. In the most general terms, I will reconstruct how images of equal and informal social relations and an openness and appreciation of difference became nationally salient. This history of salient notions will focus on the period after WOII. To some extent I will refer to social developments in that same period. However, the crux of the reconstruction is not an adequate historical or sociological account of ‘Dutch society’, but a well-rounded excursion of notions about post-war Dutchness as they came to form what I will call dialogical Dutchness.8

There is no reason to assume that a public imaginary like dialogical Dutchness has a definite core. Part of its success is probably its rather rhizomatic structure. One can begin enacting its rhetoric at one of its many extensions, thereby immediately evoking a host of other threads that are bound up with it. If one begins to speak of individualism, one can quite easily slide over into a large variety of other directions that become available. One may go on to talk about a resistance to religious orthodoxy, or rather speak about a certain rudeness in Dutch society, or go another direction altogether by mythologizing the civic freedoms of the Dutch Republic. This shows that it would be a mistake to assume logical order where there is associative resemblance, to assume definitions where there are imaginations. By describing a number of the threads that have come to make up a discourse about the Dutch disposition for dialogue one isn’t logically and exhaustively unpacking a coherent ideology of a collectivity. Rather, one starts at one end of a tapestry and traverses it along some of its knots, hoping to get an adequate sense of its associative tendencies. In principle, any point of entry will do.

We are not nationalistic
Let’s start at what may be an unlikely point of entry: nationalism. Unlikely because nationalism figures as a rather ambiguous element. In the context of dialogical Dutchness, nationalism is often the very opposite of what is deemed typically Dutch. Nationalism, here, entails that one doesn’t speak for oneself, but let’s one’s ideas and commitments be prescribed by a script that is not one’s own. It was already important in discourses on Dutchness before WOII (Van Ginkel 1999) as it

8 Of course, there is a lot more to say about Dutchness in the post-war period. The focus here is on the emergence and political salience of this particular imaginary.
informed an emotional sobriety and civilised composure that contrasted well with the overly romantic nationalism deemed typical of other European nations. A disdain for overly emphatic nationalism set the Dutch apart (Beller & Leerssen 2007; Kloek 1993; Van Ginkel 1999; Lechner 2007). It builds on already established notions of burgherlyness and pragmatism, prescribing a well-reasoned control over one’s feverous emotions. The significance of this trope has to be placed in relation to the German occupation, the unresolved role of Dutch government during that occupation and the new, Atlantic orientation in which post-war governments positioned the liberated kingdom. A nationally distinctive anti-nationalism corresponds to Leerssen’s analysis of a Europe-wide topology of national affect ascriptions. The idea that the Dutch exercise an anti-nationalist restraint is first and foremost related to the north-cold / south-hot distinction, so prevalent in the nationalist imagery of Europe (Leerssen 2006). The narrative of not-so-very nationalist Dutch puts the Dutch on the right side of history vis-à-vis Teutonic aggression, namely on the side of the noble victims. It also pointed to a new role on the world stage for the now shrunken empire, having lost its main colonial possessions in the East in 1946. The disdain for nationalist fervour qualified the ‘small country’ for an intermediary role between the great powers of the post-war order. Central concerns of anti-nationalism, then, are the avoidance of violence and pacification of destructive, irrational emotions.

The importance of anti-nationalism, particularly after WOII, should not be construed as the absence or rejection of nation building and national imagery in public or political life. Quite the opposite. As Van Ginkel (1999) shows, the period directly after the German occupation was marked by extensive mobilisation around explicit ideas of a unified, civilised and proud Volk. As had already been described in the previous chapter, a characterological discourse only lost its self-evidence in the course of the 1970’s. The political talk about one nation came especially from a series of attempts at headlong breakthroughs of the pillarised, corporatist state. Several, newly formed parties sought to round up a national majority as the parliamentary system was reconstituted (Van Ginkel 1999: 178). These movements, both of a social-democratic and more popular-conservative kind, sought to overcome the crippling, ideological divisions that they blamed for the inertia of Dutch governance. However, they did not succeed in usurping the corporatist arrangement of politics. The history of failed break-through attempts can be followed up to this day, with pragmatic-centrist (D’66, DS’70, the purple coalitions of the 1990’s) and popular-conservative (Boer Koekoek, LPF, TON, PVV) inclinations both seeking to do away with the stale demarcations of established politics.
In the context of civil society, nation building took the form of civilising offenses directed at ‘asocial working classes’ and ‘amoral youths’ (Derksen & Verplanke 1987). A healthy patriotism and sense of national belonging would provide those lacking civilised manners and disposition with the moral compass to better themselves and society as a whole (Van Ginkel 2004; De Regt 1984). The notion of anti-nationalism did not directly conflict with these movements and projects. Rather, disdain for nationalism-as-fervour became an effective enactment of the integrity and moral worthiness of the Dutch, thereby strengthening efforts of nation building. The post-war developments in the Netherlands show that anti-nationalism can provide an effective and practical narration of national difference.

The importance of anti-nationalism became even more pronounced as pillarised moral communities began to give way to a liberal moral majority (Kennedy 1995; Duyvendak 2004; Vuijsje & Wouters 1999). Resistance to traditional morality and clerical authorities gained increasing public legitimacy as large groups left the churches (Van Rooden 1996) and the economic and educational expansion created unprecedented possibilities for the post-war generations (Schuyt & Taverne 2000). The culture and politics of the United States provided a crucial point of reflection. In view of the US, the Dutch acquired specific contours: not as dynamic, not as aggressive, and not as nationalistic. The moral superiority of an emancipated people was strikingly articulated by a term such as ‘guiding country’ (gidsland), expressing the notion that the Dutch were frontrunners in a global transition into a post-traditional era (Kennedy 1995). Sociologists, both in and outside the Netherlands, were prominent narrators of this transitional story as they sought to shine their academic lights into the future (cf. Van Doorn & Lammers 1968; Zijderveld 1971). The Netherlands was deemed fit for the role as global guide, because it took on pragmatic, peaceful and reasonable positions in international relations, in contrast to the bellicose US and USSR. Moreover, succeeding governments enacted distinctly post-traditional policies concerning issues of sex, death, and drugs. To be sure, these policies were not the gains of progressivist dominance, but rather the outcome of the specific way in which the welfare state was built up, namely by pragmatically accommodating the concerns and grievances of different constituencies. Indeed, those on the left celebrated these changes as ‘progress’ but thereby obfuscated that most of these policy changes were introduced as pragmatic ways to curtail and halt precisely the ‘progress’ that self-consciously progressive publics projected to be an inevitable future (see for instance Mellink 2014).

With depillarisation, anti-nationalist postures not only gained legitimacy but became entangled with expressions of moral superiority. Resisting traditional
authority, including the small-mindedness of a once Christian nation, meant that one was more free, more emancipated, more autonomous, more competent, more contemporary, and – in a sense – more true to how the world really was (Dudink 2011; Aerts 2011). The new politics of enjoyment and self-creation that took hold in the Netherlands as it did elsewhere (Van Rooden 2004) thereby also informed a specific notion of national particularity. Repressive, religious morality – particularly with regards to bodily expression and enjoyment – became the other of a post-traditional and liberalised image of Dutchness. The autonomous individual at the heart of this narrative would no longer feel compelled to censor their expressions and stay quiet about societal taboo’s (Verkaaijk 2010).

Emancipation for all, paternalism for some
Of crucial importance in the advent of an idealised individualism has been shifting politics of emancipation concerned with uncivilised populations and gendered divisions of labour. Since the postwar construction of the Dutch welfare state communal efforts to emancipate not-yet-civilised populations have been increasingly taken over by state institutions (De Regt 1984; De Swaan 1989; De Haan & Duyvendak 2002). Yet, the logic of such ‘civilising offences’ has persisted: organisations and their agents set out to ameliorate the moral dispositions of specific groups – perceived to be uncivil and backward – through assistance, instruction and social control. A considerable part of such offenses were directed at child rearing, cooking, household maintenance, personal hygiene and moral instruction (Van Otterloo 1990; De Regt 1984; Van Rijswijk-Clerkx 1981). Within a strong gender division of labour that reserves the home under the supervision of the mother a large part of emancipatory efforts were directed at women and their maternal responsibilities (Van den Berg & Duyvendak 2012). Such civilising practices have, for a long time already, been understood in terms of emancipation as they were aimed at the inclusion of uncivilised groups into civil society. Emancipation was conceived to be the elevation of excluded and backward groups into civil society through benevolent assistance and discipline.

A remarkable shift in the politics of emancipation did take place from the 1960’s onwards. Progressive elites were successful in gaining entry to and control over the state institutions that effected social welfare policies. Such elites devised new ideas and ideals about the methods and ends of emancipatory policies. Against notions of ‘elevation’, ‘instruction’ and ‘guidance’ from above by representatives of public and clerical authority, a process of autonomous and self-guided empowerment was proposed (Tonkens 1999). In the former perspective, group-wise entry into civil society through the demonstration of civil conduct and
communal social control provided the basic stepping stones for emancipatory
efforts. From the perspective of self-proclaimed advocates of post-traditional
emancipation such efforts were endemically paternalist. A broad rejection of state
paternalism emerged, resisting governmental constriction of citizens’ lives in a
variety of forms.

The shift towards an individualistic and autonomous conception of
emancipation and effective social citizenship has been, however, highly unstable.
The attempt to empower citizens through government policy has had to cope with
internal contradictions that haven’t been easily resolved. First of all, social welfare
policies have been justified as attempts to extend citizenship from juridical,
political and socio-economic dimensions towards those of well-being, autonomy,
self-creation and -expression. But such policy efforts were still enacted by state
institutions that took over such responsibilities from paternalist civil society
organisations. It was already in the 1970’s that critical commentators within the
liberal-progressive establishment began chastising the ‘empowerment of citizens’
as just another instance of Weber’s iron cage, partly inspired by the work Foucault,
Illich and the anti-psychiatry movement (see Achterhuis 1981, also see Hilhorst &
Van der Lans 2013 for contemporary version of this discourse). Second, the mid-
1990’s saw a reappraisal of interventionist practices in the form of ‘unsolicited
intervention’, ‘outreach programs’, and ‘prevention’. This reappraisal did not
contradict the still widely expounded ideals of anti-paternalism, because
interventionist policies were explicitly directed at specific populations, which in
different ways were deemed incapable of autonomous self-development and
therefore outside the purview of the post-paternalist relations between state and
citizen. These marginalised populations included denizens of different kinds: most
notably groups called ‘woonwagenbewoners’ and ‘zigeuners’, the newly defined
‘ethnic minorities’, long-term unemployed, and inhabitants of disadvantaged
neighbourhoods (Rath 1991; Schinkel & Van den Berg 2011; Van Houdt 2014). In
many ways, the politics of government-led emancipation has thereby come full
circle: (1) from the group-wise inclusion of not-yet-civilised populations into civil
society through the civilising work of various ideological and denominational
communities, (2) to government-led institutions aimed at emancipating citizens, (3)
towards an attempt at democratisation and empowerment of citizens, headed by a
vocal and self-consciously post-traditional vanguard, (4) to the targeting of not-yet-
emancipated populations by a now anti-paternalist policy establishment that seeks
to equip citizens for the demands of non-interventionist government. Thereby, the
paradox of paternalism is both institutional and ideological: paternalism is good for
those who are not yet equipped to live without it. It is a good and a bad all at once.
See me, hear me
The idealised, emancipated individual would be seen and heard. The best way to deal with contentious issues in society was to explicitly address them. The often used phrase in this respect – ‘zaken bespreekbaar maken’ – literally means to ‘make matters utter-able/negotiable’. The passage from repressed expression to visible and audible autonomy became the basic scenario through which secularisation and modernisation of society were conceived (Verkaaik 2009; Bjornson 2012; Van den Berg & Van Reekum forthcoming). This scenario builds on a particular structure of time: whenever there are enactments of explicit talk, open dialogue, and frank debate time moves towards a more fully modern future as open speech breaks the bonds of social restrictions and internalised shame (Butler 2008). As progressives and conservatives take their positions in this post-war vision of societal development, they tend to agree that people are becoming more individualistic and less restrained by groups and collectivist morality. Their quarrel is not about the direction of change, but about the worthiness of individual autonomy. Conservatives call themselves such because they, like their opponents, hold that society is becoming less traditional and more flexible. The sometimes heated debates over increasing informality in society – rudeness and fleeting sociality (Van Stokkom 2010) – thereby continuously affirm that Dutch society was, in fact, an exemplar of post-traditional development. To this day, politicians of all colours tend to agree, unbothered by evidence to the contrary (Duyvendak & Hurenkamp 2004) that Dutch society is highly individualised.

