

Paul Schnabel, Ph.D.

The Netherlands Institute of Social Research/SCP, The Hague
Utrecht University

1. A long history of migration

Dutch history began with mass migration. Our Germanic ancestors came down the Rhine, and the Romans (who are not looked upon as our ancestors) built forts along the banks of the Rhine to protect the frontiers of their vast empire. Dutch cities like Leiden, Utrecht and Nijmegen owe their existence to these Roman castra. Immigration as we now know it began over a thousand years later, as the Dutch borders were gradually taking on the shape they have now, and Holland was briefly the centre of world trade. People from less prosperous regions migrate to countries where they think they'll have more opportunities in life. They look for work and a better future for their children. People who leave their home country have no more confidence in the opportunities it offers them. People who immigrate to a new country have hopes of a better future. After the Second World War, hundreds of thousands left the Netherlands to go to the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, holding high expectations of a better future in their new country. Around the same time, some 300,000 people with Asian or mixed Eurasian backgrounds were forced to leave Indonesia after it became independent. They had to build a new life in the Netherlands, a country that most of them had never even seen. They didn't have an easy time of it, but today, half a century later, practically the only thing that distinguishes those Indonesian immigrants, their children and grandchildren from other Dutch people is their darker skin and black hair. Similarly, most of the Dutch immigrants and their offspring in North America are only identifiable today by their Dutch-sounding names.

Owing in part to the US Marshall Plan and to the growing cooperation within Europe, the Netherlands made a strong economic recovery after the Second World War. The economy was so successful, in fact, that a labour shortage arose in the late 1950s, particularly in basic industries like iron and steel, textiles and food. So-called guest workers were recruited on a large scale from southern European countries like Italy, Spain, Yugoslavia and Greece. They were mostly low-skilled young men who were brought to the Netherlands on temporary work contracts. Most of them later returned to their country of origin; some got married to Dutch women and settled permanently in the Netherlands.

In the course of the 1960s, southern Europe began catching up with the more prosperous North, and the reservoir of foreign workers dried up. Dutch industry began seeking new workers in poor but populous low-wage countries like Turkey and Morocco. The first eight Turkish workers were welcomed to Rotterdam in 1965. At that time, nobody would've dreamed that forty years later more than 370,000 people of Turkish descent would be living in the Netherlands, and up to 3 million in Germany. Most of the Turkish and Moroccan immigrants did not return to their countries of origin. Unlike southern Europe, the political and economic situations in Turkey and Morocco showed no signs of improvement, so the immigrants stayed in their host countries and gradually sent for their wives and children. Ahmed Aboutaleb, the current State Secretary of Social Affairs and Employment in the Dutch government, came to the Netherlands at age 15 as the son of a Moroccan worker. State Secretary of Justice Nehabat Albayrak is the daughter of Turkish immigrants.

In the aftermath of the first oil crisis of 1973, rapid structural changes took place in the Dutch economy. These had many negative consequences for Turkish and Moroccan workers. Traditional industries could no longer compete with those in the newer low-wage countries,

and what industrial activity did remain switched to highly automated production methods requiring well trained workers in minimal numbers. There was no place there for the traditional immigrant workers, nor did the developing service economy have much use for unskilled workers with a poor command of Dutch. Most were left to a near-marginal existence on unemployment or disability benefits. As the disability programme provided better and longer benefits than unemployment insurance, improper use was made of it on a large scale, with the knowledge and consent of all the parties involved. In the early 1990s, Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers concluded to his dismay that the Netherlands was a 'sick' country, with almost one million disability recipients against a working population of six million.

Today, foreign workers are arriving again. Most eastern European countries have now joined the European Union, triggering an influx of often skilled workers to countries like the Netherlands, Germany and the UK. They haven't been recruited; they just turn up, particularly in the construction and horticulture industries. Although their numbers are large – more than 100,000 from Poland, for example – most are not expected to settle permanently. Rapid economic growth is now underway in eastern Europe, and especially countries like Poland already have good educational and health infrastructures. Commuting back and forth from Poland is no big problem either, as many Polish cities are only a day's drive away.

