

REVIEWS:

## DENKEN IN EEN TIJD VAN SOCIALE HYPOCHONDRIE

**W. Schinkel**

**Klement 2007**

**517 pages, ISBN 978-90-8687-017-2.**

*Harm Dane\**

Willem Schinkel wrote an impressive study<sup>1</sup> about the integration debate in the Netherlands in the last ten years, the role sociologists play in that debate and their betrayal in doing so of their sociological duty. He is angry about the fact that with the demand to integrate migrants are consequently put outside 'society', although as citizens they actual belong to. They are caught in an impossible paradox. On the other hand he is angry that also the "normal" natives are caught in something named 'society', in which they have to be "normal". Sociologists never released themselves from the concept of society as a body, a persistent concept since Plato, but nevertheless an illusion.

In the last ten years, sociology has returned in the public debate. In the mass media there is a violent discussion about who "we" are, what "our" identity is, what shaped "our" culture. We talk about our shared values and norms we are accustomed to and which have to be defended against strange influences from other cultures. In the interaction between public opinion, politics and social science there has emerged a huge industry on monitoring those people among us, who come from another (non-western!) culture, on measuring their integration or their not (yet) being integrated. A complex network of social scientists, journalists, policymakers and politicians is creating the Dutch culture, our Dutch identity, with the history-events everyone should know about and a fixed set of values everyone has to obey. In this process of carving identity, sociologist play an important role by doing a lot of research to measure the degree of integration in Dutch culture of those arriving since the sixties from other cultures and their children and grand-children. And for the sake of objective empirical research these sociologists have to develop clear indicators about who does and who don't belong to the Dutch community. And in doing so they produce objective facts about our culture and what is alien to it. Sociologists are back on stage.

Does the above constitute a reason for a little euphoria among sociologists? On the contrary! This is the opinion of the sociologist Willem Schinkel is his double-study "*Denken in een tijd van sociale hypochondrie*" (Thinking in a time of

---

\* Dr. Harm G. Dane (1949) studied sociology and theology and wrote his theses "*Enlightment and Forgiveness; about Christian adult education*". He is study secretary of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands.

<sup>1</sup> See also: W. Schinkel, *De gedroomde samenleving*, Kampen: Klement 2008.

social hypochondria). This scientist from Erasmus University reproaches his colleagues in science to have become part of the social discourse and the public debate instead of being critical observers of what is going on in society, especially in the integration debate. And in doing so they have become part of a socio-political process and they reinforce instead of analysing the hidden powers in this process. In their 'scientific' practises they reproduce common sense, as their duty is to analyse it in its (hidden) functions, purposes and effects. On the one hand he deconstructs the knowledge production of sociologists in the integration debate since about 2000, but on the other hand, he is looking for the roots of sociological thinking since Plato as an explanation for the common sense opinion about society, not only in society, but also among social scientists. Therefore a double-study: about sociology as such and about society from the point of view of the integration debate. His main interest is the first point; the second point is the crowbar for the first.

Since Plato, all thinking about society has used the metaphor of the body to explain society. This metaphor can be used as a powerful image to make clear that society is an entity, consisting of a lot of interrelated parts, which - in a certain fixed hierarchy - cannot operate separately. The good functioning of the body is the result of the good interaction of all parts within the body. When the body gets ill, somewhere within the body there must be a dysfunctioning of one of the organs. Sociologists have the duty to make the "diagnosis of our time" (Mannheim), which is to look for the dysfunctioning elements within the body, so the politicians can take measures to re-establish the harmony and the good functioning of the whole body, the common interest.

As known, this metaphor has been a useful and effective weapon in hands of conservative elites of all times to denunciate opposite forces which tried to change society. But the body is not only threatened from within, there is also always the threat of bacteria and other alien elements, which try to get settled in the sane body and so to disturb the good functioning of it. And that is, according to Schinkel, the way in which the metaphor is used about the last ten years. With the introduction of the political use of the concept of "culture", common sense had a firm criterion for "the sane society", that is the society in which all people not only accept but more than that subscribe and internalise "our common Dutch culture". And all people from another "culture" can be treated as aliens, which can be forced to "integrate" in "our" culture. When they are integrated, they are no longer a danger for "our" Dutch society and its own culture. Therefore, it is necessary to know exactly what the 'cultural' background is of those who have social problems or causes problems of what kind so ever. This is the hidden assumption of the integration debate.

As mentioned before, Schinkel organises his critics following two lines. First he analyses the paradoxes and contradictions in the integration debate itself. He mentions four contradictions, which all have to do with the central

