

POOYAN TAMIMI ARAB

(DIS)ENTANGLING CULTURALISM, NATIVISM, RACISM

Krisis, 2012, Issue 2

www.krisis.eu

A general attitude prevails in Dutch public discourse that either denies or downplays the existence of racism. Dutch sociologists distance themselves insufficiently from this public context that denies racism. It is striking that their colleagues from other countries, for example Australia and Canada, are much less hesitant to use the word racism. A professor describing the situation for Australian Muslims at a conference in New York frequently used the word 'racism' for what sociologists such as Jan Willem Duyvendak and Willem Schinkel would respectively call nativism or culturalism. Here, I would like to express my concerns about the distinctions made between culturalism, nativism and racism in Dutch sociological discourse in recent publications by Duyvendak and Schinkel and in relation to popular Dutch opinion.

It is always a rare occasion when the reader finds that a text describes, in a subtle and detailed manner, feelings and thoughts that one knew beforehand, abroad and at home. This was often my experience reading Duyvendak's *The Politics of Home. Belonging and Nostalgia in Western Eu-*

rope and the United States. The main questions in this book are about the where, what, and how of the politics of home. *Where* are we going to investigate the idea of the home, in which specific context? *What* do people in these places generally perceive as home? And, *how* are the politics of home played out? He shows that the contents and procedures of home-making differ according to context. The comparative approach helps to highlight the idiosyncrasies of each. For example, the United States is more welcoming to hybrid cultural identities than The Netherlands. In *what* sense and *how* does the Dutch European 'thick' conception of the nation as a home fail to include diversity sufficiently? (Ghorashi 2003; Duyvendak 2011). To explain the Dutch European what and how, Duyvendak introduces the concept of nativism, which he diagnoses as an exclusive way of home-making in The Netherlands that is harmful to citizens with a recent immigrant background. The critique of nativism resembles in many respects that of another concept used to describe the Dutch politics of home, namely Willem Schinkel's culturalism (2009; 2012).

Duyvendak's analysis of Dutch nativism is a way of understanding what he calls 'sentimental politics', taking the role of everyday emotions in processes of home-making seriously. He promotes nativism as an analytical tool to grasp today's sentimental politics of home by giving lectures, writing a book for an academic audience, and by writing a critical article in *De Groene Amsterdammer*,¹ a popular Dutch magazine for intellectuals. The article separates nativism and racism though without making a critical distinction,² while in his book Duyvendak implies an entanglement of nativism and racism. What should we make of the nativism/culturalism/racism distinctions? And how should we interpret these in the different contexts of a popularizing article and an academic work?

The public denial of racism

Duyvendak's article should be evaluated in the light of the given public context of racism denial. He writes that the populist Geert Wilders and his political party should not be held responsible for racism, but of nativism

instead. Discrimination of immigrants and their Dutch-born children is a matter of religion and culture, and not of colour or race. He does not deny the fact of discrimination, of course, but writes that it is not based on 'born, physical traits'. He goes on to say that there is something that he would call 'everyday racism', which is unfortunate but not structurally connected to nativism. In the article, Duyvendak seems to disentangle everyday racism from nativism, supporting an agreeable and comfortable intellectual position for the general Dutch public. Though nativism may sound bad, it surely isn't as bad as racism. Nativism can therefore be a welcome concept for those who'd like to criticize Dutch society but think that the epithet of racism would be going a step too far. But why wouldn't nativism contribute to an increase in everyday – or even institutional – forms of racism?

A telling demonstration occurred recently in the European Parliament. Some Dutch members of the Parliament refused to stand up during an award ceremony for Arab activists and the commemoration of victims including Mohammad Bouazizi, the famous Tunisian who set himself on fire and sparked a revolution. The representatives were of the populist Freedom Party.³ Such instances of blatant discrimination by politicians should be qualified as racist, and we must not shy away from calling a spade a spade. This matters a great deal, since in popular discourse words such as nativism or culturalism do not have the same weight as racism. Nationalists may call upon nativism or culturalism when defending a measure of inequality, but it is surely not acceptable to publicly defend inequalities based on racism.

