

# Anti-nationalist nationalism: the paradox of Dutch national identity

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**ABSTRACT.** Academic research on contemporary Dutch nationalism has mainly focused on its overt, xenophobic and chauvinist manifestations, which have become normalised since the early 2000s. As a result, less radical, more nuanced versions of Dutch nationalism have been overlooked. This article attempts to fill this gap by drawing attention to a peculiar self-image among Dutch progressive intellectuals we call *anti-nationalist nationalism*. Whereas this self-image has had a long history as banal nationalism, it has come to be employed more explicitly for political positioning in an intensified nationalist climate. By dissecting it into its three constitutive dimensions – constructivism, lightness and essentialism – we show how this image of Dutchness is evoked precisely through the simultaneous rejection of ‘bad’ and enactment of ‘good’ nationalism. More generally, this article provides a nuanced understanding of contemporary Dutch nationalism. It also challenges prevalent assumptions in nationalism studies by showing that post-modern anti-nationalism does not exclude but rather constitutes essentialist nationalism.

**KEYWORDS:** Dutchness, self-images, anti-nationalism, weak nationalism, progressive intellectuals

## Introduction

Nationalism, as an ideology and as a term, has had a bad reputation for many decades in many countries (Benner 1997). Whereas some of its critics have proposed a non-national alternative (ranging from regionalism to internationalists’ ideologies such as cosmopolitanism), others have proposed an alternative (‘good nationalism’) that remains at the *national* level. Most commonly, the bad type is association with *cultural*, racial and ethnic definitions of the nation, whereas the ‘good’ type sees the nation as a *political*, territorial and civic entity. Famous examples of the latter are Renan’s idea of the ‘will’ of the national citizenry (1996), Habermas’ ‘constitutional patriotism’ (1992) and ‘civic nationalism’ (Brubaker 1992).

In this article, we focus on the Dutch case because its ‘solution’ to the problem of ‘bad’ nationalism is *cultural* rather than political. Our argument

is that this cultural nationalism depends on the very distinction between 'good' and 'bad' as the rejection of the latter constitutes the former. We coin this paradoxical national self-image *anti-nationalist nationalism*. We will show that this often overlooked self-image is employed by progressives in a variety of contexts, from 'banal' thematisations of Dutchness to explicit political positioning vis-à-vis nationalist antagonists. Although this paradoxical self-image is constituted through complex negotiations, it is confidently and proudly evoked without ever coming close to a total rejection or relativisation of Dutch nationhood.

Despite its prominence, there has not been much scholarly attention given to this mode of nationalism. Rather, most academic attention has been paid to xenophobic and chauvinist modes of nationalism, figuring prominently in the protectionist, conservative, populist and assimilationist climate that gained momentum in the early 2000s. It is often argued that the Dutch have moved from an absence of nationalism, or one that is 'weak, thin, procedural and pluralist' to one that is 'strong, thick, cultural and monist' (Van Reekum 2012: 584). However, due to its focus on overt political narratives of nationhood, this perspective has lost its sensitivity to the existence and continuity of less radical, more nuanced versions of Dutch nationalism. Hence, anti-nationalist nationalism is generally overlooked by scholars of contemporary Dutch nationalism. Although rare, there are some works on 'moderate' enactments of Dutchness with attention to anti-nationalism, for example, in public debates on citizenship (Van Reekum 2012: 2014; Van Reekum & Duyvendak 2012) and urban policy practices (Van Reekum and Van de Berg, 2014; Verkaaik 2009; 2010). Although our article is closely related and complementary to these works given the role of anti-nationalism in the constitution of national self-images, it also differs in three respects due to its focus: first, it deals with a more specific discourse, namely, a progressive, intellectual one; second, it analyses anti-nationalism not only as a politicised but also as an informal, banal form of nationalism; and third, its central dynamic is – rather than between Dutch 'natives' and 'migrants' – between 'good' and 'bad' nationalists among the Dutch 'natives' themselves. We use the term nationalism here as defined by Leerssen, as 'the articulation and instrumentalization of collective self-images [...] a tradition of ethno-types – commonplaces and stereotypes of how we identify, view and characterise others as opposed to ourselves' (2006: 17).

In the following pages, we unwrap the self-image of anti-nationalist nationalism by focusing on its three constitutive dimensions: *constructivism*, *lightness* and *essentialism*. Each dimension is illustrated by two examples in which the participants describe and enact Dutchness through negotiations of anti-nationalism and nationalism. The fact that the concrete textual sources we use vary in purpose, genre, length and degree of politicisation shows that the central self-image is a rather widespread trope of Dutchness among progressive opinion leaders and scholars alike.