No less important were the shifting citizenship discourses for the idealisation of individual autonomy. As previously discussed in chapter 3, narrations of citizenship came to revolve around the question of active participation and sustained engagement by citizens in the workings of the state. De Haan (1992) shows that the shift towards public deliberation suffers from a recurring ambiguity: political leaders claiming to give power back to citizens can, in their turn, be unmasked as careerists and technocrats by a new wave of hopefuls who brand themselves as the true, long-awaited republicans. What is important in this context, however, is the fact that political rhetoric is increasingly concerned with civic voice, deliberation and participation. Parliamentary democracy is increasingly about what citizens demand and desire. With the rise of participatory narration of citizenship, public opinion speaks up to authorities and the point of such speech is to criticise and talk back to authorities (cf. Rosanvallon 2008). Demands, opinions, desires and grievances emanate from a public domain in which citizens are autonomous and free to make up their own minds. They shouldn’t be bothered by the moral and ideological convictions of elites or corporate bodies. Decisions by
those in government should reflect what can be heard among the public. Public critique becomes the mechanism through which representatives are held accountable. With this new kind of citizenship narrative came a populist notion of politics that foregrounds the popular embrace of policies and political visions, the popularity of public figures and public confrontation of ideals (De Beus 2000; Elchardus 2002). In practice, the relevant public may be limited to public commentators, civil society leaders and other judges of public contests, like writers, academics and comedians. But the shift in justification is what matters here. Judgements of worth begin to pivot towards notions of fame, and away from notions of sovereignty (Boltanski & Thévenot 2006 [1991]). Civic voice gains priority and public manifestation of critique and contention gain in significance (Corner & Pels 2003; Hajer 2009). A crucial resource for this study – opinion pages in Dutch newspapers – came into being as part of this very development.

Tolerance as dialogue
A final consequence of these developments is the contradictory significance of tolerance. Particularly after WOII, tolerance becomes an omnipresent adjective in typifications of Dutchness (Van Ginkel 1999; Schuyt 2009). Its role in prescribing national difference is, however, deeply unresolved. This is particularly true of its role in speaking about immigrant integration (Prins 2004; Schover 2010; Nalbantoglu 1990; Essed 1994; Essed & Nimako 2006; Ghorashi 2003). Here, tolerance means that moral-cultural difference may be bridged and accommodated through dialogue as participants gradually discover the meanings and viewpoints of the other. However, it almost invariably the case that such tolerance-as-dialogue is conceived to be something that the native Dutch does to and provides for the uninitiated newcomer (Van den Berg & Van Reekum forthcoming; Schiffauer et al. 2006).

Strikingly, as similar ambiguity is present in the political importance of tolerance. The tendency to endure deep moral oppositions and seek ways to work around them remains an often positively appraised aspect of Dutch political culture, yet the pillarised managerialism with which it is thereby associated is deemed ever more outdated. Here, the significance of tolerance is contradictory as it refers both to a pragmatic suspension of condemnation as well as the moral superiority of a liberalised, post-christian nation. The value of tolerance as dialogue is thereby rather ambivalent. One the one hand, the tendency to deliberate rather than condemn is understood to be a worthy part of political heritage, often canonised by the at once primordialistic and contemporaneous term poldering (Bos, Ebben & Te Velde 2007). On the other hand, deliberation and dialogue come
to designate the barrier to further democratisation of the liberal, post-Christian nation as elites appear to negotiate among themselves and grant each other exceptions from the majoritarian rule of being liberal. With the entanglement of dialogical Dutchness, tolerance shifts from being primarily a valued aspect of a distinctly pragmatic political culture to being primarily a moral conviction of a distinctly liberal nation (Schuyt 2009). Tolerance in elite negotiations becomes suspect, while tolerance is simultaneously the designator of a national ethos.

Now that dialogical Dutchness has been charted, we can see how its particular imaginative possibilities emerged in the discussions over Dutchness in the 1980’s and early 90’s. A stream of publications emerged in this period concerned with Dutch identity. How was dialogical Dutchness implicated in these discourses?

**The imperative of debate**

As has been discussed in the previous chapter, Couwenberg’s pleas for renewed national awareness became part of struggles over race and racism. Discussions that succeeded his critiques began to shift towards other concerns. Three problems will be addressed in order to analyse what this shift amounted to: the contention over integration governance; more pronounced problematisations of Islamic faith; and further qualifications of what national awareness [nationaal besef] might actually be.

**A policy of failure**

Today, the failure of integration has become a pan-European issue, often framed in terms of a retrenchment of multiculturalism (Bertossi 2012; Van Reekum & Duyvendak 2012), but in the case of Dutch integration politics ‘failure’ has been there all along. For at least thirty years, failing policies of immigrant integration form a well-established and recurring motif in the public and political contention over governmental efforts to integrate newcomers into the national fold. Diagnoses of failing policies imply two problems that make such critiques relevant for our purposes here: (1) failure is explained through certain, typically Dutch tendencies; (2) failure implies that the nation-state is not able to reproduce itself under conditions of intensified transnational flows, providing a reason for seeking to bolster nationhood.

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9 Parts of this paragraph were previously published in a co-authored article. See: Van Reekum, R. & J. W. Duyvendak (2012). Running from our shadows: the performative impact of policy diagnoses in Dutch debates on immigrant integration. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 46, 445-466.
Government failure was, to start, the heading under which an explicit and concerted policy approach to integration was formulated between 1979 and 1983. What appeared to have failed in particular was the assimilation of Moluccans (Essed & Nimako 2006). A string of violent actions by radicalised Moluccan activists, calling for a sovereign Moluccan state, reached dramatic pitch in 1977 with the hijacking of several trains, an elementary school and, a year later, a municipal building (Smeets & Strijen 2006). These actions were resolved through military intervention, heightening both their impact on personal lives and the integrity of public order. The disturbance of that order and the threat of ethnic tensions had already been made visible when violence in Rotterdam’s Afrikaanderwijk and Schiedam were dealt with in terms of race riots (Van Donselaar 1991, Witte 2010). Concerns over public order and the future management of immigration galvanised in 1978, when social-democrat Molleman proposed to design a single, coherent policy approach to what were called ‘ethnic minorities’ (Molleman 2005; Tinnemans 1994: Scholten 2011). Failing integration and the threat of sustained segregation of ethnic groups, made visible through the disruptions of public order, was always already a central justification of government action.

The establishment of a minorities policy in 1983 made it possible to discuss further failings (Van Reekum & Duyvendak 2012). The minorities approach focused on the emancipation of specific ethnicised target-groups. The rationale was to prevent a reinforcing dynamic of economic stagnation and ethnic division among an already tense population dealing with the fall-out of economic depression and restructuring of labour relations. The policy approach was constructed through a close-knit nexus of researchers, policy advisors, bureaucrats and politicians (Scholten 2011: 101-121; Uitermark 2012). Although, the infamous phrase ‘maintenance of identity’ [behoud van identiteit] was part of the political justification for integration programmes, the whole point of targeting specific categories of newcomers and other minorities, such as ‘woonwagenbewoners’ and ‘zigeuners’, was never to preserve, accommodate or celebrate cultural difference (Duyvendak et al. 2013). Targeting was meant to catalyse processes of socio-economic mobility and socio-cultural adaptation. The minorities policy was aimed at coordinated emancipation of marginal groups. The rationale of emancipation should thus be understood in the specificity of the Dutch context. It does not designate a contentious process of claiming rights by insurgent social movements and excluded groups (cf. McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly 2001; Alexander 2006), but state-led arrangements of assistance and control through which groups lacking civil competencies are to be embedded more firmly within civil society (Rath 1991).
The minorities policy is first and foremost an attempt at civilising specific target groups, equipping these groups for modern, autonomous living and managing the risks that a mix of migration and economic stagnation could pose to public order.

**Breaking down inhibitions**

Much like the interventions of Couwenberg, the failings of government policy were first of all related to concerns over race and racism. Both proponents and opponents of anti-racism criticised government policy for reinforcing, rather than relaxing the mutual inhibition between ‘white’ natives and ‘black’ newcomers. That is, integration would only be successful if natives and newcomers, white and black, would find *words to express* their anxieties towards each other.

In their opinionated reportage *Grote en kleine irritaties in de Amsterdamse Kinkerbuurt* (Large and small irritations in the Amsterdam Kinker quarter; February 15 1984, *De Groene Amsterdammer*), Anet Bleich and Rudi Boon reported on the interactions between natives and newcomers in Amsterdam’s *Kinkerbuurt*, one of the rundown neighbourhoods that were understood to be sites of resurgent racism. Bleich and Boon focus on the more or less pronounced racism of the white Dutch residents. In their narrative, the complexity of integration is attributed to both the maladjustment of the newcomers and the spiteful, often racist reactions of the white-native majority. Policy efforts to tackle the problem culminate in the spread of counter-productive and pedantic information, which front-line community workers internalise:

> An unstoppable stream of factoids in print-work and photo-slides is let loose on them [the community workers] in which the foreigner is presented as either the prisoner of an apparently backward and stagnant culture, or an assistance seeker whom migration has turned into a total fool. When confronted with such a strange specimen of the human species, more than one doctor, social worker or lawyer loses confidence in his own professional competence to interact with people. (February 15 1984, *De Groene Amsterdammer*) (#32)

In this account, the attempts to deal with difference and to get beyond racism do not dampen, but instead strengthen the inhibitions of white community workers. The banalities of daily life are much too specific and complex to be dealt with through formulaic knowledge and bureaucratic policy measures. Because government policy doesn’t attend to the banal character of daily interaction, it is doomed to fail, leaving a chasm between natives and newcomers in its wake.

Although vastly different in intention and explicitly critical of Anet Bleich’s focus on native racism, Herman Vuijsje’s *Vermoorde onschuld* (1986)
follows the same motif. As was already discussed in the previous chapter, Vuijsje problematises the austerity of correct speech:

The argumentation and the style of the preachers of guilt and punishment are often reminiscent of radical feminism: the ‘oppressed’ can freely accuse the ‘oppressors’, all stereotypes and generalisations are allowed. When the opposite happens, it is discrimination and racism or sexism. (Vuijsje 1986: 33) (#33)

The victim mentality nurtured by anti-racist activists and those working in the welfare and minority policy ‘industry’ has adverse effects:

It was a relief to be at a meeting of an ethnic group where, for once, the main line was not: how pitiful are we and how bad are they, but rather: what can we do about it ourselves? (Vuijsje 1986: 34) (#34)

If the Dutch do not get over their inhibitions and stop shying away from openly talking about the everyday problems of difference, an easy-going, well-functioning multicultural society will remain out of reach. In this sense, Vuijsje’s book, published by a prominent publisher, was an explicit provocation of what Vuijsje called the ‘Dutch taboo on ethnic difference’.

The importance of provocation carries over into David Pinto’s June 1988 op-ed in the national daily de Volkskrant as he calls for a ‘completely new approach to the problem’. The government’s approach to minority integration has failed because it has over-accommodated and over-assisted minority communities. By helping, government has made them dependent on state paternalism.

The patronising has gone on for too long. The ethnic minorities have slowly been hugged to death. My suggestion is to just abolish the organisations that have been set up as categorical institutions and have been maintained for too long. (June 18 1988, De Volkskrant) (#35)

Like Bleich and Vuijsje, Pinto highlights the adverse effects of treating minorities like pitiful people, and not being able to speak uninhibitedly about the complexities of integration:

Why is it that even the slightest disapproval of a foreigner is seen as racism? Because people think that foreigners are pitiful and can’t take care of themselves! (June 18 1988, De Volkskrant) (#36)

Instead of the all-too-well-intentioned approach of the Dutch government, Pinto argues that immigrants should stand up for themselves and build their own futures:

This pitying of foreigners conceals the danger of a self-fulfilling prophecy. This attitude has existed for too long now. In the 90s we should no longer speak about minorities, but about immigrants.
Immigrants who can build their future themselves, who have to, want to and can stand up for themselves. (June 18 1988, De Volkskrant) (#37)

How does dialogical Dutchness play out here? First of all, government efforts to manage integration from above fail to take into account the complexities of everyday interactions. Uninhibited speech, in particular, is hampered. Open dialogue presents the passage towards integration. Yet, an overly managerial and paternalistic government restricts citizens in their daily efforts to face up to their differences. Impediments to dialogue will have to be broken down and citizens will have to be empowered. Vuijsje and Pinto not only advocate a more provocative and defiant attitude towards the paternalism of government, but in fact put that attitude into practice in their interventions (see also Prins 2004). They not only present inhibitions as the problem, but actively try to break them down through their public performances. They argue for a particular take on integration – self-reliance, outspokenness, autonomy – by enacting it in public.

A republican turn
Criticisms of the government’s minorities approach eventually lead to efforts within the policy nexus to transform it (Scholten 2011). Most importantly, it prompted the Scientific Council for Governmental Policy (WRR) to yet again publish a report on the integration of newcomers into Dutch society: Allochtonenbeleid (WRR 1989). In line with the notion of a failing policy, this report advocated a paradigmatic shift in dealing with allochthones, a term that was already frequently used but the report elevated to the status of policy category. While it responded to the kinds of criticisms presented above, the report also introduced new ideas about why integration policies had failed. With these ideas came new ideals and horizons.

The authors of Allochtonenbeleid – most notably Arie van der Zwan and Han Entzinger – developed a distinct notion of cultural recognition, which is central to the diagnosis of previous policies. Instead of actively accommodating the cultural identities and practices of newcomers, integration policies should side-line the specific backgrounds and communal memberships of allochthones. The term allochthon itself was supposed to enable the move away from ethnic group categories and towards the integration of individuals who happen to have non-native backgrounds. What is most important, according to the WRR-report, is individual success in terms of socio-economic and political participation. Cultural practice and ethnic membership is something that allochthones, and indeed all citizens, should sort out on their own. The government’s active encouragement to
form ethnically coherent communities is thus presented as the major flaw of the previous period.

