Neoliberal Xenophobia in the Netherlands
Construction of an Enemy

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In the following essay, political scientist Jolle Demmers and writer Sameer S. Mehendale argue for the necessity of recognizing the relationship between xenophobia and neoliberalism and of gaining an understanding of the complexity of that relationship. In the case of the Netherlands, the rise of xenophobia is part of a broader process: the largely market-controlled takeover of symbolic forms of collectivity in an increasingly atomized society.

Throughout Europe, xenophobic and cultural racist repertoires have become prominent across the entire spectrum of politics. Generally, this xenophobic turn is understood as reactive: to September 11th, to the Madrid and London bombings, to the increased influx of non-Western, 'illegal' immigrants. This is certainly true here in the Netherlands, which recently seems obsessed with 'protecting' the indigenous against the foreign. What we will argue, however, is that neither radical Islam nor immigration numbers is responsible for why the Netherlands, once considered so progressive and open-minded, is now among the most restrictive and punitive in the EU when it comes to asylum, integration, family reunification and deportation policies. [1] We propose to look beyond *salonfähig* truisms about the new cultural racism as a product of 'ethnic entrepreneurs' or as the outcome of media regimes of representation. While the mobilizing properties of these phenomena must be recognized, the crux is something different and more fundamental.

How did this change occur? How did a once (seemingly, at least) relaxed, tolerant, progressive country turn into one of the toughest hardliners in Europe when it comes to the issues of immigration and ethnicity?

Since the marriage of the socialists and the liberals represented by the Netherland's Purple Cabinet of 1994, one of the main divisions within post-Second World War political debate – how to run the economy – ended with widespread consensus that neoliberalism was inevitable, the uncontested new normalcy. Major, if largely silent, transformations during the 1990s in the realms of the economy, governance and media were rapidly turning the Netherlands into a fully-marketized society: patients turned into clients, public space into private opportunity, job security into flex-work, subcontracting and outsourcing, citizens into consumers. These processes, however fundamental to the everyday life of the Dutch (affecting education, welfare, housing, child care, health care, work stability, pensions, social security) nonetheless failed to engage the public. Both the accepted inevitability ('the country's economy is in a dismal state, something has to be done') of the implemented policies, plus the complexity of neoliberal technologies of power – control of the image-world crucial among them – and its hugely diverse, case-specific consequences upon the lives and futures of individual citizens, limited not only the forms of possible resistance but even the conceptualization of experience. In mainstream society, neoliberalism was not discussed, let alone politicized or contested: its benefits were

simply too obvious. The longstanding definition of ideology was fully realized: 'They do not know it, but they are doing it.'

An essential element of the neoliberal project is atomization under the rubrics freedom, progress and efficiency – what Bourdieu has called a programme of the *methodical destruction of collectives*. [2] In order to reach the neoliberal utopia of a fully commodified form of social life, all collective structures that could serve as an obstacle to the unfettered rule of capital are called into question: the state, increasingly locked in a global regime of competing states; work groups, through the individuation of labour and wages as a purported function of individual competences; collectives that support the rights of workers; even the family, which loses part of its control over basic patterns of consumption through the constitution and targeting of market age groups.

In our analysis of how neoliberalism has affected Dutch public imagination, an understanding of the erosion of earlier modes of collectiveness (both real and imagined), and their replacement by new 'liquid' forms of belonging, is crucial. In particular, we focus on the disintegration of two preeminent icons of post-war Holland: social welfarism and 'merchantness'.

Our discussion of the demise of older forms of collectiveness, and the rise of new forms of belonging, begins with a brief history of modern Dutch societal structures. Until the 1960s, as a result of religious and political clashes in the early twentieth century, Dutch society was characterized by a system of voluntary social apartheid, within which different vertically organized communities ('pillars') lived parallel lives, each with their own social institutions and represented by their own set of political elites. [3] Dutch generations born in the middle two-thirds of the twentieth century grew up belonging to one or another more-or-less defined pillar, roughly classified as Protestant, Roman Catholic, Socialist or Liberal, each with its own political party, church, sporting club, union, newspaper, broadcast organization, housing corporation, school, university and senior citizens' home.[4]

After the 1960s, however, a process of de-pillarization began, within which welfarism, steadily gaining ground since the Second World War, now rose to prominence as a national identifier. The accompanying omneity of welfarist policies, attitudes, and beliefs were to set the Netherlands apart from most other Western countries, in particular from the USA. In its remade image, the Netherlands stood out (particularly in its own eyes) as a bastion of civilization and urbaneness juxtaposed against the crude winner-take-all mentality from across the Atlantic, its sense of moral superiority importantly shaping the collective imagination of the nation. [5] The personal individualism of the Swinging Sixties was above all a cultural phenomena, rooted in the assuring socioeconomic collectives of the welfare state.