interest of the debate that is to define 'society' by identification of anything that is alien to 'society'. First, there is the de-individualising individualisation. Each migrant has the individual duty to integrate because he is part of a strange group of people. And whatever he as an individual tries to realise, he never succeeds in cutting the ropes with the group he belongs to. Another aspect of this de-individualising individuality is the transmission from being not integrated from one generation to another. The murderer of Van Gogh was a normal Dutch boy, born in The Netherlands, who visited Dutch schools, but he was "redefined" afterwards as a not-integrated child of migrants and so a migrant himself. The second point is the normative prescription of what 'our modern' society is in stead of describing what is happening among people. We are, so is repeated again and again, secularised and liberal and individualised, so everyone who does not fit in this prescription, does not belong to 'our' society, regardless whether a person has been born in this country or how long he lives here. In the third place, the integration-industry is only interested in the social contacts of migrants. All statistics indicate that the native Dutchmen have far fewer contacts outside their own group than migrants. Nevertheless the migrants are blamed for not integrating, though the natives appear to be much more isolated in their own group. Therefore, the natives (and that is point 4) have dispensation to integrate and are seen as not having an ethnicity. They appear in the statistics as white and neutral, but in fact they are the "normal" non-migrants, negatively defined as not having an ethnicity and not being non-modern. Their neutrality appears to be heavy loaded with morality. And every objective inquiry of sociologists reinforces this normative 'neutrality' instead of analysing it. So sociology itself has become, or still is part of the political struggle for 'identity' and 'nationality'. The pretension of the Enlightenment to educate people and to deliver them from hidden beliefs is sold by sociologists for a plate of lentil soup.

This betrayal by sociologists is, according to Schinkel, the result of a deep rooted theological residue in sociological thinking. Since Plato social philosophy is guided by the presupposition of the entity 'society' as a social living body. Once caught by this metaphor, it is likely to think of normality ("the sane society"; Fromm). Society has to have an order; although this order is not yet reached, there is the perspective, the eschaton of order. And once there must have been the original state of order 'society' is meant to. "Order" has the double function of normative past and prescriptive future. So the (ever) existing disorder of 'society' is not undermining the faith of the order that has been and/or should be. There is one problem, the mortality of society as a body. And because this mortality must be denied, there is the focus on illness and sanity that is typical for the hypochondriac. The fact that "culture" has become a political instead of anthropological concept<sup>2</sup> therefore is an indication for the state of disorientation among people. In our 'secularised' public sphere it is no longer possible to be oriented together to a

---

<sup>2</sup> See: S. Koens, *Het verlangen naar cultuur, Nederland en het einde van het geloof in een moderne politiek*; Amsterdam: Van Gennip 2008.

common end. The only perspective for society as a body is (economic) growth and every disturbance of the growth curve is seen as a serious threat to the well-being of the body. But growth is not an end in itself. Now “the end” can no longer offer a normative common orientation, it is necessary to orient to the past, that is the society and culture we supposed we ever had. The past is used as a construction for the healthcare of a sick body.

Of course, Schinkel is dealing with the question of a social theory without the leading concept of society. This is the other part of his double-study. On the shoulders of Niklas Luhmann and many others he pleads for an eidetic sociology, that is a sociology or social philosophy in utopia, the non-place between ‘within’ and ‘without’ ‘society’. The eidetic sociology refuses to be part of the public debate about “society”, because that would condemn sociology to a reduced scientific object. The study of Schinkel is a thorough plea for re-thinking sociology in the tradition and ideals of Enlightenment, so that it is able again to contribute to find a way out of the “*Selbstverschuldete Unmündigkeit*”, to leave behind the blindness of belief and suppositions. He is familiar with a lot of his predecessors in philosophy and social science and he is a grateful heir, not to copy his testators, but to use the inheritance for further steps to go.

I accept his invitation for further debate and proffer a small contribution. For Schinkel, the common use of the metaphor of society as a body is the effect of a persistent residue in philosophical and sociological thinking. But could it be possible that until recent times there has always been a “material” base for this thinking, being the fact that there has always been a common transcendent idea in and about ‘society’? This transcendent idea was not eliminated by the beheading of Louis XVI. Marcel Gauchet<sup>3</sup> argues that despite the secularisation in the public sphere, until recent years there has been an implicit and hidden common transcendent assumption, despite the vast agreement, that the public sphere is neutral. There was really a theological residue in public sphere until the seventies despite all ‘rational’ denial. Western democracy was seen as forum, in which the public debate would lead us sooner or later to the common interest based on the human rationality. This indeed transcendent idea has vanished in the last decades. Democracy has become a market on which salesmen try to find as many customers as possible for their product. With this shift, the last reminiscent of transcendence disappeared from the social life. This has nothing to do with the recent overwhelming interest in religion among people. As Gauchet states: this return to religion by people does not mean in any way the comeback of religion in public sphere. We have to face a profound change in the fundament of western democracies and this is hardly seen because “we” think for so many years that we live in a secularised public sphere in which religion does not have any fundamental role to play.

---

<sup>3</sup> M. Gauchet, *Religie in de democratie, het traject van laïciteit*, Amsterdam: SUN 2006.

If Gauchet is right, and I believe that he is, sociologists do not “simply” have to fight against a persistent remnant in social philosophy, they have to face an interesting paradox. On the one hand, the public interaction had become more secularised because the last anchorage of a common “we” has vanished. On the other hand, there is the renewed reinforcement of the theological concept of society as a whole body with the political use of the concept of culture. If this is true, the last development could be explained as an effect of the first one. In that case, we need not to be hopeless. A small next step in the Enlightenment-process has been made. But again we have to deal with “the fear of freedom”.

---

*- The Amsterdam Law Forum is an open access initiative supported by the VU University Library -*

