

12 The Flexibility of Viscosity: New Social Movements in a Comparative Perspective

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12.1 Introduction

As explained in the introduction of this volume, a distinction may be made between internal and external state-structures. The internal state-structure concerns the institutionalised relation between various tiers of government and (administrative) bodies, whereas the external structure comprises the relationship between state and society. This chapter will deal with the latter relationship: between the government on the one hand, and civil society and social movements on the other. In the introduction it was pointed out that this relationship has two aspects, as the state is characterised by an input and an output structure. The archetypal 'viscous' state is typically marked by a weak output-structure (i.e. the implementation of administrative policy into areas of society leaves something to be desired), which is possibly caused by an open input-structure (i.e. the government is open to a variety of often also contradictory influences and input from society). Thus, in the present criticism of the 'viscosity' of the Dutch culture of government, the sound is heard that it all takes so much time before decisions are arrived at, as everybody may participate in the discussion endlessly.

It is precisely the openness on the input side which seems to arouse the annoyance of energetic administrators who desire to see much output. They do not get to perform their administrative jobs since output is felt to be minimal due to overwhelming input. Active citizens are only appreciated on the proviso that they do not frustrate political ambitions. And, while the belief in the 'malleability of society' may officially have been denounced by politics, the politicians themselves still harbour their aspirations – naturally, as that is precisely why they went into politics. They still desire to be decisive.

Moreover, the criticism of politics' 'malleability ambitions', which dominated Dutch politics in the 1980s of the last century, slowly seems to be out-voiced by the criticism of sluggish procedures, caused by too much input from the side of the people.

In order more closely to scrutinise the relationship between input and output, I will dwell on the development and the influence of new political actors in four West-European countries; in fact New Social Movements (NSMs),¹ such as the environmental, the peace, and the squatting movements, and the women's and gay rights movements. On the basis of the internationally varied developments of these new movements, I will analyse to what extent the often derogatorily termed 'viscous' Dutch-system provides more or less opportunities for new movements to be heard on the input side, and to what degree this relative openness affects the policies' decisiveness.

In the conclusion of the chapter, I will substantiate the proposition that the sluggishness on the input side of a viscous state should be accepted as it creates a situation in which policy (i.e. the output side) is arrived at democratically and with broad support. This conclusion concurs with what others, such as Putnam (1993) have stated on the importance of a 'civic culture' for the effectiveness of policy.

The theoretical conclusion which may be drawn from this chapter, is that the criticism of viscosity (i.e. the criticism that the input side of politics should not be too 'open' if government is to remain decisive) is caught inside a zero-sum interpretation of the relationship between state and society. By a description of the political situation of the Netherlands, I will illustrate how it is a misconception to assume that the civil society is to keep quiet in order for the government to rule decisively and effectively. The criticism of viscosity has to be replaced by what I would refer to as a relational conceptualisation of the relationship between state and society.

12.2 Malleability and Viscosity

Dutch post-war politics were directed at reconstructing the Netherlands, i.e. 'making' or (re)structuring society. This did not involve only the country's physical infrastructure. People's mentality too needed much work. 'Unsociability' was challenged (Dercksen and Verplanke, 1987), and 'immorality' dealt with. The post-war decades were the heyday of the 'malleable society'

(Duyvendak, 1999). This came to the fore when in the second half of the 1970s the 'malleability ambitions' suddenly ran into flak (Van Gunsteren, 1976). The left-wing political parties (PvdA, D66, and PPR) especially took the brunt of the attack. These parties were retrospectively blamed for the fact that, ever since the 'Den Uyl' government, which was dominated by progressives, came into power, they had advocated the view that society was 'malleable' (Kalma, 1982). Of all parties, liberal-conservatives and Christian Democrats, who as no others had 'made' pre-war and post-war Dutch society (Bussemaker, 1997), suggested that a new phenomenon had occurred in that the progressive parties harboured exaggerated political ambitions. Left-wing politicians were exposed as naive dreamers who believed in a better human being and a better world.