Over the past two-plus decades, however, the welfarism project has lost ground, and is now actively in reverse: slowly in the 1980s, due in part to the decade's economic crisis; with greater speed and ideological vivacity in the 1990s, with the defeat of communism and the rise of neoliberalism. Achievements such as the longstanding 'social safety net' were now presented as outdated, pampering, inefficient. As the new ideological certitudes demanded, slowly but steadily the state retreated from the public domain, handing its institutions – including the emblematic national railways, postal service and telephone company – to private ownership. Quite literally, public space was overwhelmingly commodified (Amsterdam's central post office was turned into a shopping mall), reducing the state to its bureaucratic, monitoring and surveillant core.

Another fading national identifier, one with proclaimed 'ancient roots', is the Dutch business sense. Indeed, this centuries-old national symbol may have provided fertile ground for the new ideology of neoliberalism, combining with the economic crisis of the1980s (when unemployment hit a post-Second World War record high) to explain a rapid implementation that might be described as a national embrace. But the new forces

proved treacherous, for in the end globalization disconnected the Dutch 'ethnos' from its earlier symbols of entrepreneurism. Neoliberalism turned the Netherlands' national-multinationals into fully globalized corporations and engineered a surrender to the market of its once-prided state enterprises. In 2007, during a seminar at the Holland Financial Center, the then Dutch Minister of Finance, in defence of neoliberal ideology and reacting to public concern about yet another national-multinational going global, remarked: 'The sale of Holland is a myth that leads to an unwarranted Orange feeling,' laying normative claims on the 'Orange feeling' as he dismisses it, but at the same time acknowledges its existence. We, too, note the discomfort and uneasiness this double-sided transformation is causing among many sectors of Dutch society. With the implementation of neoliberalism, certain segments of the economy certainly prospered, while the flip-side realities of the gold coin were at best considered collateral: Amid the consumption boom of the 1990s, beggars and the homeless began to show their faces on the streets of the Netherlands. And with them, looming, for the first time in recent memory, the fear of falling.

This erosion of national collective identifiers in the context of neoliberal atomization opened up spaces for the production of new symbols of othering and belonging, rapidly filled and exploited through the recently marketized media. To fully understand the role that commercial media played in this new dynamics, it is important to sketch the major changes during this period in the Dutch broadcasting system. Until 1988, Dutch TV consisted of two public channels where various broadcasting companies, representing different pillars and catering to a more or less specific audience, could broadcast their programmes, the amount of air time for each pillar based on the size of its membership. The advent of the neoliberal order, however, saw the dismantling of the legal barricades that had safeguarded this specific public broadcasting system. New legislation allowed for the introduction of commercial channels, and by the second half of the 1990s seven new commercial stations had appeared. Segmented, ideologically and religiously based broadcasting made way for market populism, with the new TV channels rapidly entering into a battle for ratings, outbidding each other in vulgarity and coarseness. In this context it is interesting to note that the tsunami of 'eviction' shows (where an individual is 'othered' and eliminated by the remaining group) that has swamped the world this past decade started in the Netherlands with the show 'Big Brother'.

The new market media catered to the looming societal uncertainty and corresponding need for predictability. These were readily captured in icons and incidences (often short-lived) of collectiveness and belonging, particularly around 'issues' of safety and criminality, as repertoires of Us / Them. The mid-1990s became the time of massive 'silent marches' and 'popular ceremonies' honouring victims of street crime in what became a national obsession with what was coined 'senseless violence'. Here the images and practices of collectively mourning an innocent victim served as instant satisfiers for the atomized citizen's need to belong. The focus on random violence, however, failed to offer a durable enough dichotomy, and in the search for more lasting categorizations of togetherness and othering, ultimately the ethnos proved more resilient.