Another paradoxical reason for not talking about race and racism is to avoid racism. There is a widely held and remarkable idea that racism is always connected to a race-theory, a set of beliefs about racial hierarchies. Even to use the word 'race' would already imply that one is a racist. This would make the Dutch Constitution racist as it is using the word race in Article 1, which is on discrimination!⁴ In The Netherlands, to be a racist is almost analogous to being a Nazi, someone with an extremist theoretical framework about race. This narrow understanding of racism facilitates a disentangling of racism from the thick Dutch self-conception as essentially progressive and emancipated. When it does occur racism must not

be directly connected to Dutchness. As Derksen remarked a few years ago, the Dutch are not 'essentially racist'. Paul Scheffer reassures us that 'most people have essentially nothing against the presence of immigrants...' (both quoted in Jong 2011: 21) Therefore racism tends to be both under-scored and underestimated. Public intellectuals like Joost Zwagerman go out of their way to debunk the comparisons made between Geert Wilders and Adolf Hitler (Zwagerman 2009). On the one hand, Zwagerman shows how meaningless and biased it can be to describe Geert Wilders as 'a little Hitler'. He also proves my point that for both the left and the right, the word racism has very extremist connotations. Debunking these false comparisons has led the Dutch public to a superficial though comfortable conclusion that they should not use the vocabulary of racism in response to Wilders and other nativists *at all*, since doing so would align them to Adolf Hitler.

What the general public discourse does not sufficiently take into account is the European post-war culture of plurality, which should not be abused nor lose its appeal altogether. Not surprisingly, nativists are intensely sceptical of the future of European citizenship, and do not care to remember that the European unification project is embedded in a history of war that has compelled a worldwide and fundamental reconsideration of the very ideas of nativism, culturalism, and indeed, especially racism.

Making distinctions between nativism, culturalism, and racism can be useful and critical when they reveal entanglements rather than hiding behind all-too-comfortable separations. I am suggesting that there is a difference between a 'critical distinction' and a 'comfortable separation'. When used critically, the disentanglements of our conceptual tools cover up real entanglements only provisionally. Actually, the discovered reality may not fit our initially neat conceptual separation. The separation becomes critical when the sharp borders drawn *prima facie* are problematized. The point I want to defend is not that we should not make any such distinctions between culturalism, nativism and racism *at all*, but that we should be aware of their entangled relations. For example, in *The New Religious Intolerance* Martha Nussbaum refers to the concept of nativism very much like Duyvendak does, but is less hesitant to use the word racism in connection with religious intolerance as well (Nussbaum 2012).

Such an approach can explain why the culturalist exclusion could also be racist and not only applicable to the ‘Other’ as Muslim, as culturally and religiously different, but also as physiognomically different. Put differently, nativism/culturalism have aesthetic and visceral implications that spring from, as well as feed, racism, and operate both structurally and in everyday life. Contrary to popular Dutch belief, racism is not a problem that we have solved or overcome definitively.

The academic evasion of racism

When I asked the above-mentioned Australian professor what he thought about the Dutch reserve in employing the word racism, he remarked frankly that academics should not engage in ‘evasive tactics’. A South African professor working in The Netherlands went as far as stating: ‘Dutch academics are blind when it comes to racism’. It should come as no surprise that the general public denial of racism is evaded in academe, since race-critical paradigms have been institutionally downplayed in the past two decades. This history, which cannot be recounted here, continues to shape Dutch sociological discourse as allergic or evasive for talking about racism (Essed and Nimako 2006). Indeed, ‘critical Dutch intellectuals frequently distance themselves from discussions on racism, defining it as a problem ‘over there’ (in the US or in South Africa) rather than ‘here’, in the Netherlands. The widespread resistance among white Dutch that their skin colour might in any way constitute an ethnicized or racialized identity that provides them with a privileged social position allows the widespread denial of the everyday exclusion that is a regular occurrence in everyday life in the Netherlands’ (Davis and Nencel 2011: 480).

Scheffer and Entzinger’s recent report on integration does not once use the words race or racism. They do write about discrimination and distinguish levels of discrimination against different ethnic groups. The concept of ‘ethnicity’ is used as a neutral alternative to avoid talk of ‘race’ and ‘racism’. Just how estranged and particular the Dutch denial of racism is becomes apparent in comparison with Amnesty International’s recent report on discrimination of Muslims in European countries. There, racism

and race are explicitly and frequently referred to, and without hesitation when describing the Dutch context, among others (*Choice and Prejudice, discrimination against Muslims in Europe*, 2012).

