

A Welcoming We? Europe Day Utrecht 2023

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Just two figures for starters. Europe+ (i.e. incl. EU Norway and Switzerland, excl. UK) received 81.000 applications for asylum in February 2023. The Dutch government expects an influx of 70.000 asylum seekers in 2023. These are huge numbers. No wonder that people start asking questions: how many people can we accommodate? The Dutch ministers responsible for immigration and asylum have decided to leave this question aside for the time being, and concentrate on a different one: how can we keep control? This change of perspective is a feasible one. The populist statement 'The Netherlands are full' is grafted on a metaphor, the metaphor of a bucket overflowing, thus indicating a limit that may be exceeded by one more drop. But not all words indicating a limit ('full') are like that. To draw a somewhat weird analogy, at some point we may call a person 'bald'. But it makes no sense to link that to the number of hairs left on persons' heads that would justify us calling them 'bald'. In any case, for the person involved a different question is much more interesting: 'how do I, getting inevitably balder and balder, keep a more or less attractive profile?' Now the analogy suddenly becomes less weird. Though the government's question may be taken up in a variety of ways, one possible mode would be: how do we, the Netherlands, confronted by inevitable immigration, keep a more or less attractive profile? By the way, to do justice to the occasion of the 9th of May, in the remainder of this talk 'The Netherlands' is just a dummy for any EU Member State.

Now bald persons (no pun intended) have a whole set of tactics to exude their attractiveness, say from a toupee to a tattoo. So have Dutch citizens when it comes to refugees. Some prefer to do as if nothing is happening (the toupee tactic). They state that the Netherlands should remain 'Dutch' whatever this may mean. Some others prefer the tattoo tactic. They welcome everyone from any other corner of the world and invite them to carve a perennial mark into the Dutch body politic. This tactic we witness recently during the King's Day celebration in Rotterdam. The festive presence of the king himself was sufficient to remove the political sting from the multicultural society for just one day.

What then is this political sting? We talk a lot, these days, about inclusivity and diversity. But ultimately, what makes politics political is an act of self-inclusion. People grouping together start and continue to draw a line around themselves referring to themselves by pronouns like 'we', 'us' and 'ours'. Yes, this means that others are excluded without being heard. No, that is not just, not even if these lines are retraced every other day. Yes, this constitutes a 'we/they' divide. No, we cannot evade doing so, not even if these boundaries are porous and provisional. Yes, this injustice pervades the laws of our polity, even the rule of law itself. No, we cannot ban it out completely, not only because of events happening around us, but also because, ultimately, we are unable to fully grasp who we are ourselves in the first place. This is all inherent to what we call a political order. This line of self-inclusion is traced not only at the Schiphol immigration office but every time a politician, a journalist, an ordinary citizen uses the word 'we'. There is a lot of 'we-ing' going on, for instance, in every Friday night interview with the Dutch prime-minister.

A plea to get rid of the 'we/they' gap may meet with moral applause: politically, however, it is what our Flemish neighbours call 'dikke zever' (bullshit). Even this fine European anthem (which we may sing today, 'Europe Day') 'Alle Menschen werden Brüder' leaves open two incisive questions with regard to the gap: (a) who counts as a human being? And (b) should we not quickly learn to regard animals (and why not trees, rivers, mountains) as our brothers? Let me summarise this in a firm statement: politics is not applied morality, and morality is not the ultimate norm for politics. So, we should not reply to political questions by morals answers. Morality can only provide reasons to look for better political answers.

Remember the question. Not 'When is this country full?' But rather 'How do the Netherlands (or 'Europe') remain attractive?' Some policy makers seem to think that it is possible to make the Netherlands (or any other EU country) less attractive for refugees and more attractive for their own citizens in one fell swoop. This is a mistake. Being and remaining attractive entails looking at yourself through the eyes of others. A polity is as a roof promising shelter. The very idea of finding shelter is only conceivable from the vantage point of the outsider suffering the hardship of a hostile world, even for those who are already inside. And so, what makes The Netherlands or Europe attractive in the eyes of its own citizens will make it attractive in the eyes of refugees. And what European Member States will do to make themselves unattractive for refugees, will make them utterly unattractive for their own citizens, too. There is, thus, the quest for an attractive roof at both sides of the line. This, I submit, is at least the beginning of a genuinely political basis for a refugee policy.