Two other waves of immigration to the Netherlands deserve mention, both of which arose from the Dutch colonial heritage. When the Dutch prime minister Joop den Uyl announced that Surinam, the former Dutch Guiana, would gain independence in 1975, that precipitated a mass exodus of Surinamese people to the Netherlands, especially to Amsterdam. Now, some 30 years on, the serious adaptation problems they had at first, including high rates of crime, drug use and unemployment, have largely been resolved – or more correctly, have dissipated. To a considerable extent, Surinamese immigrants have followed a path similar to that of their Indonesian predecessors – not just integrating successfully into Dutch society, but actually becoming a part of Dutch identity. Today, about 330,000 people of Surinamese background live in the Netherlands, making up 2% of the Dutch population, but more than 40% of the total Surinamese population in the world.

A similar but more recent pattern can be seen in the immigrant population from the Dutch Antilles. Although less than 1% of the Dutch population is now of Antillean background, over 40% of the previous Antillean population (not including Aruba) now lives in the Netherlands. This group breaks down into two categories: a group of largely well educated Antilleans who arrived to do higher education degrees and who later settled; and a group of low-skilled young people with a poor knowledge of Dutch, most of whom have moved to the Netherlands on their own and now have high rates of crime. Most of the latter originate from Curaçao, which, unlike Aruba, suffers from high unemployment. Because Antilleans hold Dutch passports, they may travel unrestricted throughout the Netherlands and the Dutch Antilles, as well as the European Union. The current Balkenende government is now preparing legislation that'll allow the authorities to repatriate young Antillean persistent offenders back to the Antilles.

A final group of immigrants stems from a recent influx of refugees into the Netherlands, which has since diminished. During the 1990s, their numbers grew to 60,000 to 70,000 per year, mostly from ex-Yugoslavia, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and Somalia. The best known example is Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who collaborated with filmmaker Theo van Gogh on the movie *Submission*, before he was assassinated by an Islamist militant. As a member of the Dutch parliament, Ayaan Hirsi Ali became the political symbol of a campaign that portrayed Islam as an oppressive religion. More recently, that role has been assumed by Geert Wilders and his Party for Freedom, now with nine seats in parliament. In weekly opinion polls, Wilders now receives support from 10% of the electorate, good for 15 seats if elections were held today.

2. Non-Western ethnic groups: the ‘allochtones’ in Dutch society

In the past forty years, the proportion of non-Western ethnic minority residents in the Dutch population has surged from just over 1% to more than 10% today. Non-Western ethnic minority people are defined as those who have at least one parent born in a non-Western country, with the exception of specified nations like Indonesia and Japan. So if you are a Dutch-born person of Surinamese descent, for instance, and you marry another Dutch-born person of Surinamese descent, then your children aren’t defined in the statistics as ethnic minority children, but as ethnic Dutch. Which passport you hold plays no part in the definition. Dutch population registers are complete and accurate, and that makes it easy to monitor and study trends in minority ethnic populations. There are few other countries where such research is as readily feasible as in the Netherlands. Many countries don’t have population registers, while others either don’t allow them to keep track of ethnic origin or prohibit the use of such records for research and policy purposes.

The growth of the non-Western ethnic minority population is most noticeable in the four largest Dutch cities. In Amsterdam and Rotterdam, for instance, non-Western ethnic minority residents now make up more than one third of the population and more than half of the youth. From a Dutch perspective, none of the streams of immigration have been intended (the recruitment of foreign workers up to the early 1970s was meant to be temporary) and immigration has been more massive than could have ever been expected. For many years, the few government policies aimed at adequate support and better integration for newcomers were hesitant and reactive. Often it was far too late before people realised what was really going on. For example, Dutch statistical records don’t include a category for ‘illiterate or no education’; as a result, the education levels of first-generation Turkish and Moroccan immigrants were systematically overestimated. Especially the women immigrants of the first generation were, and still are, overwhelmingly illiterate or very nearly so. For many of them, the civic integration course now required for new immigrants is their first-ever contact with an education system.