Allochthones, who wish to, need to be able to maintain and develop their cultural identity: integration certainly doesn’t necessitate cultural assimilation. Even more than in realising institutional integration, this is the responsibility of the groups in question. The initiative to obtain certain facilities should come from these groups themselves. Government doesn’t have any other duties apart from breaching barriers that allochthonous groups encounter due to being allochthonous, thus enabling them to share in the cultural plurality in equal measure to the autochthones. (WRR 1989: 24) (#38)

There is a striking shift in concepts here. The WRR rejected the idea that newcomers should be supported to maintain their identities – the infamous maintenance of distinct identity [behoud van eigen identiteit] – in its own previous report on integration policy (WRR 1979; see also Vink 2007), a rejection that was carried over by government in 1983. It did so precisely because it was not up to government to dictate the contents and boundaries of ethnic identity. Government should not reify what was – in fact – fluid, plural and changing as this would only hamper integration. The 1979 report bears the imprint of an anthropological notion of group identity: it is constantly changing and cannot be prescribed in terms of a set of characteristics (Scholten 2011; Uitermark 2012). In the new report of 1989, the accommodation of supra-individual identities is also rejected, this time because citizens should be free to experience and change their identities on their own prerogative. The reasoning is not anthropological, but rather juridico-republican. The WRR thereby introduces a new logic for dealing with cultural identity and practice. As long as culture and ethnicity are treated as private matters and the government only needs to protect the negative liberty of citizens, there can be no misunderstanding about what is expected of allochthones and their equal position vis-à-vis autochthones.

There is no reason to place the ‘new’ allochthones, groups or members thereof, in a special position when dealing with their cultural and denominational identities and the creation and maintenance of the necessary, material conditions. (WRR 1989: 49) (#39)

If only government would treat everyone as citizens and leave their other identities alone, the right balance between responsibilities and rights will be maintained. What was already true for autochthones should also be true for allochthones: as far as government is concerned, only their civic, individual identities are relevant.

The failings of integration policies were no longer immediately related to concerns over race, racism and tensions between ethnically distinguished groups, but instead became associated with the remnants of pillarisation and
accommodative negotiations between differing constituencies. Failings became related to an all-too-paternalistic involvement of government in the private lives of citizens. The problem of attributing racism and the inhibitions associated with it moved to the background. Speaking out, however, remains vitally important as the antiquated arrangements of pillarisation could be struck down by speaking out against them. Enacting republican citizenship – as demonstrated already by Vuijsje and Pinto – meant not only that government should be publicly criticised, but also that government should guard the possibilities to do so.

**Staging public culture: from Rushdie and Rasoel to Bolkestein and Dales**

A crucial implication of the republican turn in integration policies, instigated from within the nexus of policy makers, researchers and political actors, was the emphasis on common, civic ground. The contradictions of the minorities approach – paternalism and inhibited speech – were to be transformed into a coherent, distinctly republican approach that would foreground the pejorative of citizens and their possibilities to speak out for themselves. What became all the more important was the common, civic space that would allow citizens, new and old, to come together on an equal footing. If a remedial approach – compensating economic and civil lags – should be abandoned, it became all the more significant to define the common starting point from which all citizens could take off on their own particular life courses. If the remnants of pillarisation were an obstacle to civic integration as they placed distinct communities under regimes of dependence and loyalty, successful integration would only be attainable if the public and the private lives of citizens could be distinguished. It is in this light that a number of public events provided the possibility of enacting public culture, of demonstrating what was or ought to be publicly shared among citizens. Far beyond the policy discourse circulating in the networks of integration governance, these events staged concrete and urgent conflicts as manifestations of a public culture in peril. At stake are not only concrete resolutions of public issues, but the broader question how a common, public culture is to be enacted and reproduced.

Of course, the global drama that acquired the name ‘Rushdie-affair’ cannot be adequately addressed here. I will merely point out a set of concerns coming out of the Dutch version of the affair as they solidified public and political attention to the problem of public speech. As Rene Gabriëls (2001) shows in his reconstruction of the Dutch affair, a couple of concerns were foregrounded.

First of all, there was the governmental management of protests and conflicts. Would government respond to claims by Muslim groups to ban the Rushdie’s novel? And would government prosecute those who had advocated the
use of violence against book sellers, publishers or called for the killing of Rushdie in public demonstrations? Banning the novel turns out to be impossible anyway. Blasphemy is only illegal in the Netherlands in relation to Allah, not Mohamed. There quickly emerged a consensus among politicians and interest groups – Mohammed Rabbæ’s NCB (Dutch Centre for Foreigners) in particular – that deliberation with those calling for Rushdie’s death in public is to be preferred over prosecution (Gabriëls 2001: 206).

The public side of the controversy, however, is rather more expressive. Beyond the relations between government, political parties, the justice department and interest groups, a much less practical discussion took place. Here, the question of religion, that is Islam, and its place in Dutch society was at stake. The most striking part of this contention was the extent to which Islam is presented as a foreign religious tradition. The Rushdie-dilemma – how to marry freedom with security? – was time and again described as the confrontation of foreign, religious aggression and national, tolerant secularism. Of course, there were those who sought to contextualise the fatwa in the relations between the Iranian regime and the West. These voices also tended to explain actions by Dutch Muslims in the context of marginalisation and transnational ties. Experts of the Muslim world were contradicted by other commentators, who argued that Islamic fundamentalist posed a threat to a tolerant and modern Dutch society. Public intellectuals and writers – notably G.J.B. Hilterman, Jan Blokker, Gerrit Komrij, Abram de Swaan, Stephan Sanders, Anil Ramdas, Bart Tromp, Henk Hofland – positioned themselves against traditional, orthodox, oppressive religiosity. The Rushdie-affair effectively staged a conjunction between migrants, Islamic faith, aggression and traditionalism (Haleber 1989; cf. Modood 1994). This conjunction was not an innovation of the Rushdie-affair – it was, for instance, already present in the Centrum Partij’s discourse –, but it positioned this conjunction at the heart of public culture, prompting established public figures to articulate their opinion and position. As it did in other contexts, the affair provided the opportunity and, in a sense, the necessity for public figures to enact the grounding narrative of public culture: their outspoken resistance to oppressive traditionalism in the guise of religious orthodoxy (Van der Veer 1995). As Gabriëls aptly argues (2001), Rushdie’s novel – both poetically and narratively – problematised and criticised the orientalist distinction between Western, secular freedom and Eastern, religious backwardness. It seems that the contents of the novel may have been overlooked as a resource for thinking through what was happening around it.

Right in the middle of the contention over Dutch Muslims’ rejection of Rushdie’s novel and support for actions against it and its author, a remarkable
spectacle took place. A certain ‘Mohammed Rasoel’ published an op-ed in which this Iranian immigrant ridiculed the Dutch naiveté towards islam and the West’s failure to anticipate islamic aggression (Van Dijk 2003; Uitermark 2012). A year later, Rasoel’s book – *The downfall of the Netherlands: Land of naïve fools* [*De Ondergang van Nederland: Land der Naïve Dwazen*] (1990) – was published. Rasoel subsequently appeared on tv and radio. The book is an extended pamphlet written in colourful language, ardently condemning the all-too-idealistic and tolerant naiveté of the Dutch as they actually believed that accommodative and welcoming behaviour on their part would lead to peaceful co-existence with their muslim neighbours.

The Dutch encounter the Muslims at cultural events, at fairs and at parties. They see the glistening, timid eyes and the earnestly radiating smile and think: how nice, how sociable, how pleasant are these people. (Rasoel 1990: 19) (#40)

The conjunction of migrants, islamic faith, aggression and traditionalism is repeated throughout the text. Rasoel’s publications draw together a number of notions: an insider of the islamic world is warning the West; the Dutch are tolerant and prone to accommodate the other; the confrontation between a secular West and fundamentalist islam is inevitably violent. These ideas resonate with the discourse of policy failure discussed above and reiterate the central contentions of the Rushdie-affair. What made the appearance of Rasoel particular and distinctive was that it soon became highly unclear who this Mohammed Rasoel actually was and if he – the person appearing on tv and radio – was in fact the author of the texts. As he appeared on tv in somewhat of a disguise – sunglasses and a Palestinian shawl –, there was apparently something to hide. Moreover, complaints of racism had been filed against the author of the book. Rasoel’s identity thereby became a rather pressing matter. It remained and remains unclear who was actually behind Rasoel. The person playing him on tv and radio is probably not the author, yet he was convicted for racist speech in lieu of his appearances (Van Dijk 2003).10 What is relevant, here, is the way in which the figure of Rasoel, who- and whatever he was, entangled the contention over Rushdie with the discourse of policy failure. The failure to integrate immigrants, Muslims in particular, the government’s attempt to pacify the conflict over Rushdie, the West’s well-intentioned tolerance, the enduring and unchanging fundamentalism of the islamic other are all lined up to form a broader narrative of the ‘downfall of Dutch society’. The mystery

10 Teun van Dijk has argued that Rasoel and his publications stem, in all probability, from a group of writers and publishers who had hired an artist, Zoka F., to play Rasoel in real life. See Van Dijk, T. A. (2003), *De Rasoel-Komrij affaire. Een geval van elite-racisme*. Critics.
surrounding Rasoel’s person enacted these concerns over the future of a liberal society as taboo. Why else would Rasoel or others instructing him hide their faces and their identities?

The Rushdie-Rasoel complex staged the failings and fate of immigrant integration as a matter of public speech. From a variety of angles, it is the possibility, necessity and significance of public voice that is at stake. First of all, Rushdie’s voice is being threatened. Second, it was questioned whether Muslims could publicly call for murder? Third, the conflict between Western secularism and islamic orthodoxy is deemed to threaten an open, expressive Dutch culture in which sensitive issues – particularly when related to religious traditionalism – are addressed candidly. Fourth, Rasoel’s interventions and his anonymity come to problematise the future of such an open, expressive culture. Is it even possible to condemn islam publicly?

Of course, the idea that islam is a threat to Western civilisation and the open society runs throughout the entire controversy. One might even suggest that this was the dominant understanding of the issue to begin with. Yet, within this same controversy anxieties about the possibilities of public speech over and against religious taboo are reiterated. The controversy thereby had become the occurrence of two, rather contradictory facts about Dutchness at once. On the one hand, the opinions and interpretations going back and forth in public form the on-going enactment of dialogical Dutchness. The affairs gave concrete credibility to the notion that Dutchness comes down to unabashed, public speech. While on the other hand, the same controversy enacted a crisis of Dutchness. Resonant with the notion of integration failure, specifically Dutch tendencies of tolerance and openness were deemed problematic and self-undermining. Most poignantly in the case of Rasoel, addressing the issue of cultural demise in public is said to be inappropriate and taboo, not in the last instance by people warning for such demise. Dialogical Dutchness is performed, then, not simply by a particular carrier group with a particular take on Dutch culture or multiculturalism. Rather, it becomes reiterates and reaffirmed throughout the dynamic of public controversy. As such, the notion that Dutch culture is exceptionally post-traditional and morally superior to an immigrated culture of non-secular others only gains from an emerging controversy in which the freedom to speak is publicly at stake. The contradictory notions of Dutch exceptionalism and Dutch self-censure do not merely abide in the same discursive universe. Along the Rushdie-Rasoel affair, these notions come to reinforce each other in a performative loop: Dutch culture is superior, therefore it is self-defacing, therefore it is superior, therefore it is self-defacing, etcetera.
Dutchness acquires the superiority of a culture in a state of decadence. A final except from The Downfall of the Netherlands sums up this pattern:

But take note, because the Dutch believe in culture and they are prepared to bring sacrifices for it. To sacrifice a finger for another, doesn’t bother anyone. To sacrifice a hand for a finger already sounds somewhat odd. But the Dutch know no boundaries and actually say: ‘We want to die for a finger,’ forgetting that when they die the finger will die with them. Applied to daily life, this conception will lead to the realisation that the Dutch will have sacrificed their honesty, their sociability, their phlegmatic nature and precisely the tolerance with which it all started [emphasis added]. They will, in short, sacrifice their own culture to protect the islam culture. Which is all the more illogical because that culture is already excellently protected in the countries of provenance. To also protect it in the Netherlands is comparable to feeding all the endangered polar bears to the endangered tigers in India. (Rasoel 1990: 46) (#41)

It was not long after the initial controversy over Khomeini’s fatwa and Rasoel’s identity that a successive staging of public culture took shape. It too was directly related to the trope of policy failure. Frits Bolkestein, having climbed to the top of his party in the 1980’s, drew considerable attention to himself and his VVD when he published an op-ed in De Volkskrant, entitled De integratie van minderheden moet met lef worden aangepakt [The integration of minorities should be handled with courage] (09-12-1991). The op-ed was an elaboration on remarks Bolkestein had made at the Liberal International Conference in Luzern that same month. Like the WRR before him, Bolkestein’s diagnosis of failure focuses on the principle split between private-ethnic and public-civic. He also added several elements that extended the significance of this republican logic. First of all, Bolkestein presented his liberal ideals not only as political positions, but as belonging to the cultural heritage of Western civilisation. Indeed, the Luzern lecture was about the future of a post-communist Europe.11

Here we must go back to our roots. Liberalism has produced some fundamental political principles, such as the separation of church and state, the freedom of expression, tolerance and non-discrimination. We maintain that these principles hold good not only in Europe and North America but all over the world. (Bolkestein, September 6 1991)

In Bolkestein’s performance, liberal values are at once political and cultural. Liberalism moves ambiguously between being a party specific, political vision and being constitutive of democratic, public culture as such, rendering it non-negotiable.

Liberalism claims universal value and worth for these principles. That is its political vision. Here there can be no compromise and no truck. (Bolkestein, September 6 1991)

Second, Bolkestein is sceptical of the Dutch legacy of denominational ‘pillars’ for civic inclusion.

