

The Guide Has Become Anxious

How the Netherlands Has Changed

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[J A M E S K E N N E D Y]

As an American with Dutch roots I have always had an eye for the reputation of the Netherlands in the world. To be sure, one should not exaggerate the attention that the world gives the Netherlands most of the time. Nevertheless, the country has often generated strong images – often positive, as the land of unlimited freedom, but sometimes too as a country that had grown overly tolerant and permissive. The effective decriminalization of soft drug use, the legalization of euthanasia and, in a different vein, the legalization of same-sex marriage for the first time in history would seem, depending on the commentator, to prove either assertion.

The international reputation of the Dutch is currently under evaluation, as I shall analyse below, and for good reason. But I think there was good reason to think of the Netherlands, from the 1960s to the 1980s or perhaps the 1990s, as a place where various progressive projects combined to create a striking political habitus. It was a country that already in the 1950s demonstrated a noticeable interest in the Third World – a reflection, I think, of both postcolonial guilt and a strong religious and moral impulse to change the world. Secondly, in the 1960s and 1970s the Netherlands was a country where Roman Catholics – some 40% of the population – transformed themselves almost overnight from a reliably orthodox part of the church to some of the church’s most progressive critics. At the same time, Amsterdam changed from a rather sleepy European capital into one of its leading countercultural scenes. Not only did the country as a whole become a centre of social experimentation that included drugs policy and euthanasia, but a wave of ‘new social movements’ committed to issues like peace and human rights put the Netherlands at the forefront of broader forms of international engagement; for a short time, no country showed a greater involvement in such groups as did the Dutch.

All of these progressive projects strengthened the image of the Netherlands as an uncommonly liberal country – both within the Netherlands and abroad. But it was not only progressive movements and legislation that informed the Dutch image of themselves. They also tended to think of themselves as a well-regulated country – certainly in contrast to others – and as a place relatively free from conflict. Although the metaphor of the polder – meant to illustrate the Dutch tendency to work together in order to keep their feet dry – became a

recurring reference only in the 1990s, pride in their ostensibly consensual way of dealing with problems has older roots. But in a crucial way this self-image reinforced its other progressive image: the Netherlands was a country that disliked political extremism and confrontation (a 1994 survey showed the Dutch tolerance for such things as among the lowest in Europe) and thus was able to develop a sober and clearheaded approach to social issues that perplexed other societies. In this way the Netherlands was able to develop strong brand recognition. It was not only a charming country of dikes and tulips, but a country with a different moral ethos. For that reason the Netherlands could become a Mecca not only for the hordes of tourists who visited the country's coffee shops and Amsterdam's Red Light District, but also for the occasional sojourner who sought – unrealistically as it turned out – assistance from a Dutch physician in ending his or her life. Even Jack Kevorkian – the American physician convicted for his own role in ending the life of one his patients – thought erroneously that Dutch doctors routinely offered their services to those who expressed their desire to die.

But even for those many visitors who made no attempt to avail themselves of these temptations, the abiding perception was often that the Netherlands was a remarkably free society.

None of this meant, of course, that the Dutch reputation for being either progressive or free and easy earned plaudits from everyone. In the early 1980s, the American neo-conservative intellectual Walter Laqueur argued that the Netherlands suffered from '*Hollanditis*,' a historically recurrent tendency toward neutral and pacifistic policies – a tendency he regretted in the face of the Soviet threat. And in 1994 *Der Spiegel* portrayed '*Frau Antje*' – known in Germany as the costume-clad purveyor of Dutch cheese – as a cannabis addict. TIME Magazine asserted in 1987 that Dutch tolerance had surely reached its absolute limits: the enormous increase in criminality, including problems with drug addicts and violent squatters, were prompting the Dutch to retreat from their easygoing ways.



Frau Antje as cannabis addict.
Der Spiegel, 1994.

The end of tolerance

To be sure, the proclamation of the end of tolerance did not put an end to Holland's reputation; in his documentary the British filmmaker Jonathan Blank praised Dutch libertinism in his 1994 *Sex, Drugs and Democracy*, which seemed to confirm the Netherlands as a commonsensical place that let people do whatever they wanted. And indeed until the very end of the last century, the Netherlands did seem to have almost reached the end of history. In the 1990s the faintly progressive ethos presided over a society that had grown wealthy through neo-liberal policies. The public seemed content and politics were dull; there were few problems that technocratic solutions could not solve. But TIME Magazine was not entirely misplaced in its sense that the Dutch cultural landscape was heading in a more conservative direction, a trend also evidenced elsewhere. From the early to mid-1980s there were increasing doubts, expressed publicly within the Netherlands, about the decay of the public sphere and the decline of collective '*values*.' That had a lot to do with changes in the social structure of Dutch society. The very aspects that made much of Dutch society so notably progressive in the 1960s and 1970s were actually rooted in older patterns; the

social engagement and the sense of solidarity of that era had a lot in common with the 'pillarized' society of the 1950s, with its tight-knit communities. Now the processes of individualization – in whose name the cultural revolution of the 1960s had been unleashed – slowly undercut the progressive ethos of Dutch society. This did not bring an immediate end to Dutch progressive ideals, but from the 1980s on there was an increasingly decisive rejection of what was felt to be the exaggerated and militant leftism of the 1970s. By the 1990s, too, globalization in general and the expansion of the European Union in particular led to a gradual growth of interest in the Dutch nation and how its 'heritage' might be preserved, a rather striking development in a country where most public voices had disdained such interest. And even though the Dutch found it hard, perhaps more than other publics in Europe, to give form to the very squishy debate surrounding national identity, a new discussion arose about the 'value' (*nut*) of the Netherlands. Who were the Dutch anyway, and who would see to it that the Netherlands would be around in the future?