Another phenomenon that went largely unheeded was the preference of many Turkish and Moroccan people not only to choose spouses of the same religion and ethnicity, but if possible to also go back to their parents’ village in the old country to find a future marriage partner, preferably even someone from their own families. For years, thousands of such ‘family chain immigrants’ were arriving in the Netherlands virtually unnoticed. I hardly need to point out that this seriously impedes the chances of successful integration, even for the second generation. Turkish or Moroccan men or women who are at least halfway integrated into Dutch society suddenly find themselves with partners who speak no Dutch, know nothing about Dutch society, and mostly have little education. Such partners have scarcely a chance of finding a job in the Dutch labour market, and their children will inevitably begin their school careers with serious language deficiencies.

Recent legislation has significantly raised the barriers, for natives and immigrants alike, to bring marriage partners from outside the European Union to settle in the Netherlands. A whole series of requirements pertaining to age, language mastery, income and relationship duration must all be met before a partner is eligible for permanent residency. Marriage migration like this has never been an issue in the Indonesian, Surinamese or Antillean communities; in fact, intermarriage with ethnic Dutch partners is fairly common there.

Some people in the Netherlands now speak almost routinely of third- and fourth-generation ethnic minorities. It’s far too early for that. The majority of the second generation are still under 20, and the first members of the third generation are just starting to school. In the history of migration, second generations always find themselves in a difficult

predicament. At home, things are often just like they were before the parents departed from the old country, whereas at school, at work and on the streets, the rules of the new country apply. Notwithstanding their language problems, most second-generation young people still speak the language of the new country better than their parents' language. They don't feel truly at home in either country, and what's more, residents of both countries tend to treat second-generation offspring as foreigners. Tensions like this were fanned by a recent Dutch political debate about whether it was acceptable to hold dual nationality.

Looking at it from the other side, the influx of so many people from so many different countries into the older city districts has left traditional residents with a feeling that they no longer live in the world they knew. In many neighbourhoods, the original population has made way for sometimes fast-changing groups of immigrants. Some neighbourhoods have completely changed 'colour', and now have a strong Turkish, Moroccan or Surinamese flavour. Depending on your point of view, this process may be labelled as 'concentration' or as 'segregation'. Certainly some of the long-time residents feel segregated and isolated, especially those who can't afford to move out to the 'white' suburbs. At the same time, many better educated, more successful ethnic minority people are now settling into these older city neighbourhoods. Middle-class minority people are integrating into Dutch society rather swiftly, but that merely widens the gap between them and their co-ethnics that stay marginalised due to their lack of education and job experience. Many of the latter have ceased to look up to their more successful co-ethnics as role models. They see them as coconuts – 'brown on the outside, white on the inside'.

3. At home in the Netherlands

Do ethnic minority people feel at home in the Netherlands, and do natives of ethnic Dutch background feel they are part of the community? In 2006, about 40% of the residents of Surinamese descent and one third of those of Antillean descent reported that they felt 'Dutch' first and foremost. Similar percentages felt both Dutch and part of their own group. A majority of second-generation Surinamese and Antilleans felt primarily Dutch. In the Turkish and Moroccan communities, on the other hand, only one in seven or eight people felt primarily Dutch, and almost half of the Moroccans and nearly 60% of the Turks felt a primary affinity to their own group. If we look at second-generation Turks and Moroccans, however, we see a sharp contrast: less than one third of them expressed a primary identification with those ethnic groups. People of younger age and better education felt comparatively weak ties, and so did people in neighbourhoods with lower ethnic minority concentrations. Having said that, people in the Turkish and Moroccan communities were more likely than Surinamese or Antilleans to associate mainly with people from their own groups in leisure time. Ethnic Dutch people, for their part, were the least likely by far to mingle outside their own ethnic group; half of them reported having no leisure-time contacts whatsoever with ethnic minority people, and as many as 90% reported associating predominantly with their own ethnic group.