Minority Targetting: From Racist to Culturalist

In the economically prosperous 1990s, the neoliberal consensus within mainstream politics and the accompanying loss of even the illusion of a national economy left the cultural field as the main battleground for political constituency-building and opened a 'market' for ethnos-based politics. Minorities soon became the flash-point for heated public discourse which marked the invasion of Others, the building of mosques, the headscarf, the burqua, and the handshake into sites of contestation. Finally, the nation could vent its long-felt discomfort with the ever-larger numbers of *allochtonen*, so the story went. **6** It is important to point out differences between the high level of such symbolism in national politics and the practical, depolarizing approaches of local authorities. A case in point is a controversy between the national leader of the Labour Party and the Labour mayor of Amsterdam, the latter allowing his 'street coaches' to not shake hands with members of the opposite sex because of (Islamic) religious mores. The national leader loudly protested, stating that 'in this country, the handshake is the norm', conveniently forgetting that the country's chief rabbi had refused to shake hands with women for time immemorial (a fact nobody ever politicized).

Of course the question of minorities and foreigners – different things, but almost always conflated in public discourse – was not new on the Dutch political agenda. However, the logic and form of minority-targeting was now fundamentally different from that of earlier decades. The 1980s, with economic decline and high levels of unemployment, had seen the more classic type of scapegoating: 'The Netherlands is full;' 'They are stealing our jobs;' 'They abuse our social security system.' However, xenophobic repertoires did not prove expedient as political mobilizers, and the issue of migration was only taken up formally by a small nationalist party, the Centre Party (CP), and carefully kept out of mainstream politics. In those days racism was still simply racism, readily countered by the anti-racist discourse of the post-war era. The CP's bashing of Surinamese immigrants and guest workers from Italy and Spain, and later from Turkey and Morocco, was described by most in the political class as provincial and inferior, something that belonged to the past. In line with this, the state's 1980s' immigration policies defined integration solely in socioeconomic terms, supporting the idea of 'integration with identity retention'.

In the 1980s, migrants were presented as a threat to the order of the nation, to its socioeconomic security. Increasingly now, however, migrants are portrayed as a threat to the *nature* of the nation, to the essence of Dutchness. In the context of societal atomization and the loss of collective standards, the consumer-citizen has become increasingly sensitive to the drawing and maintaining of identity boundaries. And since 'we' can only exist in relation to 'what we are not', there is a now-flourishing market for the ritualization and eviction of the Other – no matter his or her Rotterdam or Amsterdam birthplace, no matter how fluent his or her Dutch and 'well-behaved' his or her manners – which clearly legitimates segregation and antagonistic group dynamics on the ground.

In the neoliberal era, minority-targeting has not only become both socially meaningful and politically functional, it has also changed form: from racist to culturalist, something that has highly complicated the formulation of a counter-argument. The culturalist defence that 'people are equal, cultures are not' or 'we are not against Muslims, we are against Islam' did not have any of the emotionally charged and messy connotations that associated racism with the Netherland's traumatic Nazi-occupied past. Even the Dutch High Court in a recent verdict concerning the abuse of article 137c has adhered to this logic, that by insulting the Islam one not necessarily insults Muslims (the latter being an offense).

The first mainstream politician advocating this turn to cultural racism was the then-leader of the right-wing People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), who in 1991 argued for a 'tougher' assimilationist stance on immigrant integration. The overrepresentation of *allochtonen*

in crime statistics and unemployment were no longer to be understood as related to their marginalized, underclass position, but instead were to be framed in cultural terms, particularly the purported incompatibility of Islam and Western Democracy. The only successful strategy, the VVD claimed, was to drop 'political correctness' and 'cultural relativism' and to pressure migrants to conform.