**Anti-nationalism: an old image in a new context**

How to understand this culturally ‘light’ nationalism in the form of anti-nationalism? To start with, it is important to emphasise that anti-nationalism (and anti-nationalist nationalism) has a long history in the Netherlands. Anti-nationalism as, paradoxically, something typically Dutch has already been claimed by the famous Dutch historian Johan Huizinga (Beyen 2008). Whereas anti-nationalism has been a received self-understanding in the Netherlands from the nineteenth century onwards (Beyen 2008; Huijsen 2012; Leerssen 2006; 2015; Van Ginkel 1999), it has gained new relevance in the past fifteen years. In these years, there has been a heated debate about Dutchness in which Dutch citizenship has been defined not in formal or political but rather in strongly cultural (or ‘culturalist’; Schinkel 2007) terms (Duyvendak 2011). In important respects, the cultural imagination of the nation has been surprisingly progressive (it is all about women’s and LGBT rights; see Mepschen, Duyvendak, and Tonkens 2010) and highly secular (Hurenkamp, Tonkens & Duyvendak 2012). The public and political contention of Dutchness has been intensified by electoral successes of right wing populist parties such as Pim Fortuyn’s LPF, Rita Verdonk’s TON or Geert Wilders’ PVV and has become deeply intertwined with migration and integration issues. The general consensus (as evident in countless debates, reports and policies) that ‘allochthones’ have to ‘integrate’ into ‘society’ to become ‘citizens’ is always informed by the underlying monolithic notion of a ‘national culture’ (Schinkel 2010). However, it is not only the Dutchness of ‘allochthones’ that has been problematised. The progressive left has been blamed for neglecting the national identity due to their cosmopolitan outlook and for actively undermining it through their alleged ‘multicultural’ policies (Duyvendak & Scholten 2011). Although the progressive left has never been in power (Schinkel 2008) nor have such multicultural policies ever existed (Duyvendak et al. 2013), this has become a powerful narrative that has gained respectability beyond the circles of right wing populism. It is telling that one of the most famous and influential voices of this stance was the social-democrat Paul Scheffer (2000)<sup>1</sup>:

The denunciative way in which we have dealt with national consciousness in the Netherlands isn’t welcoming. We pride ourselves in having no national pride. This boundless attitude of the Dutch doesn’t contribute to integration, because more often than not, it conceals a detached and heedless society. Today, the postmodern historical vision dominates in which every ‘we’ is immediately suspect. [...] A happy-go-lucky multiculturalism is spreading because we are not able to explicate what keeps society together. We say too little about our borders, don’t cherish a relation to our own past and treat our language nonchalantly (cited in Van Reekum and Duyvendak, 2012: 456).

In response to this context, many progressives developed a form of Dutchness by turning the accusation (anti-nationalism) into a constitutive and positive feature of national identity, thereby revitalising an old Dutch tradition.

## Constructivism

The first aspect of anti-nationalist nationalism is constructivism. A case in point is the book *Een zwak voor Nederland* (2005) [Weakness for the Netherlands] by sociologist and publicist Dick Pels. Here, Pels encourages his countrymen to embrace a ‘weak’ national identity, which he deems typically Dutch. The book begins with a confession about his own conversion from a cosmopolitan world citizen to a person who identified with the significance of his Dutch national identity. The up-rootedness (evinced by terms such as ‘no man’s land’, ‘abstract internationalism’) and cultural alienation that he experienced as a cosmopolitan individual led to his recent discovery of national identification. While these national feelings may be ‘totally wrong because nationalistic’ (Pels 2005: 8), in a way, they are stronger than his political or rational beliefs. National identification is subconscious, an ‘embodied and instinctual’ connection to one’s country of origin. With this new-found realisation of the unconscious emotionality of national belonging, Pels not only ‘admits’ his national identification but also acknowledges the validity of nationalist criticisms of cosmopolitanism.

In Pels’ discourse, Dutchness consists not only of traits such as egalitarianism, plurality, individualism and informality but also an ambivalent – and at times antagonistic – relation to nationhood. In the chapter ‘The Soft Forces against the Hard Ones’, Pels positions himself as someone with an affinity to the Netherlands but distinguishes himself from the ‘neo-patriots’ (such as earlier quoted Scheffer). In Pels’ left-liberal discourse, people should not be too emotionally invested in national identification; his own sense of nationhood combines affinity with a sense of ‘embarrassment’:

A feeling of home [*Heimatgevoel*]? I have a weak spot for the Netherlands. But that’s it. Patriotism? [*vaderlandsliefde*]? These words are too lofty for a paradoxical mixture of attachment, recognition, affection, and the sense of minor embarrassment I feel towards this small but pleasant country (Pels 2005: 17).

The enactment of this ambivalence towards national identity is not merely a personal issue, as it fulfils other functions in the text. It is this very ambivalence towards Dutch nationhood that is presented as both a historically persistent characteristic of the Dutch collectivity and a normative prescription for how to deal with the question of Dutch nationhood today. In contrast to the ‘strong, defensive and proud national identity’ (Pels 2005: 18) advocated by his political opponents, Pels foregrounds ‘weak identity’ as a typically Dutch trait that consists of an ambivalent and therefore moderate and modest attitude towards the nation, what he calls ‘character weakness’ [*karakterzwakte*]. Dutchness as a weak identity also consists of ‘ontological weakness’: the nation is an ongoing *construction* that encourages continuous struggle between a plurality of views on what the nation is, rather than an ‘essence’ or ‘historical reality’:

What is the Netherlands? What should it be? ... Instead of a strong and hard identity, we should cherish the same weak identity that has been the pride of our Dutch nation and culture in the past as well. That uncertainty best suits the weak spot I have for the Netherlands (Pels 2005: 16).