‘Emancipation through pillarisation’ has a good reputation in the Netherlands. A century of pillarisation, so it is claimed, has led to the emancipation of catholics and orthodox calvinists. On these grounds, one would also prefer emancipation through pillarisation in the case of islamic minorities. But maybe catholics and orthodox calvinists would have emancipated themselves without pillarisation. Yes, maybe they would have emancipated more quickly in the face of repression than within the rich life of their own pillars. (September 12 1991, De Volkskrant) (#42)

In Bolkestein’s account, the pillars were always already minority structures sheltering individuals from the repression of an already emancipated, liberal majority. If so, pillarisation can only be a mechanism for inclusion into that majority, not a politico-cultural ideal in itself. Not sheltering oneself from the pressures of the majority is presented as a more promising mechanism to prompt individuals to engage with, rather than retreat from, public life and to promote a more active, republican attitude.

Finally and crucially, Bolkestein calls for a ‘great debate’ on the issue of integration. This, of course, is consistent with a republican logic: if we differ, the only way to manage these differences is to speak out publicly as citizens. And like Vuijsje and Pinto before him, Bolkestein’s interventions already perform what a ‘great debate’ should be. There is no place for permissiveness or taboo in such debate, it should showcase the public culture of Dutch society and involve all political parties.

The integration of minorities is such a complex problem that it can only be solved with guts and creativity. There is no space for permissiveness or taboos. We need a great debate, in which all political parties take part, about what is allowed and what is appropriate, what is necessary and what looms if we don’t. (September 12 1991, De Volkskrant) (#43)

Bolkestein gained considerable notoriety through his interventions (Prins 2004; Rath 1992; Uitermark 2012; Fermin 1997: 82). He drew support and criticism. He thereby became yet another public figure who had the gumption to break the supposed taboo of ethnic difference (Prins 2002). His position was, philosophically speaking, hardly different from many of the positions taken by earlier critics of the minorities policies or the governmental appeasement of fundamentalism during the Rushdie controversy. These positions are predicated on a hierarchical and cultural difference between the civilised West and the yet-to-be-enlightened East.
Bolkestein is hardly original in this respect, nor is his use of rhetoric. As we have already encountered: courage, gumptions, provocation, rupture of taboo, and evocation were all established repertoires for dressing up the act of public intervention.

What makes his intervention particularly meaningful is the fact that a political leader now took on the issues and rhetorical gestures of public discussion. The problems of integration policy were already widely and openly discussed by parliamentarians, but the question what it was that Dutch citizens ought to share culturally had not yet been taken up as a major item of party political strife. Whereas parliamentary politics and public controversy over such a question had remained rather neatly separated, Bolkestein resolutely crossed the boundary between public and parliamentary discourse. Bringing the kind of reasoning that was going on publicly into the political and, most importantly, electoral struggle was provocative in and of itself. Bolkestein not only brought the public discourse to the party political field, but also drew other parties towards the public contention. He proposed ‘a great debate’ between all parties. This would be a debate in which parties would have to take positions and engage within a discourse that had hitherto not been central to party parliamentary exchanges. Bolkestein effectively drew public contention into parliament and the parliament out into the public eye. He thereby enacted a populist politics that prescribes immediacy between public opinion formation and parliamentary deliberation. That is, Bolkestein’s intervention in early September involved his fellow parliamentarians in a debate about public culture, thereby suggesting that there was profound disagreement in parliament over the idea that minorities should be integrated and that concerted effort was needed. There wasn’t. Yet, by reframing the question in terms of what citizens ought to culturally share he instigated considerable contention and response. Thereby, he implicated parliament into a public issue that was constructed and developed by non-parliamentarians: journalists, writers, public intellectuals, and commentators. Bolkestein’s intervention placed the issue of a common, public culture at the heart of parliamentary responsibility. The governmental management of minority integration had already been an object of policy, but as the diagnoses of policy failure began to centre on the lacking recognition and explication of a public culture, in which all citizens are to be grounded, the demise, protection and affirmation of such a culture could also become a central, governmental responsibility.

The performative effect of Bolkestein’s boundary crossing quickly materialised. The so-called algemene beschouwingen – a yearly rounds of debates in which all parties respond to the policy agenda of government for the following
budgetary year – were held not weeks after Bolkestein’s op-ed. The integration of minorities and the op-ed in particular were extensively discussed. On October 8 1991, Bolkestein reiterated his concerns over failing integration in parliament. Leaders of the other parties chose to respond by unanimously agreeing that a further debate was needed (TK 7, 8 October 1991). Disagreement centred not on the need for debate or the positive effect that debate could have on the efforts to integrate minorities, but on the quality of the debate and whether Bolkestein had articulated concerns in the right way. Leader of the social-democrats Wöltgens claimed, for instance, that:

Colleague Bolkestein has recently addressed the position of minorities in the Netherlands. Frankly, I have no problem with that. I do think he has created somewhat of a terminological confusion. Integration can to my mind not be equated with complete cultural adaptation. The rightly proposed, universal values – precisely because they are universal – cannot be designated as specifically western values. In some of the reactions to Bolkestein the impression has been created that there is a taboo on a discussion over the position of minorities, over rights and duties. I don’t agree with that. In any event, I don’t think there should be a taboo. My criticism is not moral but rather pragmatic [zakelijk]. I want to propose to colleague Bolkestein and the other democratic parties [ergo excluding Janmaat’s CD] to have a sober [zakelijk] discussion over the minorities policy, with the agreement that scoring political point over the backs of immigrants will be the only taboo. (TK 7, October 8 1991: 345) (#44)

To which Bolkestein replied:

The conversation will continue, but may I now make two comments? I have never said or written that integration should be equated with complete cultural adaptation. In the contrary, I have argued in an article in the Volkskrant for cultural pluralism. That is the opposite of what mister Wöltgens just said. That is my first comment. My second comment is regarding mister Wöltgens final point: I happily concur. (TK 7, October 8 1991: 345) (#45)

Bolkestein’s boundary crossing clearly evoked worries of discrimination. The next day a motion was put together by Beckers-De Bruijn, Bolkestein himself and co-sponsored by a number of representatives from other parties. The motion is strikingly general, yet served a very particular purpose. It reads:

The parliament, […] has noted that the minorities policy has as of yet not yielded sufficient results; of the opinion that this is partly due to existing prejudices and discrimination; of the opinion that this has to be combated and that this can be achieved when those who are responsible in public administration, politics, the private sector, unions, and other civil society organisations commit themselves unequivocally this goal; asks government to take initiatives that will lead to such a common declaration; and proceeds to the order of the day. (TK 22 300 nr. 28, October 10 1991) (#46)
The motion is phrased in the depoliticised language of parliamentary discourse. Policy hasn’t failed, but is as of yet insufficiently effective. The process of minority integration is hampered by discrimination and prejudice. As such, the motion could be backed by all parties in parliament with the notable, yet predictable exception of the Centrum Democraten. The actual point of the motion only comes at the end: to ask ‘government to take initiatives that will lead to such a common declaration’. This refers to Bolkestein’s plea for a great debate. As he later explained in a lecture:

The real problem of integration takes place in the neighbourhoods. There, various groups of allochthones with their own rules of conduct and cultural and religious attitudes live together with autochthones who also proclaim certain convictions. There, the groups and their customs clash. There, tensions rise. There, the other is made into the scapegoat of the misery of each. […] Neither local government nor politicians should prescribe to people how, within the law, they should live together. In the best case, they can try to create conditions for neighbourhood residents to enter into dialogue about what they want ‘integration while maintaining identity’ to mean. Consensus on this issue should also be sought on the national level, as well as a national, unequivocal declaration against discrimination. In a motion, Ria Beckers, leader of Groen Links, and I have requested government to set up such a declaration. (Bolkestein 1992: 196-197) (#47)

Within such a depoliticised discourse, the common goal of integration is always dependent on the rejection of discrimination and prejudice as it places a post-racist consensus beyond the political differences of parliament. But the minister responsible for the implementation of the motion was more than aware of what was implied. Ien Dales, the serving minister for Interior Affairs and responsible for the minorities policy, took the attention paid to integration by parliament and the introduction of the motion to mean that a ‘national minorities debate’ [nationaal minderheden debat] should be facilitated by government in order to address the problems of the current policy approach and to reflect upon what integration might actually entail. This implication of the motion – making parliament and government responsive to and responsible for the declaration of what grounds public culture – is precisely not in the motion itself. Yet, everyone involved, including the minister, was clearly capable of following up on it. Dales took on Bolkestein’s proposal for staging a great debate. She, however, channelled the debate away from a parliamentary confrontation and into the organisation of a series of conferences to be held all over the country. In these conferences, the representatives of minority organisations, local policy makers, politicians, residential associations and the like participated and discussed the muddling efforts to integrate minorities. Entzinger and Van der Zwan, architects of the new critique of minorities policies, were directly involved in the set-up of the conferences and
published a final report that, together with the reactions to their WRR-report, were instrumental to the redesigned integration policy, stipulated in the Contourennota of 1994 (Van der Zwan & Entzinger 1994).

It is not the actual debates that took place in 1992 that is most relevant here. Consultation such as these debates, in which a large variety of minority stakeholders are brought together to vent, argue and re-affirm their mutual dependencies, had been held before and have been held since (for an overview of what was organised by Dales see TK 22 809, nr. 3: 2-6). The interplay between the general trope of policy failure, Bolkestein’s boundary crossing, and Dales’ depoliticisation enacted a lasting re-definition of the problem-at-hand. In terms of a staging of public culture, the dynamic is interesting because the notion of debate becomes, from this point on, a crucial notion when addressing the possibility and/or necessity of delineating a common culture. Dutchness has not only become a public problem, but an issue of a particular kind with particular possibilities. With Dales’ invention of a ‘national minorities debate’ Dutchness had become the kind of issue that is to be dealt with through debate. Of course, most issues tend to evoke debates. What I seek to highlight is that Dutchness not only evoked debate, but that the issue becomes known and conceivable as a debate prone to resolution by debate itself. The contention that the integration of minorities is in need of a national debate carries a performative significance. That is, debate itself becomes a mechanism of integration and a way to perform a common culture. As minister Dales reiterated:

In the last six months opinions are exchanged about the position of ethnic minorities with an unprecedented intensity in all sections of society. The attention is so general that people have started speaking of a "public debate on integration" [emphasis in the original]. This marks a remarkable stage in the minorities policy of central and other governments. […] The current public debate on integration does not replace the governmentally administered minorities policy [emphasis added]. It can indeed provide impulses for the continuation of an effective, results-oriented minorities policy and contribute to an acceleration of the integration process. That is why government follows developments with great interest, trusting that the broad attention will lead to great engagement and vigour among all who participate in the integration process. (TK 22 314, nr. 9: 1, March 27 1992) (#48)

Adopting the method of debate as such implies (1) the rupture of discursive inhibitions; (2) a public declaration of anti-discrimination; (3) crossing between parliamentary and public discourse; and, crucially, (4) a public enactment of dialogical Dutchness. Christian-democratic representative Huibers summarises this complex of meanings when he reflects on the significance of the up-coming minority debates:
As I have said, the goal should be to gain support for the minorities policy. This means that it is also important that the voice of those who feel threatened or victimised by the necessary extra attention given to minorities will have to be heard. In a calm atmosphere taboos should also be addressed. When you think about this, it should not be a national conference. The debate should be primarily take place in the neighbourhoods themselves. So, we will have to go to the people. As mister Dijkstal [a representative of the VVD party] already said, it will have to be a dialogue. That shall be an important element of the debate. (TK 22314 UCV 13: 5, December 9 1991) (#49)

Debate plays a double role throughout the emerging discussion over failing policies. On the one hand, it denotes the dissensus concerning minority integration. In lieu of the Rushdie-Rasoel controversy, interventions by Bolkestein and others highlight the divisive and provocative aspects of discussing integration. This tension is not specifically about any one piece of policy. Political parties did differ vocally on the issue of naturalisation and double nationality, but most of the actual policy debates around the time are quite managerial (Fermin 1997). What provided tension was the danger of introducing, opening up and inciting racist discrimination among ‘autochthonous citizens’ displeased with minority exceptions and their own prospects. This danger was apparent to parliamentarians at the time. As both Pitstra of the Greens and Bolkstein himself reflected on the national debate initiative in 1993. Pitstra stated:

The minorities policy and the great minorities debate, which should have encompassed society like a net, don’t seem to work either. Bolkestein and the VVD have unintentionally set the tone and the punctured the dikes. Through the holes now flow CD-stories [the rhetoric associated with the Centrum Democraten]. The taboos have been ruptured and with them the realisation that any racist remark, however subtle, has simply become respectable and utter-able [bespreekbaar]. To be sure, I’m not of the opinion that racist statements should be ignored, including in parliament. (EK 15: 633, February 2 1993) (#50)

Bolkestein raises similar concerns:

When I started the minorities debate in its youngest instantiation two years ago, many accused me of repeating what was said in bars and churches [a metaphor for the kind of speech that people only dare to say amongst their own and not in public, i.e. prejudice and racism]. Apparently, I was closing a gap that others wanted to preserve. This is another instance of the golden mean. A wide gap leads to a bubble around the Binnenhof [the seat of parliament and the government]. A narrow gap leads to tunnel vision. (TK 35: 2728, December 8 1993) (#51)

Debate stands in a dangerous relation to racism. This concern leads us right to the other face of debate: it not only denotes the risk of dissensus, but also the possibility to address integration explicitly and frankly without enabling racism (see also Prins 2004). In this sense, debate denotes the mechanism through which
integration becomes possible, an achievement of an exceptionally tolerant, anti-discriminatory culture. The signed declaration presented in 1992 as part of the national minorities debate initiative thereby enacts both an inclusivist rejection of discrimination and a gesture of distinction:

<<GENERAL DECLARATION AGAINST RACIAL DISCRIMINATION
THE SIGNATORIES…
CALL INTO MEMORY that on the basis of the constitution, other laws and agreements discrimination on the grounds of race, skin colour, national or ethnic descent is prohibited.