Freedom as Boundary

The emerging market of identity politics was now to code incidents of urban violence and criminality committed by young people of North African, and particularly Moroccan, heritage, and reported instances of the repression and abuse of women, as symbols of a clash of cultures (pre-modern Islamic tribalism versus Western civilization). Repeatedly, these acts were framed as characteristic of the bounded community of 'Moroccans' (which became the synecdoche for all Islamic *allochtonen*). By the end of the millennium, any untoward local incident concerning immigrants (or Dutch-born *allochtonen)*, but in particular 'Moroccans', became national news. Moreover, it was now their alleged incapacity to deal with 'freedom', and the 'unfreedom' characterizing 'Muslim culture', that made them 'uncivil', 'unintegrated' citizens. More and more, the 'hard-won' freedoms of the 'real' (meaning *autochthon*) Dutch – secularism, individualism, sexual liberality, homosexuality and even pornography – were juxtaposed against Muslim immigrants' unfreedoms on these same terrains. Increasingly, integration was to require the adoption of these specific moral choices – integration instrumentalized to a specific cultural grounding as a precondition for citizenship. As Judith Butler rather understatedly noted regarding the Netherlands: 'So a certain paradox ensues in which the coerced adoption of certain cultural norms becomes a requisite for entry into a polity that defines itself as the avatar of freedom.' [7]

Following on the heels of sexual freedom as an instrument of coercion and boundary-drawing was the invocation of freedom of speech, particularly including the freedom of gross insult. In the public domain, a combination of a dead-serious anti-Islam political discourse and a popular culture of ridicule, accusing Muslims of lacking 'resilience' and a 'sense of humour', now openly displayed the pervasive underlying cultural racism of Dutch society. Added to this is the dynamics of the electoral system: a parliamentary system of proportional representation as in the Netherlands lacks the imperative to counter majority (read: autochthonous) sentiments. Electoral logic compels the major parties to opt for the majority vote: reaching out to the *allochtoon* minority could prove counterproductive. Hence, there is also a certain electoral rationale to the current setting of polarization.

Although some sectors in the political arena immediately welcomed the VVD chairman's assimilationist discourse as 'brave' and 'outspoken', for several years it largely remained a right-wing issue, influential but not dominant. This changed in 2000 with the publication in one of the Netherland's major national newspapers of a watershed essay by a journalist of socialist stock, a somewhat incoherent, mildly assimilationist piece but with an emblematic title: 'The Multicultural Drama.' [8] The essay argued that the integration of immigrants had failed, that the policy of multiculturalism had locked up migrants in their inward-looking communities, creating an apathetic, isolated underclass. It emphasized the need for unconditional assimilation of migrants through the (coerced) learning of Dutch history and language. Here, finally, left and right discourses on integration merged: the similarities between the leftist essay of 2000 and the right-wing position of 1991 were such that the former VVD chairman referred to it as 'a feeling of déja vû'. [9] More and more, 'failed integration' was identified as the source of societal malaise in the Netherlands. Multiculturalism's death rattle echoed in all corners of the public domain.

This blurring of right and left political positions, first in the economic realm and then also on the highly mediatized issue of minority / immigrant integration, resulted in a kind of cultural-nationalist bidding war, with the new eponymous political party of Pim Fortuyn

leading the way. His populist anti-Islam and anti-establishment rhetoric, greatly enhanced by the September 11 events, found fertile ground among the Dutch electorate: political correctness was out, Islam-bashing in. The media, needless to say, loved him – he was automatic ratings. Fortuyn presented a puzzling merger of old antagonisms and new style: a former socialist, part-time academic, a dandy who toured the country in a Bentley-with-chauffeur and two lap doggies, talking in sound bites ('I say what I do and I do what I say'), who declared Islam a 'backward culture' but flaunted his sexual encounters with Moroccan boys. In the polls, his party skyrocketed. Holland seemed to be on the brink of a new order.

A key to Fortuyn's rapid rise was the incapacity of the old-style politicians in the Purple Cabinet to respond to the new populism. Although they had been largely responsible for the economic transformations of the 1990s, they never recognized the silent discontent it had caused. The economy was booming, there was no reason to worry, they thought. When it came to issues that fed into the exclusionist repertoires building up in society, such as the arrival of large numbers of asylum seekers in the 1990s, they seemed unable or unwilling to deal with them. Obsessed with enacting the coalition's mantra 'Work, Work, Work', they had no feel for the new depression and needs created by the neoliberal transformation, leaving all the 'gut' issues to Fortuyn.