Pels argues that 'a relaxed national awareness [*natiebeseft*] has always been the essence of our open and tolerant identity':

Not certainty about a rigid national essence, but rather an uncertain image of the Netherlands is the best starting point for both the integration of alien cultures into our society, and for the integration of our culture into Europe and the world. To have a weak-spot for the Netherlands is more than enough (Pels 2005: 17–18).

The debate on the Dutch historical canon reveals another manifestation of constructivism in enactments of anti-nationalist nationalism.<sup>2</sup> In 2006, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science invited a committee of professional historians to develop the canon, which consists of 50 historical lemmas taught in high schools. In order to counter 'exaggerated expectations and even abuse of the canon' (Commissie Ontwikkeling Nederlandse Canon 2006: 23), the committee argued that the canon, national identity and their instrumental relationship are highly problematic on conceptual, ontological, ideological and political grounds. 'National identity is fictitious, yes dangerous' (Commissie Ontwikkeling Nederlandse Canon 2006: 23).

Anticipating accusations of creating a nationalist canon, and to reach a broader readership than merely those who read the reports, the committee explicitly formulated its stance on the notion of the nation on its central medium, the canon's website. From a *constructivist* perspective, the committee writes:

It is important to use terms such as 'Netherlands', 'Dutch culture' and 'Dutch history' carefully. After all, until the nineteenth century the term 'Netherlands' was an anachronism, and the adjective 'Dutch' is problematic with respect to that early history. When we write in this text about Dutch language and culture, Dutch territory or the Dutch state, we mean 'referring to this region' without suggesting that this region has been a cultural, political and linguistic unity. These things need to be approached as historical phenomena ([www.entoen.nu/hooflijnen](http://www.entoen.nu/hooflijnen)).

Nevertheless, the committee constructed a canon and concomitantly several reports explaining and justifying the canon. The recurrent arguments were the 'intrinsic value' of such a canon but also a connection between the canon and nationhood. Since some people seemed to think that the committee had 'dissociated itself from the idea that the canon could have a positive effect on national feeling', it deemed it necessary to 'clarify and nuance' its stance on the connection between the canon and nationhood:

We think there is nothing wrong with a canon that strengthens a civilised form of Dutchness or even self-awareness [*zelfbewustzijn*] – as long as that feeling goes hand in hand with a thorough awareness [*doorleefd beseft*] of its relativity [*betrekkelijkheid*],

including knowledge of the dark sides of the historical narrative of the Netherlands (Commissie Ontwikkeling Nederlandse Canon 2007: 30).

The committee's 2006 report, for instance, argues that a canon meant for everybody should also be used by everybody. Like Wikipedia, the idea is that everybody can suggest side-branches to the themes picked by the committee, and these will be made available online. While contributions from the public will be edited, the committee has faith in the 'basic principle' of 'free canon compilation' (Commissie Ontwikkeling Nederlandse Canon 2006: 40). The report states that this way of 'dealing with the canon could be considered characteristic of the country' (Commissie Ontwikkeling Nederlandse Canon 2006: 41) for '(canonical) history teaches us that the Netherlands has often given free rein to freedom of speech.... In this sense, the canon as "wiki" is on a meta-level actually very Dutch' (Commissie Ontwikkeling Nederlandse Canon 2006: 41). This fragment not only foregrounds a particular element of Dutch history as a defining marker of Dutch identity but also suggests its historical continuity; Dutchness in the present is a re-enactment of Dutchness in the past. The wiki-principle implies, apart from inclusion, pluralism and egalitarianism first and foremost, a processual, dynamic, non-essentialist constitution of Dutchness.

Given this constructivist take on nationhood, it becomes understandable why and how historians struggle when asked to define the nation. As its 2006 report states: 'The canon can perhaps reflect the collective memory of a country, but never its identity' (Commissie Ontwikkeling Nederlandse Canon 2006: 23). When asked for clarification – 'Is an identity not constituted precisely by shared awareness of the past?' – the committee's chair Van Oostrom responds: "I don't think there is such a thing as 'the' national identity of a country. It is not feasible to fit everybody into the same pattern. However, indeed, a cultural and historical heritage is part of one's identity" (NRC, 16 October 2006).

In another interview, Van Oostrom is asked about issues of identity and is first questioned if it makes sense to talk about 'Dutch characteristics'. His response is cautious. Rather than directly answering in the affirmative, he begins by implying the self-evidence of Dutch characteristics:

Of course, there is something. What follows is a specification of what these Dutch characteristics consist of, again indirectly: there are "typical" Dutch things, such as a high degree of corporatism, or, simply said, the polder model. These foreigners do not make it up (NRC, 13 October 2007).