AFFIRM that in a democratic society respect for every human is fundamental and that anyone living in the Netherlands should be able to participate in Dutch society on an equal footing.

NOTE that prejudice, discriminatory statements and behaviours, consciously or not, exist throughout society and are a substantial cause of existing disadvantages of minorities.

REJECT prejudice, intolerance and subordination at work, in schools, in leisure, or wherever. Discrimination is a social injustice.

COMMIT themselves to a concerted effort to prevent and combat all forms of prejudice and discrimination.

DECLARE that they will at least do the following to prevent and combat discrimination:
- To lead by example and contradict stereotypes.
- Promote the establishment of code of conduct against discrimination in each sector or branch of civil society.
- To hold people and organisations accountable for intentional or unintentional discriminatory behaviour.>> (TK 22 809 nr. 3: 10-11, September 15 1992) (#52)

The staging of public culture from Rushdie and Rasoel to Bolkestein and Dales has a peculiar performative effect. Not only does Dutchness become a public problem in the face of new diversity, it becomes a problem in need of debate. As such, Dutchness is enacted through dissensus: the debates consist of a constant dynamic between provocative challenges of self-proclaimed taboos and silences, leading to expressed anxieties over legitimising racism. Yet, public deliberation is also, in line with the imaginary of dialogical Dutchness, the enactment of public culture. Debate is a mechanism of enacting what and how a common culture is, while evading the dangers of racism and displaying Dutch exceptionalism (see also Prins & Slijper 2002). Dialogical Dutchness, then, provides a way to narrate Dutch culture as a distinctly liberal, republican and anti-nationalist one. The acts of public deliberation, provocative critique and autonomous expression come to typify Dutch nationhood. Becoming Dutch, here, involves a liberating, expressive rupture of traditional and collective repression (cf. Prins 2004; Verkaaik 2009). In light of failing integration, debate provides a mechanism for more successful acculturation.
Dutchness is not only—finally—explicitly articulated in debates, but the act of debate exemplifies what it means to be autonomous, emancipated and Dutch.

**Discussing nationhood in a new era**

In the period leading up to the stagings of public culture, as they were discussed above, intellectual discussion of Dutchness had remained—when contrasted to the period after 1991—ostensibly parochial. Authors, sociologist and public commentators discussed Dutchness with an emphatic playfulness. In such discussion, national particularities are described as quaint, strange and, indeed, parochial. The often expressed conviction that such discussion was somewhat outdated in a thoroughly international world order gave discussion of Dutchness a distinct casualness. They present what may be understood as a light-hearted version of culture-and-personality anthropology. Sociologist Derek Philips, for instance, playfully ridicules Dutch tendencies that he, as an American, finds particularly deviant, typical and irritating. He writes:

> Because the group and its laws are sovereign here, someone who appreciates his or her individuality is forced to give strongly expressed opinions, to be frank about it, and to constantly express one’s views on all matters of concern. And the more someone does this, the more probable it becomes that he or she will be deemed unfriendly, arrogant, nutty, or intolerant and will be called a trouble maker. (Phillips 1985: 24). (#53)

Rentes de Carvalho, a novelist from Portuguese extraction, described his personal dealings with the Dutch, discrediting the many myths that they tend to tell about themselves. Again, a playful ethnography of quaint particularities is the result:

> Any business meeting worthy of the name is at least two hours long, and any Dutch person of some import has at least several a day, during which he consumes an identical amount of watery coffee. […] As everywhere, there are useful, necessary and indispensable meetings, but for the most part they are somnolent affairs that create the illusion of participation, and for Everyman taking the stand, when others keep quiet, the momentary enjoyment of feeling like a regent, even if only of the association “Our Garden”. […] ‘But aren’t the Dutch individualists?’ Not more or less than other mortals. But what frustrates them is that they can’t combine the benefits of association with the pleasures of individual initiative. (Rentes de Carvalho 1982: 83-84) (#54)

In his essay *Nederland, een bewoond gordijn* [The Netherlands, an inhabited curtain] Rudy Kousbroek, arguably one of the most respected Dutch intellectuals of last thirty years, does take the two previous observers to task—criticising Philips and amending Rentes de Carvalho (see Kousbroek 1987: 41-57)–, but the whole exchange never exceeds the boundaries of cultural reflection. Such exchanges contrast rather starkly with the kinds of publications that address Dutchness from
1989 onwards. It shows how the issue moves from rather light-hearted reflection on the quaint disposition of the Dutch pseudo-tribe to much more earnest discussions of the political and normative significance of national identity.

Already somewhat more politicised are the string of columns published by Abram de Swaan in 1985 that were discussed in the introduction of this study. De Swaan – a leading public intellectual and one of the foremost respected sociologists in the Netherlands – wondered whether cultural recognition and fashionable critique of eurocentrism really made any practical or sociological sense. He ties the discussions over Dutchness to the quarrels over failing minorities policies, anxieties over Islam, antiracist and anticolonial voices in the public debate. He agrees with voices like Philips that distinctly Dutch tendencies can be ascertained. Like Philips and Rentes de Carvalho, he mocks Dutch tolerance for newly immigrated groups and Islamic practices. These should not be mistaken for appreciation and recognition, but stem from a thoroughly western, civic approach to cultural difference. Moreover, attempts to cultivate both indigenous and immigrated identities and cultures are contrasted by De Swaan to what he suggest is a much stronger process towards global culture. De Swaan’s interventions make a double point: (1) Western civilisation is superior, particularly when it comes to dealing with cultural difference; (2) the significance of nationhood and distinctiveness [eigenheid] is resolutely transforming as the dominance of Western civilisation is transformed into the dominance of an increasingly global culture. In line with the light-heartedness of the discussions, De Swaan famously characterised the Netherlands and its culture:

In this global circuit the Netherlands is a stopover [perron]. That is the function and the significance of the Dutch language and culture, that one can get on and off of the globe with it. The utility of the nation is to be a platform [perron] in the world. (November 16 1985, NRC Handelsblad) (#55)

Very different from ephemeral reflections on national particularities is Paul Scheffer’s discussion of Dutch national interest in A Satisfied Nation [Een tevreden natie] (1988). Scheffer, a staff member of the research organisation of the PvdA at the time, tries to spell out how social democrats could and should rethink foreign policy and diplomacy in the context of shifting Atlantic relations. His suggestions did not lead to any prolonged, public debate about Dutchness, but it does show a line of reasoning that, first, problematises Dutchness in a specific way and, second, is at heart of an argument that would, eventually, make Scheffer a leading European intellectual. Moreover, Scheffer published his book right at the time that a more politicised debate about Dutchness was beginning to take off. As this
analysis of his argument shows, Scheffer was already well-placed to take up his central role in the debates of the 1990’s.

Analogous to Couwenberg, Scheffer starts out from the idea that the Netherlands entertain a weak national identity. This is tied to the highly decentralised and deliberative formation of the Dutch state (Scheffer 1988: 32). A weak identity facilitated the conservation of an international status-quo that was in the interest of a trading nation. National interests were thereby always understood and expressed as if international co-dependence and cooperation were actually more important. Scheffer describes this intellectual tradition in foreign relations and diplomacy in order to ask whether it does not mask changing realities on the ground and is, thus, in need of change itself. Scheffer’s idea of a weak identity resonates with a long standing argument in discussion on Dutch identity. It is a particular version of the notion that the Dutch are distinctly disdainful of all-too-vehement nationalism as practiced by others. Scheffer is well aware of this and he illustrates the notion of a weak identity with a reference to Huizinga. A famous quote forms one of the mottos of his essay:

The intellectual ground, on which political illusion and rhetoric thrive most exuberantly, is that of a political sense of inferiority. (…) Oppression, subordination, loss of former greatness, imperfect national development are usually the causes. An exasperated nationalism is almost always the consequence (…). It is not our merit, but our gracious fate, that we are spared these causes and these consequences. However despicable it may sound to those who feel fire and courage, as nation and state we just are, in a certain sense, satisfied, and it is our national duty to remain so. J. Huizinga, 1935 (Scheffer 1988: 11) (#56)

Scheffer follows up by questioning the consequences of an all-too-weakly expressed national particularity:

The awareness of national distinctiveness [eigenheid] is weakly developed in the Netherlands. The eyes are more preferably directed beyond the country’s borders. This mental condition can also be found in the debate about foreign policy and the adherence to internationalism is widely propagated here. When we take our cue from public opinion, the Netherlands doesn’t exactly defend its own interest in foreign policy, but it primarily the bearer of universal principles with high moral and judiciary standing. Rarely, however, are the specific interests of the Netherlands in its relation to the ‘outside’ discussed.

The reflections that follow start out from a critique of this distorted self-image. It is, rather, worth considering whether this negation of national interest is not a means to certify the position of the Netherlands. Tactfully, it is assumed that Dutch interest flourish in the same circumstances as those in which the national interests of others nations are advanced. […] Inadvertently, the silence over national interest becomes the bench mark to which the outside world is expected to aspire. It is expected that other nations will mirror themselves to the Dutch self-image. […] The more we become aware of the particular interests that the Netherlands represent in Europe – even though these are cloaked in a morality of universal pretence –, the more insight can be gained into the
national traditions of surrounding nations. It may even become possible to judge expressions of national identity with some impartiality. Patronisingly, we speak of ‘English nostalgia for the lost Empire’, ‘the French longing for grandeur’ and the ‘German struggle with the divided nation’. The Netherlands finds itself surrounded by countries that take care of their national interest and identity less underhandedly. The internationalism that takes this to be nothing but the echoes of a foregone era is, in spite of its wide vision, rather narrow-minded. (Scheffer 1988: 16-17)

Scheffer’s engagement with national identity is indicative of a wider problematisation that moves Dutchness from the realm of cultural reflection into the domain of public contestation: its weakness. As shall be addressed shortly, the weakness of Dutch identity forms the crucial vehicle for its politicisation. It immediately involves the invitation of action: if Dutch identity is weak, should it be strengthened? by what means? This is quite clear from Scheffer’s own treatment in relation to foreign policy. In fact, Dutch identity provides a distorted self-image as it both overcodes national interests into universal norms and misrepresents foreign nationalism as backward. The structure of this argument – (1) Dutch identity is weakly developed, which (2) distorts certain realities and, (3) thus, necessitates a reconsideration of a nationalist imaginary – will return when Scheffer, in 1995, widens its application from foreign relations to solidarity and diversity.

Scheffer’s notion of a weak identity resonates with interventions by other intellectuals who set out to problematise national identity. We have already seen how the author of The Demise of the Netherlands conceived of the self-undermining dynamic of Dutch self-conception. Another example of this trope gained notoriety when Herman Pleij – cultural historian – addressed what he called ‘Dutch discontent’ (see also Pleij 1993).

And I keep wondering why it would be both suspect and ridiculous to reflect on the origins of a set of national characteristics, about which a growing number of foreigners expresses amazement. They do not hesitate to speak admiringly or jokingly about something like a ‘national character’ [volkskarakter], which is apparently in plain sight. But why don’t we want to hear this? Or do we deem a term like ‘national character’ so unmanageable and stained that any sensible mediation is always already out of the question?

[...]
Ordinary! There isn’t a people on earth that strives to be as ordinary as our own. We don’t want heroes, and in case they, accidentally, do emerge, they are expected to excel in ordinariness. And hero worship is completely out of the question. Acting normal is crazy enough. (Pleij 1991: 12-13)

Apart from Pleij’s reiteration of the meagre attention to nation distinctiveness and an apprehension for the notion of national character, he plays up an interesting trope about ordinariness. As Pleij himself notes, ordinariness is to be associated
with Dutch burgherlyness. According to Pleij, burgherlyness is all about restraint, smallness, frugality and utilism.

But where does that apparently uncontrollable proclivity to deny or ridicule any grandeur in the present or the past come from? And does it also relate to the visible lack of interest in the national past? Do such attitudes constitute the Dutch [Hollandse] identity? But what to do with the growing steam of foreigners, who expound the particularity of our cultural expressions and the distinction of our customs. To them, these are apparently easy to amalgamate into behavioural patterns, which can carry the seal of true Dutchness [Nederlanderschap]. Are we really that frugal, hardworking, cleanly, moderate and tolerant?

One can’t write about national constitution [volksaard] or national character [volkskarakter]. To start, those concepts are unusable. But what’s worse: these concepts have become so contaminated by sinister nationalism – from the nineteenth century culminating in contemporary racism – that any hope of rehabilitation is precluded for a long time to come. […] Isn’t it evident and inescapable that through increasing centralisation of government and cultural diffusion from the beginnings of the nation the subjects will begin to resemble each other in thinking and acting? Even though two farmers on either side of the German border (still) speak the same dialect, they think and dream remarkably different due to the suction of the centres on which they are bound to concentrate.