The week before the elections, Fortuyn was murdered. The elections went ahead, and his List Pim Fortuyn (LPF) won a stunning victory of 26 seats, which obliged the Christian Democrats (CDA) and right-wing VVD to form a coalition. But the new party's members were a hastily assembled bunch with little real political savvy, and the 'revolution' quickly fizzled out. The government lasted 86 days, and in the following elections the LPF lost most of its voters. 'The heritage of Pim,' however, lived on, actively embraced by a series of split-off factions of the VVD but also within mainstream politics. Cultural racism remained ascendant.

Neoliberal Xenophobia

In the atomized society of the Netherlands the search for new forms of togetherness has translated into a turn to the ethnos, with fantasies of purity and the moralization of culture and citizenship. Abiding to the logic of the market, the media reiterates and so enhances this societal process. Where the neoliberal project has, largely unnoticed, abolished the collective standards and solidarities of the post-Second Wrld War era, the faces of immigrants have served as ideal, identifiable flash points for new repertoires of belonging and othering.

Neoliberalism may be technically agnostic on matters of culture and race, but the neoliberal project is well-served by the permanent construction of an Enemy (either within or without) who can satisfy the otherwise alienated consumer-citizen's need for inclusion and belonging. For the time being, at least, the current Dutch marriage-of-convenience between cultural racism and the neoliberal project is certainly not an unhappy one.

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Footnotes

1. In recent years, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and the European Commission have criticized various aspects of Dutch immigration policies as inhumane and discriminatory towards 'non-Westerners'. These punitive, criminalizing practices include the open-ended (some lasting more than a year) detention of migrant minors, families with children, and torture victims in cramped conditions of up to six persons in a cell, with little communication with the outside world, and an 'integration' process with costly compulsory exams and a hierarchy of countries of origin, effectively blocking family reunification of people of Moroccan and Turkish origin. See: 'Discrimination in the Name of Integration, Migrants' Rights Under the Integration Abroad Act', *Human Rights Watch* (May 2008); 'The Netherlands: The Detention of Irregular Migrants and Asylum Seekers' (June 2008), *Amnesty International* EUR 35 / 02 / 2008; 'Evaluation of the Family Reunification Directive', Commission of the EU, 2008, 610 / 3 (October 2008).
2. Pierre Bourdieu, *Firing Back: Against the Tyranny of the Market* (London: Verso, 2004).
3. Arend Lijphart, *The Politics of Accommodation: Pluralism and Democracy in the Netherlands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).
4. As a member of, for instance, the socialist pillar, you would vote for the Social Democratic Labour Party, watch the programmes of the VARA, read the *Vrije Volk*, and send your children to a state university.
5. This shift from pillar to welfarist state was both symbolized and significantly reinforced by the establishment of the NOS (Dutch Broadcasting Institute), a national coordinating and facilitating institute that also broadcast the daily news, sports and reporting on other events of 'national' importance.
6. This is how the Dutch institutionalization of difference works: You are either an *autochtoon* or an *allochtoon*. An *allochtoon* is a person living in the Netherlands who has at least one foreign-born parent. The Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) makes a distinction between a Western (one might substitute 'civilized') *allochtoon* (a parent from Europe, North America, Oceania, but also Indonesia and Japan) and a non-Western *allochtoon* (Turkey, Latin America, Asia and Africa). The terms are common and widely used, although in everyday parlance only those from the non-Western group are labeled as *allochtonen*, and the theoretically non-existent third generation of *allochtonen* is still generally covered by the term (for example, the city of Rotterdam officially speaks of third-generation *allochtonen,* individuals who have at least one foreign born *grandparent*). In 2008, the CBS counted 1.8 million non-Western *allochtonen* in a population of 16 million. According to the CBS, the Netherlands has a total of 850,000 Muslims.
7. Judith Butler, 'Sexual Politics, Torture, and Secular Time', *The British Journal of Sociology,* vol. 59 (2008) no. 1, 4.
8. Paul Scheffer, 'Het Multiculturele Drama,' *NRC Handelsblad*, 29 January 2000.
9. *NRC Handelsblad*, 20 May 2000.

Tags

Capitalism, Democracy