This prompted the following question from the interviewer: 'Does the Dutch identity exist after all?' Van Oostrom's answer is neither negative nor affirmative: 'Of course not in a massive sense' [*Natuurlijk niet in de massieve zin des words*]. He claims that there is indeed something specific to the Dutch (here called 'characteristics') but that these should not be equated with a 'pure, indivisible Dutch identity' that persists over time; nor should it be imposed on immigrants. The committee's chairman, as he seeks to avoid traits associated

with nationalism (such as a monolithic, static view on group identity), nevertheless tries to formulate Dutchness in more legitimate, cautious ways. A constructivist outlook is discernible here as well: Van Oostrom's clarification of Dutch characteristics (in contrast to those of the South-European hedonism or Anglosaxon competitiveness) refrains from presenting a plain, objectivist designation. Rather, Dutchness is dealt with by connecting it to perceptions ('ascribing') and epistemological doubt ('there is something'). If the underlying outlook is a constructivist one, it is no surprise that 'typical' is written with quotation marks, in order to make clear that the speaker is critically reflexive about the mechanism of national stereotypes that the term 'typical' is part of.

### Lightness

In his 2013 column *In de ernst ging het mis met het koningslied* [The king's song went wrong in its seriousness], publicist Harrie van Rooij discusses the public reception of the song produced to celebrate the coronation of the new Dutch king Willem-Alexander in 2013. The King's Song [*Koningslied*], composed by John Ewbank together with a large number of Dutch pop artists, received widespread criticism in the national media. In his column, Van Rooij writes that the 'discussion, satire and hate messages' (Van Rooij 2013) actually revealed a depth of consensus. Referring to the received opinion that the public's negative reception of the song was yet another sign of the crisis in Dutch national identity and sense of belonging, he asks: 'Has the ambition to unite the country through the king's song produced a counter-productive effect?' 'Are we a divided rather than a united nation?' (Van Rooij 2013) Before explaining why the negative reactions should be seen as an enactment of Dutchness rather than a lack thereof, Van Rooij distances himself from the voices criticising the song for its content and form. He instead argues that the problem does not lie in the song's strange use of language or evocation of melodrama, but in the way it was handled: with seriousness [*ernst*].

Van Rooij argues that whereas seriousness in popular music is generally not a problem (many Dutch are deeply touched by it), it becomes problematic when it is tied to national identity: seriousness connected with 'national feelings around the coronation is an explosive combination' (Van Rooij 2013). This proposition regarding the particular phenomenon of the King's song is inferred from Van Rooij's more general assumption about the Dutch national character: 'We are simply a carnivalesque people'. This statement on national character in turn defines what would be considered legitimate expressions of nationhood: 'If we want to express national feelings at all, it must be with a wink' [*Als we al een nationaal gevoel willen uitdrukken, dan uitsluitend met een knipoog*] (Van Rooij 2013). Van Rooij thus sees only two legitimate ways of expressing Dutchness: by not expressing it at all or by expressing it ironically (for example, by dressing up in fluorescent orange for matches of the national football team). In enacting Dutchness in this ironic, self-conscious

and exaggerated mode, there is, he stresses, ‘one thing which is prohibited: taking ourselves too seriously. No hand on the chest during the national anthem, no deep sentiments please. Authority and the nation are to be mocked frivolously’ (Van Rooij 2013).

Van Rooij’s commentary then returns to its initial topic: the song’s public, mainly negative, reception. He repeats: ‘What went wrong with the king’s song was the expected seriousness’ (Van Rooij 2013). But ‘we’ (the Dutch) ‘resist the grotesque national feelings which don’t allow placing oneself in perspective [*zelfrelativering*]’. Van Rooij asserts that the public reception of the song was more ‘Dutch than the song itself’ (Van Rooij 2013) [*Hollandser dan het lied zelf*]. By assuming the Dutch to be playful, ironic and suspicious of deep sentiments, he is able to reinterpret the public’s critical and satirical reception of the song as the very embodiment of Dutchness itself. It is precisely because the Dutch acted in an essentially Dutch way that there is no reason to interpret the criticism of the song as anti-Dutchness. At the end of his text, Van Rooij soothes his readers in a self-deprecating tone:

Everything is just fine. The song is still here, but what has been added to it is a satirical connotation. This is how we do it. Lesson learnt: maybe it is an awkward choice to want something like a King’s song (Van Rooij 2013).

What Van Rooij regards as the legitimate and characteristically Dutch way of enacting the nation ranges from an absence of national celebration to ironic, self-critical, emotionally superficial, i.e. ‘light’ modes of dealing with nationhood. In this sense, *anti-nationalist nationalism* is both a description of Dutchness and a prescription for how to be Dutch.