Obviously these high figures can be blamed in part on the fact that ethnic minorities are heavily concentrated in large cities and city districts. But another thing this segregated pattern makes clear is that Dutch people's ideas about ethnic minorities are based largely on media imagery rather than on actual contact. Once upon a time, let's say up to the turn of the 21st century, the Dutch media mostly showed images that promoted the acceptance of a multicultural identity for Dutch society. The colours and fragrances of other cultures were presented as an enrichment of Dutch culture. That imagery has now been transmogrified into an equally one-sided depiction of the downsides of multicultural society – the threat of aggressive Islamism, the four- to sixfold higher crime rates of Moroccan and Antillean youths

as compared to non-minority youths, the emergence of 'non-white' schools and the high dropout rates, the greater benefit dependency, the oppression of women and the negative attitudes to homosexuality. I could make the list longer, but the point is that a wide, menacing gap is being perceived between some minority groups and the values that are dear to Dutch society – values like equality and equity, tolerance, fairness and hard work. Dutch people are coming to understand their own identity through a reverse mirror image of the things they dislike in the behaviours and attitudes of the newcomers.

Especially significant is that attitudes toward gender equality and acceptance of homosexuality have practically become the litmus test of integration into Dutch society, far more than issues like honour killings or female circumcision. Contrary to what you might expect from a right-wing party, Wilders's Party for Freedom, generally viewed as extreme rightist, defends accomplishments like gender and sexual equality. Accomplishments they are indeed, as it wasn't too long ago that Dutch people themselves were clinging to traditional notions of gender and sexuality. So these still remain sensitive issues in Dutch society. Rights that are perceived as important steps forward may seem especially vulnerable when confronted with opposing ideas.

It is clear that most of the tensions about gender and sexuality are felt in relation to Islam. The Netherlands is now home to about 900,000 Muslims and nearly 500 mosques. There is definitely no central authority for Islamic religious dogma, nor is there any general consensus among Muslims on many such questions. At the same time, Muslims do regard their religion as a strong determining factor in their identity, and the majority of them regard Islamic rules of conduct as guiding principles in everyday life. This can range from observing Ramadan and praying five times a day to wearing a headscarf or burka (although few women in the Netherlands have ever worn a burka), or to refusing to shake hands with people of the opposite sex. This, too, is more the exception than the rule, and while some people show understanding for such behaviour, it's a difficult custom to accommodate in a society where refusing to shake hands is perceived as an insult.

Until the 9/11 attacks, Islam was scarcely a matter of discussion or concern in the Netherlands. The emphasis was on social problems and the often difficult process of integrating immigrants into Dutch society. Although those issues still remain, they are decreasingly seen as a responsibility of government, and far more as demands made by society and government on the newcomers themselves. If you want to stay here, you have to learn the language and support yourself. Virtually everyone now agrees with this, in minority and majority communities alike. Majorities in all groups also believe that the average ethnic minority resident isn't doing enough to integrate. People with Surinamese and Dutch backgrounds are most likely to espouse that view, while those of Moroccan background are the least likely by far.

The Dutch integration debate is now strongly coloured by fears of violent Islamist terrorism, as well as a fear of growing self-censorship in cultural and social life. Could this movie, play, photograph or novel be offensive to Muslims? Does that mean the artists and distributors have to fear for their lives? Safeguarding freedom of speech has now risen high on the political priority list of the average Dutch citizen. Demands that government guarantee freedom of expression are now stronger than ever. Protective security measures for politicians and artists were never needed before in the Netherlands. Virtually everyone had unlimited access to government buildings. That is no longer possible. Although actual attacks and other violence have fortunately been limited so far, the belief has vanished that things like that don't happen in Holland. This has had a deep impact on the quality of life in a country that was one of the first nations in the world, in the 17th century, to provide a secure public space for its citizens. That idea has partly shaped us as Dutch people, and it's painful to no longer be able to live in that security.