In his book, Duyvendak connects culturalism and nativism to describe the current Dutch situation, and therefore the roles of culture, language, and religion are not underestimated. The concept of the ‘culturalization of citizenship’ or culturalism is utilized in a flexible way so that it can also be identified as nativism. However, there is no sharp distinction between nativism and culturalism. Though culturalism and nativism are said to be interdependent with economic globalization, they are not merely epiphenomenal. What distinguishes Duyvendak is his insistence to take seriously the feelings of people attracted to nativism, rather than brushing them aside as secondary or irrelevant. He tries to listen to them, while analyzing nativism critically. Racism plays a minor role in *The Politics of Home*. The problem of colour is mentioned however, clarifying the point that the discussion of nativism/culturalism does imply and presuppose physiognomic consequences, which is missing in the article in *De Groene Amsterdammer*. The issue of racism seems to hover in the background of Duyvendak’s thought but is not explicitly theorized in connection to nativism/culturalism.

For instance, Duyvendak writes in the introduction that he is ‘convinced that we cannot separate questions of how people inscribe space with meaning from social struggles involving class, race, gender and sexuality’. (Duyvendak 2011: 5). He also does not hesitate to connect ‘homely racism’ to the politics of home (Duyvendak 2011: 31). We also read that ‘there is a common understanding of Dutchness based on color, ‘roots,’ and certain codes of behavior that exclude difference’. (Duyvendak quoting Ghorashi, 2011: 99) The idea seems to be clear: the analytical concepts of nativism and culturalism are intimately intertwined and can explain Dutch discourses on domestic politics very well. Yet in the background of the national discussions about great liberal principles such as freedom of expression and women’s emancipation hover racist tendencies that connect roots to colour. Culturalism, nativism, and racism are intimately intertwined in the European context. Why then did Duyvendak address the broader audience by separating nativism from racism, rather than actually

showing their entanglement? I believe this may be related to the tendency that Dutch sociological discourse hesitates to frame objects of analysis as racist and prefers to cater to the Dutch self-perception as essentially progressive and therefore not capable of racism.

A sociologist who has taken up the challenge of explicitly entangling racism and culturalism/nativism is Willem Schinkel. In an essay on Dutch mosques and the production of marginal spaces, Schinkel first distinguishes culturalism from racism (Schinkel 2009). Referring to Cornelius Castoriadis⁵, Schinkel understands as running under racism a discourse of alterity. Racism is the structural depiction of others as different or as *The Other(s)* in a homogenizing way, stressing specific (physical) traits that the others supposedly have. Racism also connects to a logic that is both literally and metaphorically connected to the soil, as summed up in the phrase *Blut und Boden*. Racism seen this way is intimately connected to the nation-state, which grants rights based on *jus soli*, right to the soil, and *jus sanguinis*, right of blood. So far this is Schinkel's brief explanation of what racism fundamentally is. He continues: 'The question is: is there in The Netherlands a discourse of alterity based on either a literal or metaphorical logic of the 'soil', and is there such a discourse of a proportion that has a broad impact. The answer is: no, there is another discourse of alterity that is widespread. That discourse might better be described as culturalism than racism'. (translation mine, Schinkel 2009: 75). Note that technically speaking he has not denied the possible existence of racism, but only distinguishes racism from culturalism and emphasizes the latter. Dutch politicians both on the left and right could be described as nativist or culturalist, as Duyvendak shows, but their statements should not be seen as primarily racist, depending on how one interprets the meaning of a 'broad impact'. Racism is out; culturalism and nativism are in.

In his latest book, Schinkel reiterates his proposal to prefer talking of culturalism rather than racism, but this time he entangles the two more explicitly (2012: 223-240). He claims that Dutch society is still pervaded by 'structural racism', which is not on a par with Duyvendak's more innocent everyday racism. Schinkel writes that though racism in the classic sense still exists, what he calls culturalism is more urgent and widespread. In his analysis of culturalism he comes to the conclusion that culturalism

can be an 'equivalent for racism' (2012: 228). By studying 'everyday culturalism' we can thus make visible existing forms of racism.

True, culturalism as a concept does allow the social thinker to grasp what appears at first sight to be paradoxes that are hard to understand by referring only to racism. For example, the discourse of culturalism can locate racism in the Other who is culturally inferior and therefore possibly racist. Failing to appreciate racism and locating it outside what is perceived as normal, native, the nation and the home, is essential to culturalism. Duyvendak's nativism and Schinkel's culturalism can explain such phenomena that are perhaps harder to grasp in terms of the traditional racism only.