Another illustration of the lightness in anti-nationalist nationalism is the 2004 column *Over het misverstand dat de Nederlanders geen eigen identiteit hebben* [About the misconception that the Dutch don’t have an identity of their own], by sociologist Abram de Swaan. Here, he questions the idea that the Dutch do not have an identity. He argues that the Dutch do have a national identity – constituted, paradoxically, by self-abasement and the continuous trivialising of ‘its own history, society and culture’ (De Swaan 2004: 451). De Swaan places his analysis in an international context, leading him to conclude that the Dutch suffer not only from an inferiority complex but also, more importantly, that they are exceptional in their self-abasement. His column begins with the words:

The last people to ask about the Dutch identity are the Dutch. They make themselves smaller than they are, and then they actually think they are. No other nation would present itself to its European neighbours with a series of chaffing pieces that trivialize its own history, society and culture. This self-abasement is a widespread characteristic in Holland. Especially in the company of foreigners the Dutch tend to run their country down. By pretending to be less than they know they are, they prevent being belittled by other people. By distancing themselves from their fellow countrymen, they try to elevate themselves to the high level they place the foreigners on. I haven’t seen this

in any other Western nation. Collective self-exaltation is the most common tendency in the rest of the world, national self-abasement is a specifically Dutch trait (De Swaan 2004: 451).

Not only does De Swaan identify a typically Dutch trait (self-abasement), but in the enactment of this trait, he also observes how the nation still operates: 'In this self-reproach the Dutch already reveal an essential characteristic: they talk about "we" and "Holland" as a coherent entity. And so they are already in the process of identifying with their countrymen' (De Swaan 2004: 451). Following the general thesis of self-abasement as typically Dutch, De Swaan provides some examples, such as a lack of pride in one's military heroes: 'One thing is sure in retrospect... there was not a single Dutchman we can be proud of. The shame this evokes is also a national feeling, a "we-feeling"' (De Swaan 2004: 451). De Swaan's message is clear: Dutchness is still a relevant category for national identification, although it is primarily a negative one.

What is attributed to the group (Dutchness as anti-nationalism) is also textually enacted by De Swaan himself. The relationship between the author as the subject and Dutchness as the object of analysis is ambivalent. At times, De Swaan speaks about the Dutch as an external observer; on other occasions, he speaks as a Dutchman. The ambivalence is palpable in his switching between the first person ('we' and 'our history') and the third person ('they' and 'the Dutch'). De Swaan enacts his Dutchness as anti-nationalism in various ways. First, he partly shares in the collective and individual self-abasement. Second, the way he enacts what is apparently un-Dutch (positive self-images and pride) reaffirms notions of Dutchness as anti-nationalism: with moderation, irony and critical distance. In other words, De Swaan's stance coincides with how he characterises the Dutch as a collectivity. His descriptions of the country and its people – a 'prudish people', 'a decent and industrious, middling country', 'sensible, peace-loving and entirely unaccustomed to warfare' (De Swaan 2004: 452) – mirror those characteristics that he positively evaluates as typically Dutch. One example is his ironic evocation of pride:

Like a baron von Münchhausen, Holland sucked itself out of the sea with its own pumps. I am proud of that, even if all I ever did was use a toy scoop to build little dikes against the flood in the sand on the beach (De Swaan 2004: 452).

Both the moderately positive characterisation of the country and his restrained pride in it are summed up in his closing sentences: *The Netherlands is a democracy under the rule of law and the people there are peaceful, humane and grumpy. ... In addition to all my idiosyncrasies I am also a Dutchman. And quite content to be* (De Swaan 2004: 452). In other words, the ambivalence in De Swaan's simultaneously internal and external perspectives on the nation, his positive and negative evaluations, should not be seen as contradictions but as the very aspects that together produce Dutchness as anti-nationalism.

## Essentialism

The first example of essentialism, the third characteristic of anti-nationalist nationalism, comes from the field of popular historiography and the author Herman Pleij, who is famous for his eloquent, enthusiastic, entertaining and understandable spoken and written depictions of Dutchness. In his latest book *Moet kunnen. Op zoek naar een Nederlandse identiteit*. (2014) [Can do. In search of a Dutch identity], he aims to present Dutch mentalities throughout the centuries. These include, among others, pluralism, individualism, egalitarianism, pragmatism, tolerance, ordinariness, honesty, solemnity, lack of imagination, frugality and mediocracy.

His presentation of centuries old and still persistent characteristics of the Dutch should be understood in the light of two stances that he writes against: discontinuity and nationalism. First, he opposes voices that claim that the Netherlands has changed recently, for example, into the pinnacle of nationalism. Second, he explicitly distances himself scientifically and politically from nationalism. He displays an awareness of the manipulation of history and the misleading functioning of stereotypes. Moreover, he explicitly rejects the naturalisation of terms such as ‘national character’ and the political consequences of nationalist ideologies (exclusion, chauvinism and violence). In a nuanced fashion, he warns the reader that a dismissing of racial nationalism is not enough, as in the era of ‘post-racial national thought’, ‘quests for some commonality’ (Pleij 2015: 165) also remain dangerous.