Little evidence exists, though, that extremism and terrorism can count on much support from Dutch Muslims. Muslims fear violence from Islamist militants just about as strongly as other groups do. At the same time, 70% of the people in the Turkish and Moroccan communities, and as many as 90% of ethnic Dutch people, do expect tensions to rise between different ethnic groups. Half of the Dutch population, equally distributed over ethnic groups, fear that violence will erupt against Dutch Muslims.

4. Dutch identity: quest and question

‘There’s no such thing as a truly Dutch person.’ That was the conclusion drawn by Princess Máxima, wife of the crown prince Willem-Alexander, in her search for the Dutch identity. She made that assertion at the recent presentation of a report entitled *Identification with the Netherlands* published by the Scientific Council for Government Policy, the Dutch government’s chief advisory body. What Máxima said was nothing new, nor was it original; but it went down badly with a lot of people. It made no difference that the princess, who comes from Argentina, also argued in her speech that a truly Argentinian identity didn’t exist either. She was besieged with criticism. The Dutch royal family was deeply upset by the accusations of being out of touch with the public mood. It has always done its best to rise above the parties and to represent all of the people. The princess was made out to be a proponent of elitist multiculturalism, or worse still, an apologist for a kind of cultural relativism that would inevitably lead to the Islamification of the Netherlands.

The Dutch haven’t traditionally been all that conscious of their own identity. They did have an identity, of course, but like a fish that doesn’t learn what water is until it is lying on dry land, the Dutch have only become aware of their distinctive character after an influx of immigrants from other countries and cultures. The use of the word ‘identity’ to refer to the innermost essence of one’s being is of relatively recent origin in the Dutch language. Seventy years ago, the great historian Johan Huizinga spoke of ‘the Dutch mind’, and some anthropologists spoke of ‘national character’. The first term, ‘the Dutch mind’, never caught on, and the term ‘national character’, with its overtones of chauvinism or even racism, fell into disuse after World War II. Yet a consensus did exist about what the Dutch national character was. The Dutch were a frugal, pragmatic, hard-working, honest and thrifty people, slightly lacking in courtesy, perhaps, but also free of flattery. Together they formed a civic-minded, god-fearing society where everyone knew their place and where cleanliness and tidiness were important virtues.

That’s how the Dutch always liked to see themselves, and still do. However, as early as the 17th century, foreigners were already reporting that the Dutch were rather pushy and loud-mouthed, quite lax when it came to their children, neglectful of personal hygiene, and not very refined in matters of taste. And it’s true that if a Dutch person says they’re about to say something ‘open and frank’, you should brace yourself for a stinging insult. And that’s just what happened to Máxima.

Identity has now become a topic of national debate. Or more precisely, Dutch people’s fear of losing their own identity as a country, a nation and a people has triggered a strong desire to test the loyalty of anyone whose parents are not Dutch. That applies to almost 20% of the Dutch population. It has never been seen as a problem before. In fact, any previous proposals to devise a ceremony for people granted Dutch citizenship, with elements like a mayor’s speech, playing the national anthem, raising the flag or presenting a symbolic gift have always been shot down as totally useless – or even as typically American frivolities. In the meantime, though, all those symbolic gestures are now being performed, and obtaining Dutch citizenship is no longer a pushover the way it once was. Candidates must now show at

least a basic knowledge of Dutch and pass a civic integration course that also covers Dutch history and government.

When the fourth Balkenende government took office in early 2007, the dual citizenship of two of the undersecretaries – Ahmed Aboutaleb and Nehabat Albayrak, of Moroccan and Turkish descent – suddenly became a topic of political debate. Could a person holding two different passports ever be fully loyal to the Netherlands? Several months before, the previous cabinet had actually fallen over the issue of whether Ayaan Hirsi Ali, then a member of parliament for a liberal party, had rightly been granted Dutch citizenship several years before. She was discovered to have given slightly incorrect information about her background and family for the purpose of self-protection. Ultimately she did keep her citizenship, but then departed for the United States. She's now being invited to apply for French citizenship, her fourth citizenship running.

