Institutionalizing the Muslim Other: Naar Nederland and the Violence of Culturalism

Marc de Leeuw and Sonja van Wichelen

Introduction

On the brink of the European demise of multiculturalist discourse, “culture” configures prominently in the debates on immigration of European nation-states. New discourses of integration emphasize dominant values and norms and define civic membership through cultural commitment or loyalty. How are the Dutch doing integration? And what is integration doing to Dutchness? Taking our cues from the new integration exam we analyze how “culture” is paradigmatically disciplined upon new aspiring citizens. By employing cultural tropes of sexual freedom, gender equality, freedom of speech, and individualism as emblems of Dutchness, integration is identified as the successful adaptation to hegemonic liberal and secular virtues, leaving little room for cultural or religious variations. We argue that this need of reinstating Dutchness signals its very crisis, and that culturalism reinforces revivals of national identity.

Understanding discourses of multiculturalism (historically) as a depoliticized ideology of secular liberalism, we argue that, rather than simply seeing the strive for multiculturalism (in terms of moral position) as better than that for integration (see for instance Duyvendak, Engelen, and de Haan), we should consider and analyze the premises and complexities in which it operates. The entanglement of migration and globalization is key to understanding current changes in thinking about citizenship and multiculturalism. What is more, culturalism, while obscuring its nature as a form of racism, is in fact a mode of racist and (post)colonial ressentiment. It is a violent mechanism that appeals to exclusionary mechanisms of racialized, classed, and gendered identification, that reduce groups of people to essentialized characteristics,
and that affirm constructions of “us” and “them” by using them as absolute forms of differentiation. We emphasize the need to understand the concept of culturalism as an inherent complification of the concept of racism. Culturalism is no new phenomenon. It is very close to cultural racism, which has already been identified by Essed (288). Our discussion of a notorious video on Dutch national identity will help to clarify the nature of culturalism, which we see as the form Dutch racism has taken on since the last few decades. What makes culturalism different from the cultural racism in the past is its (obsessive) instrumentalization of religion. It is in such a way that culturalist discourses operate successfully in the Netherlands today.

**Testing “Newcomers”: Cultural Tropes of Dutchness**

As a prerequisite to obtain a temporary residence permit it is compulsory for particular groups of foreigners that they pass an integration exam at an early stage—even before their arrival in the Netherlands. This new measure primarily targets foreigners who want to marry or be reunited with their partners or family. It complements two other criteria: a minimum income and a minimum age of 21 years for both partners. It is also intended for religious clergy who want to work in the Netherlands. An important component of the exam is the film *Coming to the Netherlands.*

In this one and a half hour long video, seven themes are explored—ranging from Dutch history and its constitution to parenting and healthcare—that are meant to give an overview of basic knowledge of Dutch society, values, and culture.

The film is guided by a female presenter who seems to stand for both the image of the modern Dutch woman and, through her narrative, for the voice of the state speaking to its new immigrants. She explains to them what they need to understand, learn, accept, and do, before they attain the privilege to enter the Netherlands. The second character is a male figure, depicted as naive and somewhat dim-witted, and meant to represent the typical immigrant. Newcomers are expected to identify themselves with this character who in one of the excerpts expresses total amazement at seeing a political debate on television. Through the sullenness of the “Wally” and the disciplining voice of the female presenter, the tone of the film is somewhat infantilizing—as if it was crafted for elementary school children.

The section entitled *Constitution, Democracy, and Legislation* underscores the importance of article one of the Dutch constitution and is narrated through stories of white Dutch citizens and well-articulated (well-integrated) migrant-citizens. They function as “testimonials,” giving evidence of how Dutch constitution gives you “the freedom and space to be yourself” (*Naar Nederland* 2007). The female presenter and a male voice over summarize the section with:

*So, every one in Holland has equal rights, men and women are equal. They each make their own choice, and both are allowed to express their own opinions, women