Moreover, he adds that this is not the whole picture. Whereas there are no natural national characteristics, ‘collective mentalities [...] attributed to or cherished by small and large communities’ (Pleij 2015: 36) do exist. However, it’s not only the (self)images but also patterns of behaviour and the institutional makeup of the country that Pleij foregrounds. Subjective mentalities are ‘never merely invented’ (Pleij 2015: 61). Pleij argues that they came into being in the nation’s eternal struggle against the water, a well-known trope in Dutch national self-images. This historical objectification of national characteristics also becomes evident in the mode of argumentation to convey the message of continuity. The rhetorical pattern always begins with the given characteristic, followed by multiple historical examples presented as the same, and concludes with a statement suggesting an a-historical Dutch essence, an a-temporal truth. For example, with respect to the political culture of deliberation, he writes ‘that is how we do it since the earliest Batavians’ (Pleij 2015: 169), or regarding pragmatism as an explanation of Dutch economic success he writes: ‘God or devil, depending on the moment. That is how the Dutch have been for centuries. And they did well’ (Pleij 2015: 164). In other words, Pleij evokes a-historical national essences precisely by foregrounding their presence in various moments in history. It is historicisation in service of essentialism, a historical proof of an a-historical essence.

So far, Pleij’s anti-nationalist nationalism expresses itself through distancing itself from nationalist ontology and politics (anti-nationalism) on the one

hand and by providing essentialist traits of the Dutch (nationalism) on the other hand. However, he focuses on and enacts anti-nationalist nationalism more specifically. One of the essential Dutch traits is the *absence* of the type of nationalism that can be found in other countries. Pleij develops this argument by pointing out that the Dutch have never had national holidays or military parades in which the nation and its heroes are chauvinistically celebrated. Another way of enacting anti-nationalist nationalism is through an explicit plea for ‘positive nationalism’ (Pleij 2015: 28), again made possible by careful boundary work done to differentiate between bad foreign nationalism and good, Dutch nationalism. The latter is rendered positive because it is de-substantialised from its national substance.

The national is rendered acceptable because it is *displaced*: what might seem national at first glance due to the symbols (such as the colour orange during soccer games) is not about the national as such. Beneath the national appearance, it is rather about something else, such as trade, family, religion, operating at a supra- and/or sub-national level but using national symbols without celebrating the national. In his view:

In the Netherlands, nationalism takes rather the form of celebration of community at larger and smaller scales [than the national, JKL & JWD]. In fact, this means that it is about something else. Sincere celebration of the state has always been weak due to pillarization which emphasised more religious rather than national identity (Pleij 2015: 171–2).

Similarly, he argues that while the usage of the national symbol orange may appear nationalistic, it is actually not. In Pleij’s words:

The choice for the colour orange at many rituals of belonging [*samenhorigheidsrituelen*] seems to prove the opposite, yet this is not the case. *Oranje* [Orange] is borrowed, as it were, from the Royal House and symbolises cohesion at all levels (Pleij 2015: 172).

Pleij’s book is not only about Dutchness, but it is also an enactment of it: he positively evaluates those traits that he attributes to the Dutch, even to the point of self-congratulation; he also often acts ironically; and, he explicitly identifies with his topic, evinced by his usage of the first plural (‘we’ and ‘our’).

A more political expression of essentialism is a text by the former chairman of the Green-Left Party, Herman Meijer. His 2011 essay *Vrijzinnig nationalisme* [Progressive nationalism] begins with a question: ‘What does it mean when people *love their country* [*vaderlandsliefde*, italics in original]?’ After demystifying uncritical, top-down nationalism, Meijer continues to propose interpretations of patriotism [*vaderslandsliefde*] that may be acceptable to his liberal-leftist readership: a nation as a community of shared fate where patriotism and internationalism are not mutually exclusive. Progressives should deal with nationhood not only because politics is still a national affair but also because factually and ideologically problematic interpretations of Dutchness

by right-wing populists have the potential to poison the country's present and future. Elsewhere in the same text, Meijer reformulates the necessity for a left-liberal conception of Dutchness:

We have learned that the 'left' is weak against any form of nationalism, especially when it tends to counter it with cosmopolitanism. When the left lacks its own story, it disregards the national context's particularity, hence it disconnects from the experience of citizens for whom 'un-Dutch' is not simply a positive quality (as, curiously, intellectuals in this country can call something 'un-Dutch' superb) (Meijer 2011: 56).

Here, a narrative about the nation appropriated by left-liberals is justified by means of the very opposition that is frequently employed by his political adversaries (right-wing populists): Dutch citizens versus self-hating elites. For Meijer, the challenges are how to be left-liberal without being anti-national and how to be national without sliding into anti-internationalism. He emphasises that left-liberals have the (historical) means to construct such a narrative, not a national history but a deliberately political narrative with a left-liberal outlook.