Another example, prominent in Duyvendak's analysis, of the usefulness of using words other than racism is the question of why some Dutch homosexuals are attracted to nativist/culturalist thought and right wing political parties. Contrary to Judith Butler, Duyvendak does not lament homosexuals' emancipated capability today of identifying with a broad spectrum of political positions other than the progressive left (Butler 2009: 130). Nativism and culturalism do offer food for thought in understanding why Dutch homosexuals would be attracted to the nativist/culturalist critique of homophobia. My own experiences talking with Dutch Muslims are corroborated by quantitative research showing that Dutch natives today are in general significantly more tolerant towards homosexuality than Dutch-Surinamese, Moroccans and Turks (Scheffer and Entzinger 2012: 128). Roughly half of Turkish and Moroccan citizens in Amsterdam and Rotterdam respond negatively when asked their opinion about homosexual teachers in schools, whereas 90% of the autochthonous population doesn't see a problem. Butler's critique of the alliance between nativism and homosexuals did not take this fact into sufficient consideration. By taking nativism seriously and interpreting it as charitably as possible, as Duyvendak does, we may develop a deeper understanding of its characteristics without immediately and always accusing nativists and culturalists of racism.

I'd like to restate that my worry is not per se about the academic use of the concepts of culturalism or nativism. They are good tools to critically ana-

lyze domestic politics in European countries. The problem is the firm or resolute denial of racism by academics in both scholarly works and especially in public debates, for example in Duyvendak's mistaken claim that physiognomy matters little, made on behalf of immigrants and their children in a public magazine. In his article, he ends by reassuring the reader that in time nativism might perhaps become more inclusive. 'Perhaps there is one comfort', in the end newcomers become natives too, 'while blacks never become whites'. This statement still seems out of place in a country that employs the language of 'zwarte scholen', black schools, and 'allochthons'. Indeed, the allochthons will identify easier with 'black' or 'colour' than with 'white' in the current context. Recent quantitative analysis corroborates my claim: Allochthons mingle with other ethnic groups significantly more than autochthons do; the autochthonous Dutch culture is relatively more homogenized than one might expect, as Duyvendak describes as well (Scheffer and Entzinger 2012: 124). In an analysis of Dutch black language, Lammert de Jong points to the case of the American Irish who were often called 'white niggers'. Indeed, Afro-Americans cannot literally become white, but Catholics who were described as 'black' for decades have been finally whitewashed (Jong 2011). What does this say about the current Dutch black language?

I believe that Schinkel, Duyvendak and other sociologists overlook in their writings how nativism and culturalism can explain certain specific local phenomena that connect to structural and everyday racism. Even if their studies are not about racism, but nativism and culturalism, the connection should not be explicitly rejected or underemphasized but implied. *The Politics of Home* does so to a limited extent. Schinkel makes the connection explicit, but goes on to suggest that racism should be replaced with culturalism, because culturalism would be a more urgent issue today and has greater explanatory power. But is that really true, especially in view of his remark that precisely in the denial of racism lays its strong operational power (2012: 237)? As I already said, being a culturalist is something that some may find acceptable, while racism is deemed universally unacceptable. Nativists can challenge Schinkel's negative characterization of culturalism and claim that 'culturalism may sometimes lead to exclusions but does have valid points', while no one can claim that 'racism has valid points'. Dutch self-criticism is only truly enhanced when what is

found radically unacceptable, racism, is searched for and located within the self, home, nation, and thus within the normal social order. Alain Badiou, for example, has done so by re-entangling the concepts into what he describes as 'cultural racism'.⁶

Concluding remarks

Racism in The Netherlands is not a right-wing phenomenon, as Duyvendak's convincing portrait of nativism shows. It does not necessarily belong to the right, though its currently most extreme manifestation is often described as a right-wing party for want of a better categorization. Certain features might be emphasized by nativists that might not coalesce well with racist thought, however it would be good to realize that we are not beyond racism in The Netherlands. Culturalism, nativism, and racism cannot be sharply disentangled; they are family. Making such critical distinctions simultaneously calls for their entanglement of family resemblances to be revealed.