But note, newcomers and natives alike, that this is a *political* roof. The roof rests on walls, on boundaries, even if there are windows, doors, and thresholds in these walls. The floor under the roof is a relatively secluded area, a we-area. As I said, politics cannot help starting out from self-inclusion, hence exclusion. Ordinary life as the Dutch live it, is an iterative and incisive joint action of drawing a line that constitutes a boundary with warning signs, barriers and guardians for you, refugees, status holders with a temporary or even a permanent residence permit, to take note of, to negotiate, to challenge, to cross. Crucially, however, this task of identifying, questioning and coping with such constitutive barriers is not only in the interest of newcomers. It is also vital for native residents enjoying full-blown citizenship as if it were a gift of nature. For citizenship is not a gift but the upshot of an appropriation, more or less successfully sustained by a contingent mix of luck, smartness, and violence. It will not last, as refugees know, unless we learn to look at this blind spot of ours, through the eyes of those we regard as 'others', 'outsiders', 'foreigners', 'strangers'. Let me point to two of such barriers, self-evident for most Dutch people and completely alienating for many refugees. And let us bear in mind: what is self-evident and constitutive is not, therefore, just; while, on the other hand, what is alienating is not, therefore, hostile.

The first barrier is this: Dutch society is based on what is sometimes called 'civil religion'. Not in the sense of a state religion like Anglicanism in the UK but in an altogether different sense, to wit 'Society comes first, religion second'. Society takes priority over religion, as if it were a religion in its own right. Religious natives you meet in The Netherlands will perhaps deny this in so many words. But look, what they practice is 'society first, religion second' (as the constitution obliges them to do). No wonder that some non-religious natives consider religion as an opinion; a truth claim that you may freely express, as long as you abide by the laws of the country; and freely practice or live by, as long as you remain in the private sphere

of your own temple. But of course, a religious faith is not an opinion in the hearts and minds of the faithful. For them, it is tied up with a sense of salvation, vocation, dedication to what, in the Christian tradition, St Augustin called a being more intimate to me than my innermost self. And yet, Dutch society requires residents, even temporary ones, to put what is most sacred to them second, and give pride of place to the secular law of society. Which is, ultimately, the principle of reciprocity of interests. A laudable principle indeed, were it not for the fact that it seems to picture society as a marketplace writ large.

Now to the second barrier. This reciprocity, this law of society takes a largely anonymous form. It is what a famous philosopher in Germany (Habermas) called a form of solidarity among strangers, i.e., among people who do not know each other and who, moreover, *prefer* not to get to know each other. Of course, also in Dutch society, if you have ambitions, it is important to know people. Networking, self-exposure, joining projects are key, here as everywhere. Yet, when it comes to this particular political artefact we call law, you better *not* count on family ties, personal friendships, traditional privileges, tit for that, and everything coming in their wake. In a sense, we prefer to take care for each other without caring for each other (in person). Not (not yet?) when it comes to real care giving, such as in health care, parenting, offering education or preserving cultural heritage. But we do take this attitude when it comes to the rule of law, which is the warrant of basic reciprocal care. This anonymity, too, is very hard to get used to as an outsider coming from a different culture, where you are nothing without parents, relatives, friends, ancestors, patrons and clients. We do acknowledge the moral meaning of these ties. But then morality does not take priority over law. For Dutch society, law is the intermediate, the interface, between politics and morality. A precious acquirement, I would say, this conception of law, were it not for the fact that it burdens the legal system with a task it can never accomplish, not to speak of the organized crime that anonymity tends to produce.

So, there you are, as a refugee or a former refugee, but also as a native, always wrestling with these two peculiarities of the Dutch 'we'. Society comes first, everything else, including religion, second. And law, the warrant of social order, is anonymous solidarity. Peculiarities, that are characteristic of this self-included 'we', though not, by the same token justified. You may challenge them, negotiate them, evade them. But you cannot afford to ignore them. Although they are in permanent change, they are not easily changed by planned action. They are in the habit of returning under new guises. They are tough, resilient, as asylum seekers are.