Meanwhile, some – though by no means all – of the trademark features of progressive Holland ran into trouble. A few emblematic developments may illustrate this development. The Dutch were compelled by its neighbours in 1995 to curtail the amounts that its coffee shops could sell customers and the number of coffee shops themselves began to decline. It was one sign that Holland's social policies would have to fit within the patterns of a wider Europe. Much more important was the catastrophic failure of the Dutchbat contingent in Srebrenica in July of 1995, which at the end of a badly-conceived UN mandate handed 7,000 Muslim men over to the Bosnian Serbs, who promptly executed them. The early rejoicing that followed the return home of the Dutchbat troops had the effect of deepening the shame many Dutch soon felt about their indirect role in the massacre. 'We are cowardly,' the prominent Amsterdam sociologist Abram de Swaan told a military audience not long after the event. For years, Srebrenica would continue to haunt the Dutch, not only as the tragic outcome of government policy, but as a failure of national character. But Srebrenica was not the last event that would disquiet the Dutch. The 2000 discovery of structural and massive fraud in the construction sector prompted the Dutch to question whether they were really the upright and corruption-free society that they imagined themselves to be. Similarly, though with considerably more unease and pathos, the politically-motivated murders of the politician Pim Fortuyn in 2002 and the filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004 caused a new wave of soul-searching. The Netherlands was not as peaceable as the Dutch had thought. Others saw in the murder of Van Gogh by an Islamic radical primarily an external act of violence, but also a severe indictment of Holland's progressive Establishment, which refused to take the Islamic threat seriously.

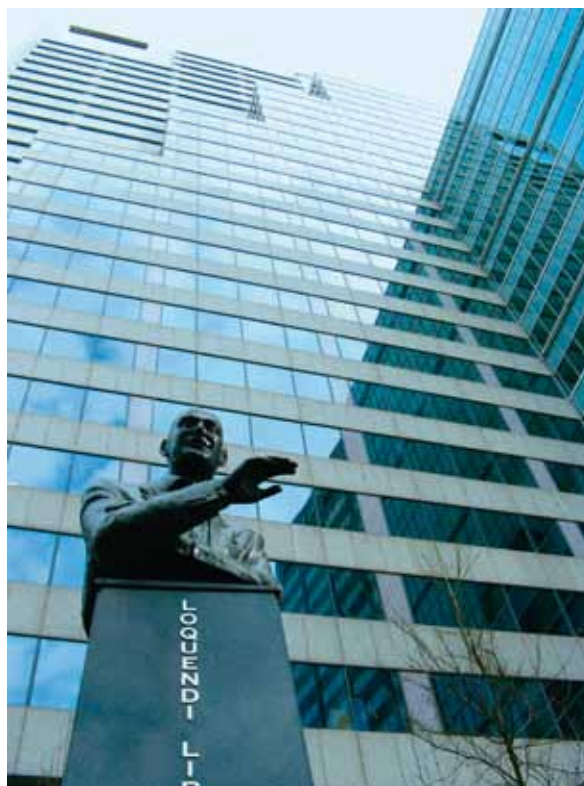


Srebrenica.

So Dutch history seems to have taken a turn no one expected. It seems now not that the Dutch had reached the end of history, but that they had denied history. NRC-columnist Bas Heijne argued in his little book *Onredelijkheid* (Unreasonableness) that religion and nation were more resistant forces than many had thought. In contrast to an almost studied casualness about norms a couple of decades ago, the Dutch now often state an appreciation for explicit moral norms, even if they remain ambivalent about how rigorously they should be applied.

Pim Fortuyn.

© Photo by Onno de Wit, 2002.



A country in conflict with itself

Although I could not possibly have predicted the future, I did wonder back in the fall of 1999 if the Dutch progressiveness which had so much been the focus of my historical research was necessarily guaranteed a much longer life. In a small essay I wrote then for *The Low Countries* I wrote about the myth of Dutch progressiveness, pointing to some of the more conservative features of Dutch society and wondering if the Dutch might not at some point be all too confident about the progressive spirit they projected. In my first book *Nieuw Babylon in aanbouw* (New Babylon under construction, 1995), too, I asked if Dutch Establishment politics, with its moderately progressive but not always very critical stance, would be well prepared to deal with new challenges surrounding the retreat of the welfare state, immigration and social cohesion. Although Dutch political elites could have done much worse, their ability to identify, engage and channel disaffected segments of the population proved much less effective than they believed a decade ago.