This was proven in 2011 by the heated discussions about the feast of Saint Nicolas and his black-faced helper, Black Pete. Two coloured young men were arrested merely for standing in public wearing T-shirts that showed 'Zwarte Piet is racism', Black Pete is racism. The autochthonous Dutch public, on both the left and the right, twisted and contorted itself in an irrational rage, blaming the victims. I often heard angry citizens say: 'if they think Zwarte Piet is racist, then they are racists themselves!' Who could maintain that our wonderful national feast has a racist element? As Duyvendak says, 'The native position is not in question, along with their views on what is required to feel at home in The Netherlands'. (Duyvendak 2011: 100). The same could be said about the use of racism in Dutch discourse: the dominant position is that racism is not an issue, therefore whoever thinks that it is, should either stop complaining, move out or find a new conceptual home. It is the refusal to think or even consider the possibility of racism that is sadly widespread in The Netherlands and in Dutch politics.

I am grateful for Duyvendak and Schinkel's academic contributions, because domestic life is indeed experienced by people as something fundamental, imagined through the prisms of culturalism and nativism. However, Dutch academics and intellectuals should distance themselves even more radically from mainstream Dutch discourses. When racism occurs, it should not be substituted for a more mainstream soft nativism or culturalism.

Acknowledgments

I'd like to thank the editors of *Krisis*, Yolande Jansen, Lammert de Jong and Halleh Ghorashi for their helpful comments and conversations.

Pooyan Tamimi Arab (1983) studied Art History and Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam and the New School for Social Research. He is currently a PhD candidate at the department of Cultural Anthropology at Utrecht University, doing field research on Islam and the right to the city in the Netherlands.

References

Amnesty International (2012) *Choice and Prejudice, discrimination against Muslims in Europe*. London.

Butler, J. (2009) 'The Sensibility of Critique: Response to Asad and Mahmood', in: Asad, T., Butler, J., Mahmood, S., Brown, W. *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*. University of California Press.

Davis, K. and L. Nencel (2011) Border skirmishes and the question of belonging: An auto-ethnographic account of everyday exclusion in multicultural society. In: *Ethnicities* 11(4): 467-488.

Duyvendak, J.W. (2011) *The Politics of Home. Belonging and Nostalgia in Western Europe and the United States*. New York: Pallgrave Macmillan.

Essed, P. and K. Nimako (2006). Designs and (Co)Incidents. Cultures of Scholarship and Public Policy on Immigrants/Minorities in the Netherlands. In: *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 47(3-4): 281-312.

Ghorashi, H. (2003) *Ways to Survive, Battles to Win: Iranian Women Exiles in the Netherlands and the United States*. New York: Nova Science.

Jong, L. (2011) *Being Dutch, more or less* (2nd edition). Amsterdam: Rozenberg Publishers.

Nussbaum, M. (2012) *The New Religious Intolerance. Overcoming the politics of fear in an anxious age*. Harvard University Press.

Schinkel, W. (2009) De productie van marginaliteit. In: Erkoçu, E. and Bugdaci, C. (eds.) *De Moskee. Politieke, architectonische en maatschappelijke transformaties*. Rotterdam: NAI Uitgevers.

Schinkel, W. (2012) *De nieuwe democratie. Naar andere vormen van politiek*. Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij.

Scheffer, P., Entzinger, H. et al. (2012) *De staat van integratie: Rotterdam - Amsterdam*. Gemeente Rotterdam, Gemeente Amsterdam.

Zwagerman, J. (2009) *Hitler in de polder & Vrij van God*. Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers.

© This work is licensed under the Creative Commons License (Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0). See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/nl/deed.en> for more information.

¹ Jan Willem Duyvendak (2012) 'Pleidooi voor een sentimentele politiek'. In: *De Groene Amsterdammer*, January 5, 2012.

² Also see my initial reaction to the article: Sara Emami and Pooyan Tamimi Arab. De pvv voedt het alledaagse racisme. www.joop.nl, January 27, 2012.

³ De pvv staat niet op voor de doden. www.depers.nl, December 15, 2011.

⁴ *All those in the Netherlands shall be treated equally in equal circumstances. Discrimination because of religion, belief, political opinion, race, gender or any other grounds whatsoever shall not be permitted.* Constitution of the Kingdom of the Netherlands; art.1.

⁵ Cornelius Castoriadis (1997) 'Reflections on Racism', in: *World in Fragments*. Stanford University Press, 19-31.

⁶ Alain Badiou (2012) 'Le racisme des intellectuels'. In: *Le Monde*, May 5th, 2012.