More than a hundred years ago, virtually the exact same issue was being debated with respect to Catholics in the Netherlands. Weren't they first and foremost subjects of the Pope, and didn't that mean they were not really Dutch? Not that this controversy had much to do with any unpatriotic behaviour on the part of Dutch Catholics. It was simply an attempt to block the entry of Catholics into Dutch civic and political life, which had always been Protestant-dominated. Although Catholics were the largest religious group in the country in terms of numbers, they suffered social deprivation until deep into the 19th century. Queen Wilhelmina didn't relinquish her distrust of Catholics until her rude awakening that many Catholics were active in the World War II resistance movement against the German occupation.

The chief worries today are about the loyalty of Dutch Muslims and their willingness to become genuine, full-fledged citizens. In real life, however, most Muslims feel very much at home in the Netherlands, and especially those from the second generation express few desires to move to their parents' country of origin. Nevertheless, most also report that their primary loyalty is not to their Dutch nationality. People feel Muslim in the first place, and their second loyalty is to the city they live in. Other loyalties follow after that.

I would argue that the notion of identity is an obstacle to understanding the present situation. 'Identity' implies the existence of clear boundaries and a fixed set of traits. In practice, the issue is more one of *identification*, of recognising yourself to a certain extent as part of a particular group, or more than one group. Identification is much more dynamic and fluid than identity. It doesn't rule out changing your preferences, and it allows room for a range of loyalties that don't necessarily conflict with each other in any way. People can identify with a particular kind of music or lifestyle, a religion, a nationality, a people or a family. One identification doesn't exclude the other, but people's behaviour in certain situations may clarify where their loyalties lie. Nobody would blame a Dutch person of Turkish descent for hoping that Turkey beats Holland in a soccer match, and no one is surprised if that same person is an enthusiastic fan of the Amsterdam soccer team the next day. Loyalty doesn't become a problem until it gets combined with a rejection of Dutch society and a willingness to use violence to force others to accept a Muslim identity. I can't deny that some people exist who are prepared to go that far, but up to now these have turned out to be isolated individuals or tiny groups.

5. The multicultural illusion and the multicultural drama

Immigrants change the world, and the world changes the immigrants. The arrival of so many newcomers in a relatively short time has changed the landscapes of Dutch cities. Many immigrants live concentrated in neighbourhoods that were not very prosperous to start with,

where traditional shops give way to ethnic ones, where the schools ‘change colour’ and churches make way for mosques. That’s difficult for people who have always been living there; but it’s also difficult for newcomers who find themselves suddenly displaced from mostly rural and very traditional environments into a modern urban setting where the contemporary values and norms are so patently manifest – and so sharply in conflict with everything they have always been taught was sacred.

It was almost 10 years ago, in January 1999, that I gave a lecture at the New Year meeting of Forum, a Dutch organisation for multicultural cooperation. I was invited by Ahmed Aboutaleb, who was then director of Forum, to speak on the problems of the multicultural society. I entitled my talk ‘The Multicultural Illusion’. My thesis was that the integration of ethnic minorities in the Netherlands was not going well. There were too many people that didn’t speak Dutch after years of residence, too many school dropouts, too many unemployed people, too many young offenders, too many women shut up in their homes. My recommendation was to pursue highly proactive integration policies, and basically to demand that people integrate or even assimilate. I argued that newcomers to Dutch society could be reasonably be expected to endorse the Dutch constitution and the values and principles enshrined in it. Dutch citizenship should not be granted too easily, and the awarding of the Dutch passport should become a festive occasion chaired by the mayor.

In my lecture, I distinguished between an A-culture, a B-culture and a C-culture. A-culture stands for the non-negotiable values and principles of a democratic society. B-culture refers to the self-regulation of behaviour and expectations, as performed at school or work. C-culture denotes the private family setting, where there’s a wide degree of freedom to organise life according to one’s own wishes, as long as that doesn’t fundamentally undermine the values of the A-culture. I was well aware that what Dutch people would normally regard as typical C-culture issues are valued by many Muslims as an A-culture, and that this presents them with a problem. To put it differently, their rules of conduct for everyday life, their specific male-female relations, their family honour and other such values make up the very core of their existence – and are seen as non-negotiable values and principles. The dividing line between religion and daily life is virtually absent for them, just as their personal identity derives primarily from being a Muslim and not primarily from their nationality or ethnicity.