And therefore Dutch sobriety exists, because many believe in it and even act accordingly – not in the last instance foreigners. This is also true for the utilism, cleanliness, industriousness, pragmatism and the overarching ordinariness. Such collective characteristics [eigenschappen], principally presupposed but no less effective for it, also make it possible to speak of ‘un-Dutch’ [onhollands], which by the way – very typical – denotes a positive quality in cultural life. (Pleij 1991: 17-18) (#59)

Ordinariness evokes a string of other connotation that reiterate a long standing narrative: the Dutch are distinctly adverse to formal, hierarchical relations and excel in their appreciation of equality and openness. Of course, the anti-nationalist tendency is itself part and parcel of this narrative. It articulates a national type, but also a distinctive relationship to nationalism itself.

Over and beyond this narrative of informal relations between unheroic individualists, Pleij explicates a remarkable idea: the national identity exists in popular belief. That is, what makes a certain characteristic part of national identity – which can no longer be describes as a national character – is the extent to which it is collectively believed to be distinctly national. This in and of itself creates the circumstances in which people, attentive to the same centres of governance and cultural diffusion, begin to think and act along the lines of what they believe to be part of national identity. Pleij is well aware of the fact that his typification of Dutch identity is just that: a cliché. But he also argues that it is precisely the cliché – the Dutch are ordinary – that is believed by the many. Discussing national identity thereby involves the identification of widely shared forms of imagination. Pleij contends that, indeed, talk of national character is no longer possible or helpful, but this does not preclude a discussion of national identity as such. As he enacts in his
own treatment of the issue, one can still deal with the popular imaginations of Dutchness.

Whereas Couwenberg was and is still concerned with the relationship between an objective and a subjective moment in nationalism, Pleij transforms the discussion all together. What matters is how the many imagine their Dutchness. It is at this juncture that constructivism resolutely enters the discussion. As in the case of Scheffer, who is primarily interested in awareness, what matters most is not the learned prescription of a national culture inherent to a people. What really matters is a sensitivity to the popular imagination of a national narrative shared and communicated through political and cultural hubs. Only if one takes on board this particular version of constructivism – the national is constituted through the popular – can Scheffer and Pleij succeed in creating their particular version of the problem: national identity is weakly imagined, therefore we could and/or should begin to imagine it differently. The constructivist problematisation of national identity creates a unique responsibility, which former enactments of nationhood precluded, namely the (re)construction of national imagination itself. Disagreement need not focus on the outdated question if a national culture exist and what constitutes the Dutch character, but if the nation is imagined felicitously and what should be changed about national imagination in order to make such imagination more persuasive. It thus also creates the possibility of having a defective or regrettable form of imagination. With Scheffer the predominant awareness of Dutchness creates misguided priorities in foreign policy and diplomacy, whilst Pleij hints at the cultivation of recurrent discomfort as part of the imaginative repertoire of Dutchness.

The French inflection: historians find space to manoeuvre
Between January 16 1993 and February 26 1994, the broadsheet NRC Handelsblad published a series of articles that constituted a miniature version of Pierre Nora’s grand memory project, documenting the lieux de mémoire of the French nation (Nora 1984-1992). As Niek van Sas, the leading historian behind the project and later editor of the book collecting the newspaper essays (Van Sas 1995), explained in his opening essay in 1993:

After the WOII, research into nationalism was for some time as unpopular as nationalism itself. In the last ten years there has been a remarkable surge in a variety of disciplines: sociology, anthropology, literary studies, geography and of course history as well. […] It is a widespread misunderstanding that Dutch national awareness is weakly developed. The reverse is true: it is so self-evident that it, therefore, hardly needs any elucidation. […] The current wave of publications on the Dutch identity –
a tangled notion that I’ll not touch upon further – gives me the impression that this identity is faring quite well. (January 16 1993, NRC Handelsblad) (#60)

Interestingly, Van Sas’ assessment of the imaginative prowess of Dutchness is the reverse of that of Scheffer. Imagination is not weak or unpersuasive, it is saturated. After an academic symposium about lieux de mémoire, national identity and collective memory in France and the Netherlands, Niek van Sas and a senior editor of the NRC Handelsblad, Peter van Dijk, decided to introduce the concept of lieu de mémoire to a wider Dutch audience (Van Sas 1995: 7). Emulating the French example, Van Sas and his colleagues sought to popularise the idea of lieu de mémoire by showing how it could be applied to the various ways in which the Dutch remembered who and what they are. Van Sas emphasises the plurality of imagination that Nora’s approach gives rise to:

Dozens of lieux de mémoire have been selected, which – in the words of instigator Pierre Nora – form the codification, condensation and anchoring of French national memory and are described in an impressive publication. The contents of this imaginary museum is quite arbitrary and that underscores once more that something like a national memory can hardly be defined, let alone demarcated. (January 16 1993, NRC Handelsblad) (#61)

Van Sas is well aware of what is at stake in the matter. Indeed, he argues that academic engagement in the public discussion over Dutchness brings out normative, even moral concerns. His opening essay in NRC Handelsblad ends with a warning:

At the end of that book [Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837] Colley summarises the task of current research into nation formation and nationalism: “We need to stop confusing patriotism with simple conservatism, or smothering it with damning and dismissive references to chauvinism and jingoism. Quite as much as any other human activity, the patriotism of the past requires flexible, sensitive and above all, imaginative reconstruction”

Today, the first part of this admonition is increasingly taken to heart. The second part is no less important, but does contain a certain danger: that imagination becomes an aim in itself. What is happening now in Yugoslavia or what has happened in Auschwitz, should at least serve as a warning that modern studies of nationhood may not lapse into an ethereal relativism. The phenomenon of nationalism remains essentially bound up with tensions between good and bad. (January 16 1993, NRC Handelsblad) (#62)
The contents, further elaborations\(^\text{12}\) and public success of Van Sas’ miniature mémoire-project will not occupy us here. What is interesting about Van Sas’ positioning of the project is the fact that it articulates a certain interpellation of historical expects like himself. The attempt to locate, describe and more deeply understand the constitutive elements of national memory is carefully placed in response to contemporary developments. Three developments are mentioned in Van Sas’ exposé: (1) a resurgence and relegitimation of research into nationalism within the academic world; (2) a wave of publications about Dutch identity; (3) past and present atrocities in the context of ethno-nationalist conflict, particularly those in the Balkans. Connecting these three concerns is Van Sas’ critique of relativism. He agrees that research into nationalism has clearly pointed out that the nation is an imaginative construct. Van Sas approvingly points to Benedict Anderson’s book as an intellectual watershed. But the recent affirmation of the constructivist approach to the nation by scholars should not lead experts to an uncritical relativism, as if they no longer have a role to play in guiding the ongoing imagination. Precisely such relativism involves the danger of unrestrained imagination, by which imagination becomes an aim in itself, leaving no empirical check on or expert judgement of what can and cannot be imagined to be national. As Van Sas argues, it is such unguided imagination that will enable patriotism to become its dark and violent other.

So, what is relevant for our purposes here is the attempt by Van Sas and his colleagues to gain or more to the point, regain a measure of control over the imaginative practice through which the Dutch come to conceive of something like a Dutch identity. For Van Sas, Nora’s mémoire-project serves as an example of how historians and other experts might still perform an authoritative role. Beyond the watershed of Anderson’s imagined community, experts will need to play that role accordingly, namely not just as experts of, but also as experts in imagination. The ambitions of professional historians, like Van Sas and others, to participate in the public discussions over Dutchness provides an interesting point of perspective onto the emerging dissensus over its significance. It shows, namely, that by that time – 1993 – Dutchness has become a recognisable, public issue with which historians come to engage in new ways as they seek to gain some measure of control.

In doing so, they introduce sophisticated concepts, for instance Anderson’s ‘imagined community’ or Nora’s ‘lieux de mémoire’. These concepts prescribe a

\(^{12}\) As in many other European contexts, the lieu de memoire concept was to have a major impact on Dutch historiography and ethnology. It became an organising idea in discussions and publications on heritage, canonisation and identity by academic historians and ethnologists. See in particular: Den Boer & Frijhoff (1993), Tollebeek & Te Velde (2009), Wesseling (2005), Wesseling (2005-2007). See Frijhoff (2011) for a discussion of the diffusion of the lieu de memoire concept in the Netherlands.
particular kind of engagement with the issue of Dutchness. In contrast to previous concepts – most notably national character – they no longer preclude the public’s prerogative of national imagination. Historians can only gain a right to speak about that imagination by claiming expert insight into the ways in which that public happens to be imagining it. Historians may want to correct imaginative practices or open up new directions – for instance by publishing a string of essays in a national broadsheet –, but they can only do so by persuading their publics that their collective memory need neither be static nor monolithic. The concept of lieux de mémoire thereby assigns both the public and the expert new possibilities. The public can learn about the many different ways in which the nation has been and may be remembered, while the historian regains an object of expertise, namely the mnemonic practices of the public. This public role of the historian is vastly different from the one still in place within a characterological situation. She is no longer the surveyor of large continuities in time and space, communicating hidden knowledge about the nation’s constitutive essences, but the well-trained interpreter and narrator of the ways in which people themselves develop and maintain sites of memory.

Although there is no single moment at which the movement becomes visible a rather massive shift has taken place. Historians still engage themselves with Dutchness and seek to communicate to publics, as did Geyl, the Romeyns, Fruin, and Huizinga. But as concerns over Dutch identity begin to take shape as a public problem and a question of imaginative forte, academic historians no longer claim centre stage. They do not speak from the pulpit. Rather, Van Sas and others play out their role as embedded in the imaginative practices taking place all around them. They enact a historical expertise that is reactive to and reflexive of the public’s prerogative to imagine, remember and forget.

Out of touch in Europe
It was in particular after the treaty of Maastricht was signed that the prospect of a unified Europe would be represented in contrast to the enduring importance of national identity. The Maastricht treaty not only solidified the passage to a more unified union, but also contained – for the first time – a specific paragraph on the cultural identities within it (Sassatelli 2009). Although the contentions over European unification addressed many different issues, national identity came to mean something quite specific in the on-going discussions. Whether voices in these debates supported federal unification or not, national identity came to indicate a lag or inertia in the process of unification. This concern is interesting as such, because it resonates strongly with the developing problematisation of Dutchness:
government acts in spite of a popularly entertained nationhood. If there is a problem of national identity in European unification, it has to do with the lag between administrative decision-making and popular identification. The discussions over national sovereignty, cultural and regional specificities, European citizenship and the nagging horizon of federalism thereby create a dissensus between those who do and those who don’t heed the disjunction between government and the people. Ben Knapen, political commentator and leading editor at the *NRC Handelsblad* used familiar tokens of national historiography to indicate what was happening:

There is, in short, a clash between Liberators and Patriots, between those for whom Europe is a panacea for letting fresh air in and those who see the self-evidence of national support being corroded. (June 29 1991, *NRC Handelsblad*) (#63)

The possible contradiction between European unification and national distinctiveness had, of course, already become apparent to many, particularly when it came to the protection of the Dutch language (Van Ginkel 1999: 287). The construction of a common market inevitably raised questions over cultural policies of separate member states and thus came to involve national and regional identities (see D’Ancona 1989 for the Dutch context). Whereas discussions of this kind were long restricted to policy makers and advocacy groups, the discussions became intensified and increasingly involved politicians and public commentators after the 1991 signing of the Maastricht Treaty (Van Ginkel 1999: 289-290). Although the general tenant of these discussions was to what extent European unification would undermine or encompass a more local, more proximate, more strongly experienced Dutchness, they opened up the question of civilised and restrained nationalism. If the process of unification could not be continued without political and institutional regard for a popularly embraced national feeling and identification, it followed that there should be an explication of how such nationalism could be civilised and non-violent. In the imagery of these debates, national identity moves perilously between the Scylla of a technocratic, federal Europe that recognises culture only as a tradable commodity and the Charybdis of violent ethno-politics that Mitterrand would famously diagnose as the essence of nationalism. Moreover, the violence in the Balkans served as a clear and present reminder that decivilisation could easily and ferociously follow from nationalist fervour.

Van Ginkel recounts (1999: 291-292) how reappraisals of nationhood emerged within all main currents of political ideology. Christen-democratic reactions tended to emphasise the preservation of (judeo-)christian and burgherly
values and traditions. Confessional voices tend to contrast their vision of national identity to an overly individualised and overly libertarian society that lacks in inherent moral convictions what it overacts in materialist and post-materialist pragmatism. Liberals turned towards a confederate goal for Europe under the guidance of Frits Bolkestein (see also Van Schie July 15 1996). Bolkestein in particular insisted on a split between economic integration on the one hand and popular-cum-cultural sovereignty on the other. Among the social-democratic PvdA and the more activist socialists of the SP, there was a call for a stronger emphasis on the nation-state as the proper scale of solidarity. Reasons, rhetoric and success of these reappraisals within the ideological worlds of the main parties differ, yet in each instance the recognition of national distinction is articulated as a *reappraisal* and a deliberate *project*. In contradiction to an indiscriminate Europeanisation of once-national institutions, rules, and standards, the feelings and identifications of the electorate should be taken into account. Those feelings and identifications are not only more local than the scale of Europe, but also provide citizens with a sense of belonging to their own, Dutch community, laws, institutions, language, history, values, customs, and culture. Even though interlocutors differ in their focus on one of these aspects, they do not differ in their tendency to contrast native sovereignty – what is still ‘of our nation’ with what should or shouldn’t be relinquished to Brussels. The idea that European unification might itself be nation-building or productive of national reconstruction is practically non-existent.