Although there is not such a thing as a 'pure [*raszuivere*] Dutchman' (Meijer 2011: 56), and 'We are not one and we never will be' (Meijer 2011: 56), there is a central concept around which the progressive-left can and should re-appropriate Dutch nationhood: the notion of 'progress' – or more precisely, the 'moral progress [*zedelijke vooruitgang*]' embodied in the nation's social and political values. The centrality of progress in the historicised image of Dutchness not only serves as a framework to understand Dutchness in the present but also as a political tool for the progressive appropriation of national identity. Progress is the historical constant, retroactively rendered central in order to conserve [*vasthouden*] it for the future. In the section 'Historical elements', Meijer summarises the historical accomplishments of the progressive nation: 'the water tamed', 'the religious war surmounted', 'the republic proclaimed', 'slavery abolished', 'cured from colonialism', 'the European project founded', 'successful in commerce, science, industry and art', 'shelter for intellectuals' and 'marked by emancipation'. For the Netherlands 'marked by emancipation', 'liberation' [*bevrijding*] is the central leitmotif:

*Marked by emancipation.* The twentieth century started with the emancipation of Catholics, Calvinists, and the working class, and it ended with the emancipation of women and gays. In between those periods, there was the occupation, the resistance and de-pillarization. Liberation is the key term here. Though the sixties and the seventies have recently been approached sceptically, one must conclude they reaped what had been sowed earlier. The progressive policy and legislation on issues such as abortion, euthanasia, soft drugs, and homosexuality can be attributed to the struggle of minorities. However, they have been accepted now almost across the entire political spectrum. These achievements can be understood in terms of our best tradition of socially responsible self-determination [*zelfbeschikking*] (Meijer 2011: 64).

The above excerpt is illustrative of what leftist nationalism stands for. First, 'liberation' revolves around stereotypical issues such as the regulation of life,

drugs and, most importantly, gender and sexuality. Second, liberation (understood as self-determination) is assumed to be the red thread running through Dutch history. Third, what began as a struggle of the few has become the nationally accepted stance. Fourth, emancipation has been completed.

These historical traits of Dutch culture in the guise of propositions are self-congratulatory in a very particular way, going hand in hand with, and even emanating from, self-criticism. It is through the very inclusion of self-criticism that the historicisation of Dutchness as progress becomes possible. In the section on the religious wars between Catholics and Protestants, the overcoming of the nation's internal divisions is presented as a national accomplishment at once downplaying the historical significance of religious animosities and presenting the Netherlands as exceptionally liberal: 'Nobody has anything to teach us regarding freedom of religion since the Union of Utrecht' (Meijer 2011: 60). The section 'Cured from Colonialism' strikes a similar note; it claims that 'a bad conscience is a conscience' (Meijer 2011: 58) and that the Netherlands has evolved from a colonial power to a strong proponent of national sovereignty. Acknowledging the 'negative' in its national history adds to the nation's superiority precisely because slavery and colonialism have been transcended. The progressive self-image thus banks on acknowledging the darker elements of the national past – the very opposite of what is associated with nationalism. Dutch patriotism and national pride on the one hand, and progressiveness and openness towards the world on the other, presuppose and emanate from each other. Those who are proud of the Netherlands should act in accordance with this historically persistent, progressive Dutchness.

In sum, Meijer's discourse promotes a leftist appropriation of Dutchness by interpreting it through the prism of moral progress. His final paragraph illustrates his antagonism to right-wing nationalism, his support for a harmonious fusion of the national and the international and his evocation of anti-nationalist nationalism – all wrapped in the language of nativism:

This country is not our property. But it is our place, where we are at home. Whether we were born here or migrated here, we know its limitations and we know its space. We will not acclaim or brag about it, but we will not have the possibilities for a good life, a vibrant culture and encountering others taken away from us. When we experience times of closeness [*benauwdheid*] and self-confinement [*zelfopsluiting*], we remind ourselves of our ancestors who understood that opportunities were to be sought in openness, faith, and cooperation across borders (Meijer 2011: 59).

## Conclusion

We showed how the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' nationalism played out among progressive intellectuals in the Netherlands in the past decade, constituting a specific and historically persistent trope of Dutchness we coined *anti-nationalist nationalism*. This self-image is enacted in various contexts through various themes, ranging from relatively non-political, 'banal' (Billig 1995)

thematizations of Dutchness to explicit political positioning and state policies. In a political climate in which nationalist chauvinism, right-wing populism and assimilationist policies are common features, this historically persistent but often informal self-image gained more importance, as it became a way for progressives to position themselves vis-à-vis their increasingly neo-nationalist context by defending and enacting an alternative conception of nationhood. Where anti-nationalism was seen as a problem by neo-nationalists, it has been affirmatively appropriated by progressive voices without ever slipping into total dismissal or the relativisation of nationhood. Where others have pointed to the importance of anti-nationalism for Dutch self-images more generally, our aim was to scrutinise this rather paradoxical notion in its own, not only as a politicised but also as an informal, banal form of nationalism. More specifically, anti-nationalist nationalism can be dissected into its three constitutive dimensions: constructivism, lightness and essentialism. They all involve a complex negotiation, a double gesture: rejecting the 'bad' nationalism and embracing the 'good' one, the latter seen as typically Dutch.

The *constructivist* dimension entails an active, performative rejection of fixed notions of nationhood à la Renan, to be replaced by a mix of subjectivist (about images and identifications instead of race or character) and procedural conceptions of nationhood. *Lightness* involves a rejection of an emotionally deep, chauvinistic, serious involvement with the nation, vis-à-vis a self-relativising, playful, emotionally superficial and ironic relationship with nationhood, described, prescribed and enacted as typically Dutch. The third dimension is *essentialism*, which means that certain characteristics are presented as typically Dutch in general, trans-historical terms, implying that the Dutch have always been that way.