For that matter, it is questionable whether the progressive parties in the seventies indeed were so much more ambitious than the previous governments, in which the left-wing parties had been represented much less prominently. Did the Den Uyl government constitute a breach with the tradition of the post-war 'reconstruction governments'? The contrary proves to be the case (De Haan, 1993). The Den Uyl Government was even moderate in its malleability aspirations, compared to the post-war period during which the Netherlands was reconstructed top-down. Not only had income politics been 'lead' centrally for several decades (Van Bottenburg, 1995), but also, simultaneously and quite unabashedly, the unsociability had been fought and the maladjusted had been re-educated. In fact, Den Uyl did not embody the beginning but the end of a period in time in which 'paternalistic politics' were quite common (Duyvendak, 1996, 1999). It is history's irony that precisely the liberal-conservatives and Christian Democrats rose to make themselves the voice of emancipated civilians desiring to wrestle themselves free from such paternalism.²

Be that as it may, since the 1960s, active citizens have made it difficult for politicians to formulate and implement top-down policy. Thus, it need not be surprising that since the wave of democratisation, a second criticism of Dutch administrative relationships has developed. In this case, the blame does not fall on ambitious progressive parties and their ideals of political engineering, but to the citizens who are blamed for rendering the decision making process 'viscous'. The same active citizens who had earlier been 'deployed' in a struggle against all too energetic, paternalistic 'leftish' projects, are now urged to quiet down a bit. How else might a high-speed railway track, a second national airport, or any other large infrastructure project ever be realised? These days, an increasing number of Dutch

politicians find themselves looking abroad with all but unveiled envy. As is the case, they are of the opinion that, in terms of decisiveness, the Netherlands compares poorly with more centralistically organised countries like France and England, where parties, once they have managed to obtain administrative power, may simply transform their ideas into policy.

It is interesting to note that this criticism of viscosity, too, is voiced mostly by politicians of right-wing political parties. The same politicians who attack the ambitions of right-wing malleability, at the same time complain about the viscosity of the decision-making process and the ensuing administrative lack of effectiveness and decisiveness. Left-wing decisiveness for the sake of social change apparently is something quite different from right-wing aspirations of social structuring. However, it would be mistaken to suggest that only conservative politicians complain about the government's lack of effectiveness. Many Social-democrats too, utter the same complaint now that they have been in the driver's seat of politics for an extended period of time. Often this concerns politicians who are of the opinion that the administrative primacy of politics is endangered when too much leeway is awarded to all kinds of interest groups and social movements, groups with whom they themselves often used to identify. In fact, they still desire to 'make' society top-down, albeit the ambition to really reform society has disappeared in most of them.

Where the criticism of malleability days seem to be numbered, also because the last 'purple' governments (of the 'blue' Liberal-conservatives and the 'red' Social-democrats) certainly have revealed no less ambition to re-arrange the Netherlands than the earlier mentioned most progressive Dutch government since 1945, the Den Uyl government, the 'viscosity criticism' appears to gain strength. In this criticism, the openness on the input side of the political system is directly linked with the state's lack of drive on the output side. Whoever wants a more decisive government, according to the argument, will have to curb the openness of the political system. In order to examine this connection between input and output more precisely, I wish to investigate what exactly an 'open' political system implies. To this end, I will investigate when and why (new) actors in various political systems are, or are not as the case may be, given freedom of movement. Subsequently, we will address the question as to how this openness affects the states' capacity to act in implementing its formulated policy.

12.3 The Political Opportunities for Participation

One way in which the openness of a political system may be examined is by checking which opportunities to be heard 'newcomers' enjoy. In political science, some questions among many addressed in the research of 'New Social Movements' (NSM's), are how such new movements were able to rapidly develop in certain countries and why they found a large audience and managed to produce results, while in other countries the political system remained closed and new movements were limited to playing their roles in the margins of political life. Why in some countries political parties, from the outset, adopt new issues, while in other countries politicians effectively manage to block renewal from being entered onto the political agenda?

Research into new social movements in France (Duyvendak, 1995) Germany (Koopmans, 1995), Switzerland and the Netherlands (Duyvendak et al., 1992; Kriesi et al., 1995) has shown that opportunities for new movements have little to do with a nation's character or the temperament of its politicians. Whether new social movements succeed in getting their issues onto the political and public agendas is primarily determined by four factors: (1) the acuteness and the weight of the old political cleavages (antagonisms), (2) the political structure, (3) the political culture, and (4) a country's party-political power configuration.

Cleavages

In a country such as France, where the class struggle is still being intensely fought, where the outcome of the school controversy (e.g. over the funding of religious or state schools) is yet to be determined, and where the relations between the administrative centre vis-à-vis the various districts are tense, there new movements attempting to push themselves into the political arena on their own accord are faced with a larger task than they would be in a country where the old conflicts have been 'pacified' (Kriesi and Duyvendak, 1995). In France, new political issues needed to be formulated within the discourse of the pre-existing dominant conflicts. For example, feminists have been enslaved to the social-economic struggle by speaking of women in terms of "pearls in the class war". Moreover, in order to get Green-themes on the political agenda, environmental activists in France attempted to hitch onto the 'small scale' discourse of regional nationalists (in Brittany, the Basque Province, and Occitania).