In 1999, the reactions to my lecture were generally negative. To put it simply, critics found it unacceptable to demand or expect things from newcomers, let alone force them to change; they were free to preserve their own identity to the fullest extent possible. The unspoken assumption, of course, was that everything would turn out fine in the end. In the course of time, the newcomers would become more like Dutch people. About a year later, the prominent social-democrat Paul Scheffer published a fiery essay in the leading national newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* entitled ‘The Multicultural Drama’, containing approximately the same message. A dramatic swing in public opinion followed. The time was ripe for it. From that moment on, the gloves were off, and I mean really. ‘Political incorrectness’ became the new way to be politically correct. People were also deliberately ‘incorrect’ in their tone and their word choice. Many statements about minority groups, and above all about Muslims, which are now permissible in Dutch public life and media and in political debate would be completely taboo in the United States. One thing that is clear in any case is that the current tone of debate is experienced by Muslims as extremely hurtful and offensive. It certainly does nothing to convince them that by integrating more fully into Dutch society, they will be accepted as normal people. From another angle, I must admit that when you see how people like women or gays are publicly degraded or abused by some ethnic minority youths, many of them Muslims, then you’re also not convinced of their willingness to tolerate behaviour they’re not used to seeing at home. (For a long time, it was also taboo to criticise this, by the way.)

6. Diverging paths of development

So almost no one would notice it at present, but in actual fact the Dutch ethnic minorities are now fast becoming more and more Dutch, as well as more and more modern, or Westernised. However difficult the second generation may find it to feel at home in Dutch society, very few people in that generation feel truly at home in their parents' country of origin either. They are accustomed to the Dutch way of life, and they speak Dutch better than their parents' language. They have passed the point of no return, and so have we. I predict that in due time we will see three diverging paths of development among people in ethnic minorities. The best educated and socially most successful group will become firmly integrated into Dutch society and will even assimilate to a large extent. A second group will be fully integrated at school and at work, but at home they will continue to adhere to traditions from the old country. The third group is already the source of greatest concern: people who do not succeed in finding their way in Dutch society, and who at some point abandon all desire to do so. They withdraw into a sort of 'underclass' with people from their own ethnic group and in their own neighbourhoods. Resentment and radicalism can then fuse together with dangerous consequences.

It may be a little surprising to see that a very comparable trend is underway in the ethnic Dutch native population. A considerable group will have no problems at all with ethnic minorities – that is to say, with the ethnic minority people they associate with, who are similar to them in education and lifestyle. The largest segment of the Dutch majority population will continue to have only functional contacts with minority people. But another quite sizeable group will turn its back on the institutions of society, harbouring resentment against the social elite and feeling threatened by anything that seems exotic or foreign.

On a more general level, the insecure feelings people currently have about Dutch national identity constitute one of the most significant developments in this opening decade of the 21st century. The Dutch rejected the European Constitution in a referendum, and that later prompted the government to oppose the official adoption of European symbols like the EU flag or the European anthem. It's much ado about nothing at all – except, of course, it's about keeping watch over the national identity. In the latest parliamentary elections, the electorate leaned toward what you might call 'modern conservative' parties, all with a strong national orientation. It's increasingly clear that the much-admired cosmopolitan character of the Dutch is very one-sided indeed – Dutch people do like to travel the great wide world and to feel like citizens of the world, but they don't want the world coming to settle in the Netherlands. In opinion polls, Dutch people express a preference for a caring society based on mutual solidarity, as opposed to what they see as an 'American' society – individualistic and achievement-driven. Yet evidently they wish to confine that solidarity to their own national group. And here we have the emergent image of a society I have described as 'hard on the outside, soft on the inside' – warm and caring for those who belong, cold-hearted and unapproachable for those who are outside and must stay there.