The apparent contradiction between a weakly entertained identity and culture on the one hand and a popularly embraced sense of belonging on the other is kept going by attributing the first to an overly cosmopolitan vanguard who has already decided that a unified Europe supersedes national provincialism while projecting the other on a rooted and unsophisticated population who *still* feels at home in the nation and longs for the familiar. This way of understanding the distribution of values is reminiscent of earlier discourses among Dutch ethnologists, who reiterated a divide between urban, dislocated publics and those who are still-rooted-in-place (Eickhoff et al. 2000). Yet, there is a crucial difference with regards to the out-dated ethnology of the past. Political and public elites are, so warn political and public figures, *out of touch with a resilient nation*. Not only is Dutchness to be explicated – reinvigorated through self-consciously speaking out its contents and boundaries in public dialogue –, but in the context of European unification such articulations are attentive to a public that still understands itself as a nation, *no matter how* inappropriate that self-understanding may be. Thereby, Dutchness is not only found by speaking out, but also by speaking for. The central question is not whether a national identity and culture can be unearthed and what it
looks like – only a few participants still intervene within this particular horizon (Fortuyn 1992; Couwenberg 1994; Verburgh 1991; Aalders 1987; Diepenhorst, November 24 1992, *NRC Handelsblad*) and even they do so with considerable reserves. The transformed question is if, how and to what extent the people still imagine their world along the supposedly more familiar boundaries of *national imaginations*. Can, should and will Europe provide similar, competing and encompassing possibilities for self-imagination? How will we guide this enduring nationalism in civilised and proper directions?

Henk Hofland, prominent columnist and celebrated journalist, draws the different stands of the problem together – popular dissent, violent nationalism, resilient nationhood, necessary reappraisal – when he responds to the Danish rejection of the Maastricht Treaty:

> Is that which the Danish have done through their referendum a peaceful and moderate way to express what the Croats and the like have persisted through military means? Nationalism has great flaws. In the course of this century, we have become accustomed to see them as often fatal vices. Nonetheless, nationalism as a political force has survived, also in countries with a modern political civilization and lack of blood thirst as in Denmark. All of this demands a recalibration of the importance that we must grant to national identity within an irreversible process of technological and economic integration. (June 24 1992, *NRC Handelsblad*) (#64)

Hofland and his public would soon be presented with a concerted effort of recalibration: the intellectual proposition of a civilised nationalism.

**Civilised nationalism: intellectual reflections**

It was in response to a critical moment in the positioning of their party, the PvdA, that intellectuals associated with the social-democrats began drafting a reappraisal of nationalism that would have lasting effects on the way in which debates over Dutchness would proceed. More specifically, Paul Scheffer and Jos de Beus – in collaboration and in their own ways (for instance De Beus 1996a; 1996b; 1998) – would begin to make interventions that would mark much of the debates that followed, resonating to well into the new century. They would succeed in drawing attention to their ideas and prompt a wide range of responses, laying down some basic features of what would become the ‘resurgence of nationalism’ in politics after 2001. So although the notion of lagging attachment to the nation among the citizenry is embraced across the political spectrum, the debate centred on the social-democratic attempts to design a *civilised* reappraisal of national identity (Tollebeek 1996).
Although the PvdA became the largest parliamentary force in the elections of May 3 1994 and would soon form a ground-breaking coalition – the ‘purple’ government without christen-democratic participation – Paul Scheffer and Jos de Beus sketched an uncertain victory for their party in an op-ed titled ‘Parties in search of their people [volk]’:

The CDA and the PvdA [the previous coalition partners] have been punished for their failures in an area that is traditionally their strong suit: the pragmatic management of public affairs and the maintenance of livelihood in times of radical societal change. (May 5 1994, NRC Handelsblad) (#65)

In the outcome of the election, De Beus and Scheffer read a wide-spread need for a protection of welfare combined with a social philosophy that resists government paternalism and all-too-multicultural group rights. De Beus and Scheffer then draw their conclusion:

What unites all these desires is the search for a new national awareness [natie-besef]. We have to figure out, in completely new circumstances, what keeps us together. Depillarisation, immigration, and European unification are the foremost reasons why nation-formation [natievorming] is again the order of the day in the Netherlands. All that is self-evident is under pressure and what used to be a relaxed nation [Huizinga’s enduring satisfaction] threatens to become an in-ward looking, resentful community.

To prevent this from happening we don’t need a hasty jump towards Europe. The need for national responsibility and effective public administration is extensive. All too easily, the Netherlands has been spoken off as a ‘member state’ [deelstaat] or ‘province’ in Europe. The question should be: to what extent do international organisations like the European Union enable the Dutch nation-state to develop as a parliamentary democracy, welfare society, and the rule of law? If the national administration [rijksoverheid] would falter in these areas, the consequence will be a closed, tense society.

This idea of nation-formation should not be understood as a plea for closure from the outside world. To the contrary, only a nation in which citizens have proper social protections and legal securities, a nation that lives on a clear idea of cultural integration and communal solidarity, a nation in which citizens have a direct relation to the government of the country and guarantees of non-corruption are ameliorated, only in such a community will self-consciously open up to the world outside.

In short, any government that now takes power shall be national in the sense that it should be motivated by the mission to self-consciously promote nation-formation. Parties need to imagine the people they are expected to represent. (May 5 1994, NRC Handelsblad) (#66)

These arguments and rhetorical forms follow from earlier intervention made by both figures (Scheffer 1988; PvdA 1994), but what will concern us here is the way in which this particular intervention became the occasion of whole range of reactions and contention. It is, again, these positionings in their relatedness that will give us an understanding of what is happening to the problem of Dutchness in public and political discourse. This interplay between interventions and responses

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is of special interest, because they – again – were explicitly described by the participants as a ‘national identity debate’. The fact of contention itself is made into a politically significant occurrence. The very fact that voices are raised over the idea and the terms – nation, nationalism, national identity, people [volk], distinctiveness [eigenheid] – is made into a central aspect of the issue. Once again, we see that the specific contents of identity are not the crucial point of struggle – only christen-democratic and decidedly conservative voices seriously present an essentialist-cultural analysis of the nation –, rather the means of enunciation are the point of focus and supply metaphors in which the possibility of a civilised imagination of Dutchness is articulated.

Immediately, there is vocal opposition to Scheffer and De Beus, in which their credentials as social-democrats are questioned:

…the plea by the two social democrats for a “relaxed nation” sounds a bit apocryphal to me. It shows that social-democratic thinking has irreversibly changed. Gone is the critical discourse on the international contradiction of capital and labour, the unmasking of the ideological effect of bourgeois law, and the attack on the illusion of the nation, the latest opium of the people. There should be a conscious effort of nation building: ‘Parties need to imagine the people they are expected to represent.’ However, it is here that these intellectuals overstep their critical boundaries. With a possible stab-in-the-back by the CD they speak of deliberate nation building and ‘back to the people [volk]’. Don’t they understand that these are outdated concepts? ‘Nation’ and ‘people [volk]’ are terms that inevitably bend towards claims of authenticity, originalism, and relatedly, to legitimacy. The voters of the CD regard themselves to be the ‘real’ Dutch, because they’ve already lived in the Netherlands for multiple generations. Therefore, they are the first to make claims to the achievements of the Dutch nation: a good home in a decent neighbourhood (without foreigners) and a generous welfare payment or a well-paying job. How will Scheffer and De Beus screen off their undoubtedly progressive project of intentional nation building from this regressive national thinking? (May 17 1994, *NRC Handelsblad*) (#67)

Or, in a similar vein:

Scheffer’s contention that the negative aspects of national awareness [natiebesef] have to be neutralised through democratic control doesn’t cut it. Why first let the genie out of the bottle to then try to get it back? This bottle is best left unopened. (June 30 1994, *NRC Handelsblad*) (#68)

Not much latter, Scheffer reiterates his position more directly in relation to European unification in an op-ed titled ‘A Europe without democracy summons populist resentment’. It concludes that:

Citizens who don’t feel represented in their own parliament won’t be tempted to see a beckoning vision in the European union. Those who deem themselves ‘strangers in their own country’, will sooner flee in ‘my own people [volk] first’ [well known caption of extreme right sentiment]. That is why Europe cannot be built on weak democracies in the member states. A European union that doesn’t assume the nation-state as the primary vessel for rule of law, social protection and
Scheffer would continue to use his platform in the *NRC Handelsblad* to argue for a reappraisal of national identity. The most sophisticated of these interventions, one that again sets off much discussion, is an essay published on January 7 1995: ‘The Netherlands as an open door’ [‘open door’ refers both to ‘cliché’ and to the ‘openness of society and borders’]. It is indicative of the debate as it focused explicitly on the discursive possibilities and constraints to speak up about national identity. Scheffer’s main point is one that resonates with his earlier arguments: it is precisely because Dutchness has been imagined so self-evidently, even somewhat arrogantly, that we now lack an appreciation for national identity and an adequately terminology for discussing it. Moreover, public figures who now take on liberal-progressive postures by ridiculing and rejecting talk of national community and culture are in fact calling forth *uncivil* nationalist reaction. As the title already announces, the crux of the argument is the mode of debate and form of imagination:

With a certain persistence, publications have been coming out in recent years that indicate a growing need to once again weigh and investigate the national awareness [*nationaal besef*]. We can think of studies like the one by Pleij (Het Nederlandse onbehagen, 1991), Righart (Het einde van Nederland?, 1992) and more recently Kossmann (Een tuchteloos probleem, de natie in de Nederlanden, 1994).

Apparently, something isn’t quite right. The road to Europe seem barred, at least the road to the federal Europe in which all would compete equally as ‘member states’ [*deelstaat*]. The position of our country in Europe has become far less self-evident than would have been imagined possible ten years ago. That is why we need words that often roam around in the back of our minds, but have been left unused; words like national identity or a sense of belonging.

Such a contention is often reacted to worryingly. Particularly in left-liberal circles people proclaim: in god’s name, let’s keep this genie in its bottle. All that talk about the nation, even if well-intentioned, is at best no more than a past battle and with a little bad luck will lead to trouble. Examples of scientist, publicists and politicians that represent this view are bountiful: Koen Koch, Abram de Swaan, Anet Bleich, Marcel van Dam, Joris Voorhoeve, Jan Pronk and of course the Kapittel-group, with people like Roel in ’t Veld and Arthur Doctors van Leeuwen, who would prefer to abolish the Netherlands altogether. That is a very diverse crowd, but in this debate their ideas are still remarkably similar. (January 7 1995, *NRC Handelsblad*) (#70)

Scheffer goes on to recount the historical development of national imagination and claims that the main constituents of this image – tolerance, consensus and egalitarianism – are waning out of overconfident neglect. Yet, Scheffer claims, this national image and the distinct cultural history that gave rise to it, grounds much of what citizens still hold dear: an open society, cooperative and pragmatic politics and restrained economic liberalism. Scheffer repeatedly argues, however, that an anachronistic approach to nation building is out of the question:
In place of this view [the notion that national identity is no longer important] we cannot present the Netherlands of the fifties. Secularisation, immigration, European cooperation, international competition, new media and the like have changed the Netherlands. We shouldn’t make principles out of our habits. It would be worth the effort, however, to openly raise the question what **we still deem typical for the Netherlands as nation** [italics added]. To what extent are tolerance, consensus and egalitarianism still building blocks of our national awareness? How do we want to arrange our lives here? We shouldn’t cherish the distinctive [het eigene] for the sake of being distinctive, but rather for being able to approach the world with some self-confidence.

[...] The idea of nation-formation as an always unfinished process often seems lacking in this country. As has been said, there is nothing self-evident about the civilisation of which we are the heirs. A conscious way of dealing with the nation-state is necessary for anyone who seeks to *articulate* [onder woorden brengen, emphasis added] the historical community that the Netherlands is in Europe under new circumstances. (January 7 1995, NRC Handelsblad) (#71)

Here we have the mode of problematisation in a nutshell: the point cannot be to dictate or affirm a uniquely authoritative reading of Dutch history and culture, but to openly and publicly *engage in debate* over what **we** still deem typical for the Netherlands as nation. Typification, according to Scheffer, follows the popular and the public: it is about what **we** – the nation in its public instance – still deem typical, not about what *is* typical for us. Scheffer’s reasoning is emblematic of the recurring importance of image over ground and public over expert as its profile is expanding even by Scheffer’s own reiteration of it.

The reappraisal of national identity thereby resonates strongly with the post-1970’s revolution in theories of nationalism that take their cue from ‘public imagination’ (Anderson 1983), ‘invented traditions’ (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983), or ‘ethno-symbolism’ (Armstrong 1982; Smith 1998; 2009). We may wonder whether the changing theories of nationalism and their widespread embrace in academia are themselves not part and parcel of the same displacement from historical and cultural expertise and authority towards the popular and public deployment of images.