New issues which, due to international diffusion, simultaneously demanded public and political attention in many countries in the 1960s and 1970s, are shown in extremely various degrees to have come to stay permanently in the political arena. As James Kennedy (1996) has shown, there was ample room for new issues in the Netherlands. Amongst other things, this was caused by the pacification of old conflicts and rapid secularisation. Furthermore, this room was even extended by the attitude of the authorities. The processes of transformation occurred with extreme velocity, as they were stimulated by the influence of the political elites in the Netherlands who not only were open to change, but preceded to bring change about. This explains why in the Netherlands, as compared to France, much more of the attention in politics became focussed on new issues.

Table 12.1 Percentage of unconventional actions of old and new social movements (1975–1989)³

	Netherlands	Germany	Switzerland	France
NSMs	65.4	73.2	61.0	36.1
Non-NSMs	34.6	26.8	39.0	63.9
n =	1319	2343	1215	2132

Whether the 'objective' room for new conflicts may permanently be taken by new actors depends on formal, structural features of the political system as well as on informal ones (political culture).

Political Structure

Why is the input side in some countries so restricted, and in others so open? Without being able to summarise the literature here on the open and closedness of political systems, i.e. the 'political opportunity structure' (Kitschelt, 1986; Kriesi et al., 1992; McAdam, 1982; McCarthy and Zald, 1977; Tarrow, 1994; Tilly, 1978), I wish to indicate a number of aspects that have been proven to have great influence on the opportunities to enter the political arena newcomers or new issues enjoy. Analyses have shown that, among other things, (vertically) the amount of (de)centralisation within the national

state, and (horizontally) the relationships between the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary are of great import.

Briefly, the presence of various actors or administrative tiers is beneficial to new movements, if only because divisiveness will more readily occur within and between the established parties in a situation as such. The electoral system is another important formal aspect as the established groups' openness to new issues is significantly (much) greater in a system with proportional representation and a low electoral threshold for new political parties, than in a system governed by majority rule where the winner takes all. The same beneficial effect for outsiders occurs through the availability of possible direct-democratic procedures such as referendums, people's initiatives, and the like.

Research shows that, despite the fact that the Netherlands, as a small country, is relatively centralised, the electoral system may certainly be characterised as 'open', in fact pre-eminently so. In the Netherlands, established parties simply must be open to new issues, because these will otherwise be introduced into the political arena by new parties (Koopmans and Duyvendak, 1991). That this openness of the political system in its turn affects the mobilising power of new movements is shown in Table 12.2.

Table 12.2 Participation in unconventional actions, in old and new movements in the period 1975–1989, in thousands per 1 million inhabitants

	Netherlands	Germany	Switzerland	France
NSMS	143	168	101	43
Non-NSMS	55	43	55	135
n =	1264	2229	1027	2076

Political Culture

From the 1960s, Dutch political culture, which had of old been characterised by the three C's, consultation, compromise, and consensus, was democratised (Daalder, 1995). Consultations and negotiations from then onward

were no longer restricted to the elite, as was the case in the paternalistic era, but extended themselves over countless citizens. This democratisation of the 'polder model' resulted in new relationships between citizens and government. Where before only the pinnacles of the civil society sat down at the political table, since the seventies the Netherlands have been mesmerised by hearings, representative advisory-councils, 'say', involvement, and other types of 'participation' (Veldboer, 1996).

Many politicians appear convinced that these innumerable consultations and the search for compromises do not lead to stagnation, but on the contrary, to flexible social relationships (Duyvendak, 1997b). Just as it did in the years of 'pillarisation', Dutch political-culture in its democratised form guarantees a cautious but continuous renewal. The pacifying effect of the Dutch model again especially catches the eye when compared to other countries. For example, the political process in France looks much more dynamic. Every so many years there is something closely resembling a revolution, and in the interim periods, tempers are known to run high. Paradoxically, in the end all this social movement results in stagnation. In fact, France shows a sort of very dynamic standstill, while in the Netherlands, there is a prudent progression. In France, there was (and is) little room for new social movements, also because the old identities (of class, religion, region, and nationality) are still alive and kicking.