This case problematizes the deeply ingrained distinction in nationalism studies that separates the cultural ('ethnic') and the political ('civic'). As we have shown, the alternative to 'bad' *ethnic* nationalism is not a *political* conception of nationhood, as elaborated by many authors in other countries. In the Dutch case, progressive authors propose a cultural alternative. Anti-nationalist nationalism entails descriptions, prescriptions and enactments of Dutchness that refer to how the Dutch *people* and/or *culture* (beliefs, perceptions, identifications, habits and tastes) are. Dutchness refers primarily to the Dutch as a group of people with distinctive cultural characteristics, instead of to the principles or the organisation of the Dutch state. As far as political notions are mentioned at all between the left and the right, they tend to slip into the cultural register either in the form of the political *culture* or characteristics of the Dutch *people*.

How does the anti-nationalistic self-image relate to the broader national imageries in the first decade after 2000? Contrary to what might seem the case at first glance based on the progressives' explicit distancing from neo-nationalists, the similarities between their respective general ideas about nationhood are crucial here. The fundamental self-image of a progressive, modern, plural nation (Duyvendak 2011) proved to be resilient not only across time (before and

after 2000) but also across the political spectrum (among the left and right). The synchronic and diachronic consistency of national imageries in the Netherlands is well summarised by Van Reekum:

Far from a break with the past and a *return* of nationalism, the more and more ostentatious equation of Dutchness and citizenship in public discourse is a continuation of an already long-established repertoire. Protagonists of 'new' nationalist movements, such as Pim Fortuyn or Geert Wilders, have invented more explicit, demanding and abrasive ways of enacting that repertoire, to be sure. In no sense, however, do they break with the notion that the Dutch are exceptionally civic, open, tolerant, culturally progressive and should be proud of their anti-collectivism. It is precisely this repertoire that helps them to differentiate between Dutch and foreign, in particular, Islamic, culture. Their enactments of Dutchness are not nationalistic reactions to a weakly nationalistic status quo but creative and provocative innovations of a well-established and widely used repertoire of nationalism (Van Reekum 2012: 594).

Of course, this is not to say that there are no differences at all. Since there is widespread agreement on the Dutch self-image as modern and progressive, political and intellectual differences revolve around other issues. For example, a contested issue is whether national identity should be defined, enforced or imposed by the state (cf. Van Reekum and Duyvendak 2012). More generally, the differences between various imageries of Dutchness and Dutch nationhood lie not in the *substance* of Dutchness (progressiveness, pluralism, tolerance etc.) but in its *form*, i.e. the modes and degrees of experiencing, expressing, enacting and enforcing Dutchness.

The Dutch context in general and specifically the progressive discourse challenge assumptions in nationalism studies beyond the opposition between the 'good' civic and the 'bad' ethnic type. It also problematises the distinction between the constructivist, anti-nationalist scholar on the one hand, and the essentialist, exclusionary, primordialist nationalist on the other. For sure, the people we study sometimes employ a constructivist outlook, using political, ontological, historical, conceptual arguments and even irony to deconstruct nationalism. But what if they themselves claim that 'tradition is invented' and 'imagined', enacting their alleged national culture with this very claim? As scholars of nationalism, we need to reconsider our scholarly sensibility to be able to grasp these paradoxical and subtle enactments of national identity. Although it is still crucial to de-naturalise, critique and unmask national imageries by showing how and arguing that they are contingent power constructions, this is not enough. For instance, it is important to acknowledge the possibility that a constructivist or even postmodern outlook is not necessarily at odds with national essentialism or chauvinism. We should take paradoxes seriously and try to understand them, rather than explain them away. In general, people are *both* essentialist believers *and* sceptical, postmodern constructivists. Van de Port (2011), for example, wrote that 'camp' reveals the artificiality of man-made orders alongside desires for a natural truth beyond or beneath such orders.<sup>3</sup> By focusing on and taking seriously the paradoxical and counter-intuitive manifestations of national identities, we can come to recognise the repellent and appreciate the advantageous effects of national imageries.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Scheffer is not the only social democrat to have adopted this image politically exploited by the right. In 2015, the former social-democratic minister of finance Wouter Bos wrote two apologetic columns in a daily newspaper that, in contrast to Germany and France, the Netherlands lack its own national identity.
- 2 For a discussion on the historical canon, see Grever et al 2006; Grever & Stuurman 2007.
- 3 In Van de Port's words: 'And yet, camp's constant attempts to reveal that the natural itself is an invention, and thus cannot provide identities with 'a substantial, stabilizing core' [...] can never be equated with mere cynicism or irony. For camp's declaration that fake is the greater truth never mitigates a sentimental yearning for that which is 'naturally' true, and fosters a keenness to register possible signs of that truth'. (2011: 168).

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