The person to most notably disagree with Scheffer at this juncture was Koen Koch, a political scientist at Leiden University, who chose to focus his critique on the outdated nostalgia that was at the heart of Scheffer’s pleas:

Scheffer’s recipe, a call to our national identity and a plea for the return of the warm security of the sovereign nation-state, described as a ‘conscious way of dealing with the nation-state’, looks like a band-aid to me. Because this national identity is nothing but the reflection of his own ideology and because, indeed, I do not see a self-evident persistence of the Netherlands as an independent state. In all his melancholic nostalgia [heimwee] for a lost golden era Scheffer is quite optimistic. If only the future would so easily be bent back to such a mythic past. (January 31 1995, NRC Handelsblad) (#72)
Scheffer’s optimism is also commented upon by Ton Zwaan, a historical sociologist specialising in ethnic violence:

Scheffer, who has a rather sunny outlook on the character of the Dutch nation when he typifies it with the characteristics of ‘tolerance, consensus and egalitarianism’, seems insufficiently aware of the consequences of a nationalistic perspective. Moreover, he doesn’t seem to realise that the defence of the attractive values he so adores, is based on a universalistic orientation and is undermined by a particularistic-nationalistic orientation. (February 14 1995, NRC Handelsblad) (#73)

Stephan Sanders describes the emerging debate, pointing out a change in public speech rules:

Five years ago one could. But today I dare not to joke when the national identity pops up in conversation. One used to speak about “the national identity” with mocking, derogatory quotation marks, which should convince your public that you yourself didn’t think it to be an issue, but that convention dictates that you name the non-existent problem in this way. […] But this consideration is over with; who now grins at the national, excludes himself from the discussion. Try it, the easy relativising with which you could dispense five years ago. Your interlocutors will look at you as if you’ve just lit up a doobie. You’re allowed to, nobody will stop you, but didn’t we leave that behind? War einmal. (February 4 1995, De Volkskrant) (#74)

As one of the people identified by Scheffer to be exemplary of the left-liberal apprehension towards national reappraisal, Anet Bleich presents the problem of picking sides. Where does she stand? Again, the crux of the argument centres on the question of articulation:

My own credo has always been: the world is my fatherland and I want to live where life is good. This leads to a great sympathy for Koch’s unverfroren cosmopolitanism. Indeed, who cares if tolerance has anything to do with the Netherlands? It’s valuable. Point. […] Of course, the Dutch need not pound their chests for it. But one needn’t disown this part of the cultural heritage. In my eyes, national identity isn’t beatific. But why leave its interpretation up to narrow or even xenophobic minds? The Netherlands should remain a tolerant polderland [referring to consociational politics and the protection of the land against the sea that is a widely used image of Dutchness]. I don’t feel any nationalist nattigheid in such a declaration [nattigheid meaning both ‘wetness’ and ‘trouble’, thereby again evoking the mythic struggle against water]. (February 11 1995, De Volkskrant) (#75)

The problem, again, is in the articulation: should one declare something or another to be part of the nation’s being? Is such public declaration productive or not? Does the vocabulary of nationhood offer an appropriate language for political disagreement? Bleich clearly demonstrates that such a vocabulary isn’t necessarily suspect – carefully phrasing her argument in the metaphors of national mythology –, but in contrast to Scheffer this language enacts universal values in a national milieu.
In a similar feign, Anil Ramdas further enacts the notion that the debate started by Scheffer is one of explication and positioning, one of public and audible opinion. The problem consists of public speech. Ramdas starts his contribution:

Do I also have to think of one, an opinion? Paul Scheffer has already given his, and Koen Koch and Couwenberg and Erik van Ree and Gerry van der List, everyone has given his perspective on the issue of ‘national identity’: the we-feeling. (February 18 1995, NRC Handelsblad) (#76)

Ramdas concludes that actual assimilation of newcomers is endemically complex:

They [newcomers] have fun with it. They don’t completely remain stuck in the tradition and they don’t entirely become modern, they do something much more complex. And so I don’t what to think anymore. Apparently, I can only think of an opinion about grand issues like national pride and identity when I disregard the people they involve. In that case, I’d rather not have an opinion. (February 18 1995, NRC Handelsblad) (#77)

In light of the lively discussion that had taken place on the opinion pages, the central actors in the debate decided to collect their thoughts into an edited volume, the title of which is quite significant. The volume supervised by Koen Koch and Paul Scheffer, so often identified as the main adversaries in the debate, was titled The utility of the Netherlands [Het nut van Nederland, Bert Bakker 1996]. The title reflects the central theme of the discussion leading up to the book: what do or should we imagine Dutchness for? The title itself indicates the intentional, and in some cases, strategic constructivism through which the problem-at-hand is conceived. Again, Couwenberg is alone in making a partly substantialist argument. The other contributors perform the kind of reflections about the nation already prevalent in the newspaper discussions. One essay is of special interest as it addresses one of the central concerns of this study: how people deal with the problem of nationhood.

Kossmann, prominent professor of Dutch history and author of the canonical The Low Countries. History of the Southern and Northern Netherlands (1978), had recently published Een tuchteloos probleem, De natie in de Nederlanden (1994) [An unruly problem, The nation in the Netherlands]. This extended essay dealt with the question how historically the problem of nationhood in the low countries was managed. In line with the essays’ perspective, Kossmann had already pointed out in an op-ed that:

When it comes to our so-called cultural identity, its definition […] has been so artificial for over a century now that it is apparently impossible to assert anything about it persuasively. Nor is this necessary. The incessant conversation that we in the Netherlands have, often of a reasonable quality, in a distinct [eigen], old and comfortable language, more than sufficiently demonstrates our
He reiterates this line of questioning in the edited volume:

What is our situation in 1995? In what respects does the current discussion about the Dutch identity and the position of the country in the world differ from previous discussions about the subject? (Kossmann 1996: 61) (#79)

And:

Whether our culture broadly speaking will remain Dutch does not depend on her distinctiveness [eigenheid], and nor does it depend on the level of political and economic independence, but on our craving [behoefte] to primarily remain in conversation with each other. (Kossmann 1996: 65) (#80)

Kossmann present the construction of national-cum-cultural particularity as the demarcation of the speech community whose members crave ‘to primarily remain in conversation with each other.’ This partiality of conversation should be understood both linguistically – Kossmann’s writing on nationhood in the low countries places special emphasis on the shared language in the Netherlands and Flanders – and politically. In Kossmann’s approach, nationhood emerges out of the partiality to primarily seek conversations with each other rather than other others. Not Koch, but Kossmann turns out to defend the opposite view from Scheffer: the on-going disagreement among public figures, articulated in Dutch and in national media, is a testament of the permanence of Dutchness. Not a firm, explicit and persuasive imagination of Dutch identity will bolster the nation under conditions of migration and Europeanisation – as Scheffer contends –, but the partiality towards debate with and in Dutch. Whether debate leads to a bolstered consensus and reproduces a distinctly Dutch political culture is not important. As part of this position, Kossmann coined a phrase that would be repeated often – one that to a certain extent animates the present study – and expresses this particular brand of scepticism:

One deceives himself and one’s readers if one pretends that it [national identity] can be subjected to a systematic and encompassing investigation. It is too complex, too equivocal, too mutable. Better to walk around it, look at it from all sides but not step in it, in short: treat it like a huge jellyfish on the beach. (Kossmann 1996: 67-68) (#81)

As we have already seen, the notion of debate as the site of national imagination is far from Kossmann’s invention. The trope of speaking out, entering into dialogue and publicly debating was already part of the rhetorical fabric through which the
problem of Dutchness was conceived and through which Dutchness itself was repeatedly typified. But Kossmann, out of a particular engagement with the subject of the low countries, was the one who most forcefully put the two together: the public debate on national identity could be nothing but the on-going conversation that is the nation, albeit in a new mode. What is striking, moreover, is that this version of the problem does not breach or interrupt the discursive flow. Kossmann’s approach does not contradict the already established constructivism from which Scheffer’s debate proceeded. It merely proposes a different route of composition. Kossmann not only argues, but actively enact the idea that disagreement among each other is more than plenty of what is required to keep the nation going. His own disagreement with Scheffer is, in his logic, only further proof of a persistent national narrative, while Scheffer looks for a consensual imagination of national particularity beyond the mere fact of self-cognisant dissensus. As in many of the reviews of The utility of the Netherlands Niek van Sas – the same historian who sought to introduce new ideas about memory and nation in the public domain – picks up on this process:

Was it really necessary to make so much fuss about the Dutch identity? Was there something wrong with it? We can again reflect on this question now the debate has gotten a sequel in the form of a book. […] With this, the criterion of E. H. Kossmann has been generously satisfied as to him ‘remaining in conversation with each other’ is most significant for the preservation of our culture. (April 6 1996, NRC Handelsblad; see also Jan Joost Linden, March 23 1996; De Volkskrant) (#82)

And so the possibilities of civilised nationalism take shape. That is, a range of responses is articulated around the notion that a civilised reappraisal of the nation is possible. This notion follows, as we have seen, directly from the idea that nationalism need not be understood as the search for a cultural, let alone racial substance. The problem for which the notion of civilised nationalism may provide solutions isn’t about natural difference. The problem is a reflexive one: do we still imagine a national identity? Should intellectuals speak for those who still do? Civilised, then, means that this mode of nationalism need not regress into the outdated essentialism of the past. The call for debate – the centre piece of Scheffer’s performance – should ensure the progressive mode of this new nationalism. The call for debate is ostensibly inclusivist: it is an invitation to participate in the reflections over national identity. The question remains what that community should be aiming for precisely: reaching a more explicit and out-spoken consensus or entertaining an on-going multiplicity of viewpoints? In which case is civilised nationalism really taking place?
As Kossmann and others already pointed out (in particular Van Gunsteren 1996), we may wonder whether the call for debate does not expect too much when it assumes the promising horizon of a more coherent unison. And might such doubts about the feasibility of consensus not further reaffirm the state of disrepair that national identity is apparently in?

Not surprisingly, there is also a line of reasoning at this juncture that does not seek to contradict or criticise the emerging concerns over an all-too-weakly imagined nation, but rather to relativize the issue as such. This argument proceeds from the idea that national identity is not weak, nor is it deteriorating. In Kossmannian vain, the emergence of a ‘national identity debate’ in national newspapers and intellectual circles is taken to indicate the enduring salience of national imagery. Such enduring salience is cause for satisfied relaxation, as Scheffer’s Huizinga would have liked it, and critical debunking as the mythical identification of nation, culture and state becomes ever more contrived. In an op-ed aptly titled *All is well with Dutch identity*, Nico Wilterdink, yet again a historical sociologist, expresses as much when he explain to Scheffer that the problem is:

…not in the threat to national identity as a cultural or psychological category, not even primarily in the degradation of the welfare state. But in the further diminishing political autonomy of the nation state, the erosion of sovereignty. (March 4 1995, NRC Handelsblad) (#83)

Far more critical are those who worry that enduring ascription to nationalism’s basic myth of one people, one culture, one state, one language, one history and one future is deeply flawed (see also Zwaan & Bezemer 1991). Joep Leerssen, professor of European studies, articulates such a critique:

The European Union has, in its short existence, shown more cultural tolerance than most nation states have in the last two centuries; small cultures and languages [implicating Dutch culture and language] can expect more from a supranational ‘Europe’ than they can in the traditional nation states. There is no reason why it would be of vital importance to map citizenship and cultural identity to each other. The cultural distance between citizens and state is only significant to a limited degree. Much more important, it seems, is to close the distance between citizens and administrative authority as much as possible. (January 7 1997, NRC Handelsblad) (#84)

A slew of publications, op-eds, reactions, critiques and discussions that were said to indicate a ‘national identity debate’ (see also Righart 1992; Chartier 1992; Joustra 1993; De Valk et al. 1993; Ephimenco 1994; Pröpper 1995; Wigbold 1995; Beheydt 1996; Van Staden 1996; Ephimenco 1997; De Kuyper 2000) and had, indeed, acquired the form of a debate most clearly around the interventions of Scheffer culminated, according to Leerssen, in a crucial question: is there reason to
map citizenship onto cultural identity. Indeed, it would become this question in particular that would be at stake in the period after 2001.

The particular national imaginary of dialogical Dutchness provided interlocutors with ways to form the public problem of Dutch identity. In an often ostentatious movement away from somatic-racial difference and towards the politico-cultural commonalities that ought to bind Dutch citizens together, a variety of voices came to argue for and perform debate as a crucial site of national imagination. This involved the further, constructivist reinvention of the problem. It is only rarely that participants of debates worry about the question whether people are still aware of what Dutchness is. Rather, what begins to guide their disagreements is a concern for the question whether and how people succeed in popularly imagining Dutchness. It is this playing field that is stretched out in the disagreements central to this chapter. The ensuing debates perform Dutchness as something that is endemically open to discussion, doubt, reappraisal, difference, expression, and opinion. In fact, such attributes come to play a major role in describing the reinvigoration of Dutch imagination as a mode of civilised nationalism. As long as it is dialogical a more vocal appreciation and articulation of Dutchness will remain non-violent and non-exclusionary. However, it is already clear that this imaginary of Dutchness entails stark boundaries and produces a constantly reiterated worry that the Dutch are – apparently – not able to say who they are. The stark boundaries become visible in the way in which debate and dialogue are taken to be politico-cultural attributes of the natives that may be employed to hasten and guide the as of yet failed integration of outsiders. The constant worries over dissensus are seen in the complicated problem of figuring out whether mere debate will be enough. Indeed, Scheffer’s ambition to create a more cohesive imagination of Dutchness is repeatedly contradicted in public. Yet, this only adds to and affirms the underlying conception of the problem that Scheffer has helped to become a major public issue: the apparent fact that Dutchness does not elicit agreement precisely where it ought to be in its element…in public. The shared means of disagreement – national identity is a matter of public imagination – thereby also creates a constant insecurity about the possible resolution of the problem. This dynamic would continue to haunt the post-2001 period. As we shall see in the following chapter, it would have profound consequences for the ways in which ever stronger political demands to try and fit culture and citizenship together would be discussed, contested and accommodated.