This openness of Dutch culture is not only expressed in the innumerable advisory-boards and other institutions and procedures which are supposed to guarantee say and involvement. The facilitation of social movements by Dutch politics can also be shown by the subsidising of social movements, which from an international viewpoint occurs quite generously. Such subsidised opposition may well be viewed as a zenith of democracy, since the politically overpowering ones 'voluntarily' seem to realise what exactly the importance is of such countervailing powers. This is either because these counter-voices ensure democratic debate, or because they might timely make the administrators aware of the advantages or disadvantages of their plans and policies.

Table 12.3 clearly shows that the attitude of the authorities vis-à-vis the challengers of the political establishment does influence the various action strategies deployed by movements in various countries.

Table 12.3 The action repertoire of new social movements (in %)

	Netherlands	Germany	Switzerland	France
Conventional	25,3	29,7	37,9	18,1
Direct democracy	42,5	47,0	12,1	48,9
Demonstrative	23,2	13,4	35,6	14,4
Confrontational	4,8	5,0	6,4	3,8
Petty violence	4,3	5,0	5,9	14,2
Serious violence			2,2	
n =	1140	2513	1477	950

Legend:

conventional (e.g. legal procedure, lobbying, media actions);
 direct democracy (e.g. referendum, people's initiative);
 demonstrative (e.g. petitions, happenings, demonstrations);
 confrontational (e.g. boycotts, hunger strikes, illegal demonstrations);
 petty violence (e.g. vandalising of goods, theft, and the like);
 serious violence (e.g. attacks of persons, very violent demonstrations).

(For a more extensive treatment, see Duyvendak et al., 1992: 254 e.n.)

Power Configuration

Because of the open political structure and culture which are so characteristic of the Netherlands, the precise political power-configuration is of less importance to the space given certain newcomers than it is in countries with a system of majority rule, which therefore have either the left or the right in power. The political constellation in the Netherlands with its coalition governments aimed at consultation, compromise, and preferably consensus, explains one of Dutch politics' paradoxes. Although left-wing parties have not governed relatively much in the post-war period, in many areas the Netherlands has nonetheless become a prudently progressive country. Not only was Dutch politics 'permeable' to new social developments, but also energetically lead such developments along the right tracks.

Still, the phenomenon of a progressive country with little power for progressive political parties may also be understood quite differently. Thus, apparently politics does not steer any social developments but society renews itself, against the flux of politics as it were. And yet, it would seem a

lot remains to be said in favour of James Kennedy's previously stated proposition that it is precisely because the elites themselves have taken the lead in various processes of renewal, that the Netherlands has since long shown a controlled, yet energetic, dynamics. Whether it concerns the history of attitudes toward sexuality, or the emancipation of all kinds of minorities (Oosterhuis, 1992), time and again research shows that Dutch politics has provided emancipation and mobilisation by a stimulating environment.

12.4 The Coherence of Openness and Decisiveness

But how is this openness of politics vis-à-vis civil society finally related to its policy's decisiveness? Firstly, it follows from the large influence of the civil society that politicians experience serious competition in formulating their policies. To a certain degree, politics has a more modest role to play in the Netherlands than elsewhere, and most certainly so when compared to the powers enjoyed by politicians of governmental parties in for example France or England. On the other hand, the Dutch politicians who find themselves in the opposition are placed outside the ballpark to a lesser degree because the opposition parties are much less adversaries of the government's than they would be in countries with an electoral system in which winner takes all. Or, to put it differently, when listening carefully one may hear the voice of almost every political party in the choir of Dutch policy. This means that not just the 'external' but also the 'internal' openness is relatively large.⁴

This openness does not mean that Dutch politics produces less output, or that policy-making is run more slowly in the Netherlands. Indeed, from the point of view of content, the Netherlands maintains a policy different from France because new themes rapidly gain a firm foothold on the Dutch political agenda. However, despite all rhetoric about the total 'displacement of politics' (Bovens, 1995) parliamentary politics continue to play a decisive part in the final decision as to which policy will be implemented in both old and new areas. And certainly from the perspective of social movements, Dutch politics still have a centre as all eyes remain fixed on the seat of government in The Hague, or in non-national matters, on regional or even local representative bodies (Duyvendak, 1997c).

Moreover, the legitimacy of both Dutch politics in general and concrete measures of policy in particular (i.e. the output side) proves to be great, thanks to the open character of the input side. Not only does the trust

in Dutch politics remain undiminishedly high, there is also satisfaction about the political culture in which these measures are realised. In comparison to France, with its permanent worry of 'semi-revolutions', certainly the Netherlands may serve as a showpiece of civil obedience.

