Out of character: debating Dutchness, narrating citizenship

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This is an inquiry into the public and political debates on Dutchness and citizenship. It focuses in particular on the period between 1972 and 2008. Like all historical dates, these are fairly arbitrary brackets in time. Yet, they enclose a succession of debates and controversies that, so this study aims to demonstrate, stand in an interesting relation to each other. They constitute a formation of propositions, critiques, arguments, attacks, defences, oppositions and lamentations that together perform certain recurring possibilities and tendencies. The emergence of something like ‘national identity’, around which debates are increasingly organised, is crucial in this respect.

In a longer historical perspective, this study claims that the emergence of ‘national identity’ cannot merely be understood as a change in terminology but is indicative of a change in the way that struggles over citizenship and nationhood are performed. That ‘national identity’ is increasingly used in place of the now deemed backward notion of ‘national character’ cannot merely be understood as an attempts to cloak the somatic, racist and violent foundations of national community with ostensibly less exclusionary and controversial terms. There is more at stake than an amendment of public parlance at the discursive surface.

This study is an exploration and analysis of the changing ways in which struggles over Dutch citizenship can begin to take place when former forms of engagement lose their persuasiveness and veracity. By locating the main discontinuity in the abandonment of ‘character’ and the search for ‘identity’, this study invites its public to re-interpret the many other discontinuities that have become prominently discussed in debates about ‘Dutch identity’. The often made references to transformations, revolutions, reactions and reorientations in the politics of Dutch citizenship – particularly around a contrast between an all-too-multicultural past and a cultural-assimilationist present – are themselves at play in the struggle over Dutchness and citizenship. The articulation of discontinuities with the past are crucial components of citizenship politics in national identity debates.

The study is grounded in an idea of Michel Foucault – discursive formation – which Craig Calhoun has further developed in the study of nationalism. How can citizenship be politicized? What does it mean when the citizenship politics takes on the form of a cascade of debates and controversies? This study is quite deliberately not about the changing citizenship policies and legal regime. It is a well-established fact that notions of national distinctiveness have become more significant in the justification and design of policies and laws. Instead, this study seeks to show how public contention also involves a continuous articulation of narratives about nationhood. The articulation of such narratives makes a difference in the ongoing politicisation of citizenship. Citizenship politics should not be reduced to a struggle about policies and laws that a state seeks to enforce. Here, the study builds on ideas of Margaret Somers. To even enter into citizenship politics – a struggle that is about power –, participants continuously project imaginations about how and what ‘Dutch citizenship’ is or ought to be. We know (and find it very important to demonstrate to others that we know) that such projections are employed strategically: it is in the interest of certain people in certain positions to project certain imaginations. It would be both sociologically and politically naïve to believe in those imaginations themselves, to take them at face-value. After 19th century ideologies have derailed into 20th century violence, naïveté – the willing belief in imaginations – has become the greatest intellectual vice. One ought to see through imaginations and unmask them.
Against this sobering image of the world, this study tries to show that unmasking is most certainly appropriate but cannot offer the only or decisive perspective either. Even if imaginations are merely deployed cynically and strategically – itself an absurd idea –, it would still be necessary to understand what possibilities certain imaginations offer for struggling over citizenship. It is precisely because participants in citizenship politics are reflexively concerned with the performative and imaginative significance of their interventions and engagement that it is important to study what all of that rhetoric and performative prowess could mean for the struggle over citizenship. This should not be done by trying to find an internal coherence in the narrations of Dutch citizenship, as if there is some ultimate meaning behind the discursive flow. Rather, the aim is to reconstruct how narratives contextualise and inflect the ongoing attempts to perform citizenship politics. What public narratives of citizenship mean, ought to be explored in the further practice of public story-telling. This still means that this study aims to reconstruct and conceptualise that practice by capturing it in more or less adequate concepts and images. The question is, however, not whether this reconstruction represents citizenship and nation as they “actually are”, as if unmasked and laid bare. The aim is to provide a reconstruction that enables and introduces new questions, new problems and new imaginations.