Part of the reason is indeed that the Netherlands had for a long time been more conservative on issues such as crime and immigration than Establishment politics had admitted. In this respect, the vision of the Netherlands as a progressive country was only a part of a more complex reality, even in the relatively liberal 1960s and 1970s. That is why from the late 1990s on it was not such a very long way toward new demands that newcomers integrate quickly into Dutch society, that norms be reasserted in society, and that more attention be given to national identity. For a long time mainstream politicians had ignored this



A memorial in 2009 for Theo van Gogh, who was murdered on 2 November 2004, Linnaeusstraat, Amsterdam.

programme. But now the political climate demands a harder, more radically assertive approach to these problems, and once trusted institutions are held in suspicion by a large segment of the electorate.

These new developments have their advantages – the Dutch complacency about their own society is largely gone – but it is primarily the disadvantages that we feel. The Dutch live in a society full of disunity and uncertainty. In this respect, the Netherlands is hardly unique, though it is striking that some of the most vociferous international critics of Islam, Geert Wilders and Ayaan Hirsi Ali, have been parliamentarians from the Netherlands. In many parts of Europe populist movements have asserted themselves powerfully, and mainstream institutions are challenged by a deep divide over the place of Islam in Europe and more generally over angst about globalization. In this respect, one could say that the Netherlands has merely been compelled to give up the pretension that it was a moral beacon to other nations.

Therein lies the difference, and perhaps it helps explain the rather sharp political culture that has characterized Dutch public life since the murder of Pim Fortuyn in 2002. For a long time prior to that Dutch politics was characterized by an even keel. Since the early 1980s, when the previous period of political polarization came to an end, Dutch public life had allowed little room for rowdy politics, celebrating its *'poldermodel'* instead. The Dutch have been playing catch-up with, according to some reports, some of the raucous and no-holds-barred political cultures in Europe, deeply intensified of course by ready access to the Internet, which 93% of the Dutch, from all walks of life, enjoy. The result of this uncomfortable discussion is a country that is in conflict with itself, and in which there is a sense of alienation. That was one of the main messages of Paul Scheffer's *Land van aankomst* (Land of Arrival, 2007), in which the famous publicist viewed the process of migration as a process of alienation, including for the long-established inhabitants who have to watch their own country change before their eyes. That last sentiment is certainly expressed by many Dutch who, whether they live in immigrant-rich neighbourhoods or not, see demographic change as an uprooting experience. Progressive citizens have often claimed that they no longer recognize their now xenophobic country and that they long for the 1990s, when the public sphere was not dominated by anxiety. And anxiety it often certainly is: many Dutch with whom I have spoken – and I really do mean many – do fear that Muslims some day will seize power in the Netherlands and impose Islamic rule.

Confused and uncertain

These anxieties have helped the Dutch to develop a new, more nostalgic view of the past. Paul Schnabel, the director of the government-run Netherlands Institute for Social Research (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, SCP), rightly observed that in recent years the Dutch have tended to see the best period of the Netherlands as lying in the past. That is certainly true of more politically conservative citizens, who long for a time when the Netherlands was less in the grip of Europe, or of migration, than it is presently (though I find it interesting that Wilder himself, in contrast to many populists, does not offer a very articulate vision of a past he sees as exemplary). But, as noted above, progressive Dutch, typified perhaps by the popular Dutch writer Geert Mak, feel this way too. In Mak, who has attracted a large following with his sympathetic historical portraits of the Netherlands, one often sees a desire for a return to the 1970s, a period long before the triumph of neo-liberal principles and right-wing radicalism.

And these anxieties have led to a new insistence on national identity. Although such a project inevitably remains elusive, the tens of thousands of residents living in the Netherlands have learned as a result what it ostensibly means to be Dutch. Required films, courses and exams thus point to signature features of Dutch society, from the toleration of topless beaches to the intolerance for messy front yards. They are perhaps the clearest statements at present of what it means to be Dutch, destined ironically to be better known by newcomers than by the Dutch themselves. Such statements do not in any event give the Dutch a greater sense of security about who they are.

However one may judge recent developments, there is little left of the Netherlands as a *'guide land'* (*Gidsland*) in the first decade of the twenty-first century. That is not only because of Dutch uncertainty, or because of traumatic events like Srebrenica. It also has to do with the fact that gay marriage is more widely accepted in more places than ten years ago, and the same is true of euthanasia. Shooting rooms for addicts and the decriminalization of cannabis are hardly exclusively Dutch achievements any more. That the Dutch can take at least a small degree of credit for these changes they may choose to take as comfort. But for the time being the confusion and uncertainty over what the Netherlands is, and what its place in the world should be, will continue. Perhaps that should be recognized as the normal state of affairs in Europe at the moment. At least the Dutch still have their dikes and tulips. ■

Geert Wilders in Berlin,
2 October 2010. © Photo by
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