In practice, a politics of 'all or nothing', as is the case in systems of majority rule, also means that the undesirable consequences of policy cannot be discussed openly. Such political systems are not only characterised by a lack of external, but internal, openness as well. Because of this, politics runs great risks both literally and figuratively since politics have little 'learning capacity'. A telling example may be found in the French policy on nuclear energy. Not only is France the only country in the world to have completely carried out its entire planned nuclear-energy program, but also, out of fear that adversaries might otherwise benefit, there is an absolute silence about the whole and half accidents which have occurred in the last couple of years.

For a long time, the environmental movement was seen exclusively as a political enemy, and the state closed itself off completely to societal signals. The policy had to be implemented, even to that end if political adversaries had to be eliminated, as in fact happened when the Greenpeace vessel *Rainbow Warrior* was sunk. In a situation like this, the policy is indeed realised in the short run, but in the long run the legitimacy of the government drastically dwindles. Thus, a political culture develops in which matters are brought to a head. Enforced short-term successes are achieved, but lead to long-term stagnation. In countries with non-pacified cleavages, the political identities are often so set that ultimately politics' freedom of acting has become very restricted. In France, it is not just out of the blue that one still has to take a communist party and a communist trade union into account (Koopmans and Duyvendak, 1995).

From the recent revaluation of the polder model with its three C's, one might conclude that Dutch politics has learned from the French lesson. After recent governments, as part of a deliberate anti-viscosity campaign, had at first attempted to rid governmental relations of their 'viscosity', lately we are seeing that the (economic) success of the Netherlands is attributed precisely to good, pacified relationships, specifically between employees and employers. Proudly, the Prime Minister now relates how the Netherlands has experienced a tradition of consultation and mediation for decades, forgetting to add, of course, that he only recently still regarded the civil society as an obstacle to, rather than as a catalyst for dynamic development. After all, civil society was associated with corporatist structures, matters with which liberal market-thinkers would primarily have no desire to be

associated. However, the tide seems to be turning. Where the 'purple' government at first appeared to constitute one of the greatest threats ever to the continuity of Dutch consultation-politics, it has been rediscovered that an interweaving of the political and civil societies, instead of being an obstacle, constitutes a prerequisite for decisiveness.

To be clear: viscosity, in the sense of lengthy procedures, much consultation, subsidised opposition, and many opportunities for appeal, will to some indeed be a goal in itself. And if viscosity indeed decreases the output and restricts politics' decisiveness, even then, openness of the political system is desirable for considerations of democracy. However those too, who are of the opinion that politics particularly need to be efficient (must have a high output), may rest assured since viscosity also proves to be most efficient.

The French example of stagnant politics speaks volumes. When decisions are arrived at over the heads of those who might be involved, when citizens are not given the opportunity to enter issues into the political agenda, then an alienation develops between government and citizens with all the risks of radicalism and extremism, both left and right. Dutch politicians appear to be very well aware that viscosity may well at first slow down but finally accelerates political action, resulting in flexible societal-relations in which citizens experience themselves bound to a government that listens to them.

It is the velocity of a slow polder-landscape (Duyvendak, 1997b). Thus formulated, the days of viscosity as a term of abuse are numbered, with experience turning it into an endearing symbol of Dutch society's adhesiveness, characterising a political culture which, by means of its very viscous etiquette, produces social cohesion. Politics must above all not desire to be too French. Cherishing opposition is a sign of democratic power that ultimately also results in governmental effectiveness.

Notes

- 1 By the term 'new social movements' we understand the peace movement, the environmental movement, the anti-racism movement, the squatting movement, the women's movement, and the gay rights movement. The term 'old movements' denotes for example union, regional, and extreme-right mobilisation.
- 2 For an explanation of the question why specifically left-wing politicians received the reproach of harbouring 'malleability ambitions', see Duyvendak 1997a, 1999;

Duyvendak and De Haan, 1997a and 1997b; Schuyt 1993/1994; Schuyt and Taverne, 1995.

- 3 For an explanation and account of these data based on an intensive research of newspapers in four countries, see Koopmans in Kriesi et al., 1995.
- 4 Of course, these two 'opennesses' are connected. The fact that opposition parties, too, have (some) influence better enables social-movements for example, to penetrate the political agenda, and without having to mobilise forces massively or radically to that end. This also explains the extremely high membership of social-movement organisations in the Netherlands. Apparently there is faith in their voices being heard in politics, either by the government and/or by the opposition.