In this respect, this study defends the position of a cultural sociology that holds that it is never enough to critically inspect imaginations, as if such a critical gaze is the sociologist’s prerogative. Participants in politics employ such a critical engagement themselves. By delving into and, to a certain extent, losing ourselves in imaginations – however delusional and foolish they may sometimes be –, we can experience what imaginations bring about in our attempts to make politics and how we might begin to have other, alternative imaginations that refer to a politics-to-come.

Whomever delves into the history of public story-telling about Dutchness and citizenship will conclude, as so may did before her, that citizenship and Dutchness are profoundly entangled. Chapter 3 deals with this historical entanglement. Being burgerlijk and being Dutch constantly refer to each other in this history. The very notion of Dutch citizenship thereby relies on a culturalisation of citizenship and more recent episodes of such culturalisation can only be interpreted in the horizon of that history.

Burgerschap turns out to be an intricately moral category: it not only refers to burgherly civility, but also to the moral capacity to make independent moral judgements and to live without moral guidance. The public dramatization and demonstration of such moral capacity is therefore immensely important in Dutch citizenship politics. In the last two centuries, narrations of citizenship attained an encompassing significance: a multitude of morally autonomous claimants – communities or individuals – appear to find each other in a mutual affirmation of moral autonomy. This marks a contrast with the culturalisation of citizenship as it takes shape from the 1970’s onwards. Narrations of citizenship begin to involve a differentialising significance. This happens in particular with regards to issues of immigrations and settlement. The encompassing significance of burgerschap is not self-evidently applied to people who are explicitly positioned as outsiders and newcomers. These populations are commonly positioned outside of the ‘white’/European territory of the Dutch kingdom. The debate over these issues increasingly focused on a critique and avoidance of ‘ethnic’ seclusion.
Chapters 4 and 5 jointly provide an analysis of national identity debates. On the one hand, these debates perform a shift away from ideas and arguments about ‘national character’. As such, this shift is related to emerging anxieties over race and racism in public debate. Here, participants continuously employ the notion that it is or ought to be quintessentially Dutch that racism is a thing of the past. In this way, debates perform a post-racist imaginary, in which true Dutchness appears always already beyond racism. Issues of race and racism are either discussed in terms of discrimination or in terms of taboo. More structural critiques of racism, in which race and racism are presented to constitute societal relations as such, remain in a marginalised position in this discursive situation. On the other hand, the formation of national identity debates involves the increasing salience of the notion that Dutchness is what the Dutch imagine it to be. Dutchness not only becomes a public issue, but is also the case that participants in debates argue that Dutchness can be found and explored in what is publically said about it. The public contention over Dutchness thus comes to perform a lacking clarity of ‘Dutch identity’ and prompts arguments for more persuasive, more coherent, more explicit and more monolithic articulations of what it means to be Dutch. These developments lead to the formation of a particular imaginary: dialogical Dutchness. In lieu of already well-established narrations, in which moral autonomy, liberality and outspokenness are central, the national identity debates come to performatively affirm the contention that Dutchness is open, tolerant, democratic and pluralistic.

Chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9 together form an analysis of the period after 2001. Whereas the analysis in the previous chapters has shown that a break with the past was already a crucial gesture in the formation of national identity debates, this kind of performance attains an even greater role.

In chapter 6 the intervention of Paul Scheffer and Pim Fortuyn are analysed in order to understand what new way of breaking with the past involves and how its significance was broadened. A crucial outcome of the transformation, associated with both figures, was the idea that government ought to introduce specific policy measure in order to protect and strengthen the integrity of national community. Not only ought those policies to be directed at the nation, but they ought to deploy national culture itself and turn Dutchness into a policy instrument. Previous policies are deemed ineffective because they didn’t involve this usage of Dutchness as a way to govern citizenship. What is increasingly designated by ‘national culture’ or ‘Dutch culture’ suggests that there are ways of living, feeling, thinking and acting that merit protection and ought to be imposed. However, chapter 6 also argues against the idea the interventions by Scheffer and Fortuyn initiated a distinct wave of cultural nationalism.

Chapter 7 and 8 consecutively deal with the two most important policy instruments aimed at the protection and strengthening of national community in the post-2001 period: civic enculturation and the national history canon. Both chapters show how a conception of ‘the native public’ became central in the debates surrounding these policy instruments.

With regards to civic enculturation, the native public is an audience. The demands for assimilation effectuated through civic enculturation policy do not apply to this audience but are performed for it. Discussions over civic enculturation continuously affirm that the native public need not heed the demand imposed upon those not-yet-integrated. In this way, it becomes possible to imagine Dutchness to be both liberal and open, while also demanding moral guidance and cultural assimilation. It turns out that debates very rarely concern the question whether civic enculturation policy actually assimilates target populations to a national culture – whatever that is
deemed to be —, but instead whether individuals have demonstrated the willingness, effort and capacity to reorient their lives without being granted assistance.

Chapter 8 analyses the debates over the national history canon. In these debates, the native public appears in a completely different role. No longer is the native public an audience. Instead, the native public becomes the very justification for composing a national history canon. The canon is continuously justified by suggesting that the native public ought to be assisted in its attempts to more clearly and coherently imagine a national image. It is argued that many citizens are — still — interested and concerned with the nation and its history and that this widespread engagement among the native public justifies the development of a canon, even if it is clear that the nation is imagined. Again, the very fact that national identity is a contentious public issue comes to affirm the notion that there is indeed a public that imagines its nativity and thus merits imaginative guidance. The chapter subsequently analyses the way in which the commission responsible for the canon argue for and position their efforts. It is shown how a territorial delineation of Dutchness is maintained even if the commission articulated profound scepticism about any relation between the canon and national identity. The idea that the canon refers to the history of a region is, in the end, maintained.

Finally, chapter 9 seeks to further explore how and why national identity debates work differently from previous styles of engagement. In order to do so, the chapter analyses two exemplary cases — a lecture by princes Maxima and a book by Ineke Strouken — and demonstrates how a style of popularity is at stake in them. This way of engaging with Dutchness involves certain tendencies and possibilities that are contrasted with those related to ‘national character’. Most important in this respect is the way in which native majorities are imagined and enrolled in contentions over Dutchness and citizenship. Within the style of popularity such majorities can almost never be contradicted or contested. Yet, neither does this style of engagement provide the native public with new goals or aspirations.

Chapter 10 concludes the study by developing the idea that citizenship politics involve national inflections. In relation to this conclusion, an argument is made for particularising comparisons. This involves a reconstruction of how participants in citizenship politics recursively particularise their struggles into an enduring national context. Subsequently, it is argued that three problematics nationally inflect struggles over Dutch citizenship: post-racism, plurality and autonomy. Building on this reconstruction of Dutch citizenship politics, it is argued that the Dutch case involves a form of nativism that is analytically distinct from other modes of making differences — racism, culturism, and orientalism. Across the many disagreements and contentions in national identity debates, the capacity to change, to take in a plurality of perspectives, to reshape one’s individual life is recurrently performed to be Dutch. This capacity is related to residing within the territory of the nation-state. Nativism, here, does not entail that outsiders ought to assimilate, but rather that incorporation in always already assumed to be possible. By already assuming the possibility of inclusion and associating it with the native ground, an exceptionalist imaginary of Dutchness is maintained: open, malleable, flexible, free, independent, individual, outspoken, plural. Through this form of nativism, citizenship politics is depoliticised and life in the Netherlands is imagined to take place on a liberal plateau: while it might take concerted effort and guidance to emancipate oneself and reach its morally elevated way of living, once one has gained entry to the plateau there is nothing left to reach for and citizenship politics reverts into protectionism.