

REVIEWS:

TUSSEN ONDERDANEN, RIJSGENOTEN EN NEDERLANDERS: NEDERLANDSE POLITICI OVER BURGERS UIT OOST & WEST EN NEDERLAND 1945-2005

G. Jones,
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*Dienke Hondius**

This is an original and thorough study investigating and analysing the discourse of Dutch politicians about postcolonial migrants and citizens coming from the former Dutch colonies, in particular Indonesia, Surinam and the Dutch Antilles, from 1945 to 2005. Jones' intention is, as he states, to "anthropologise the Dutch political class during those moments when it reflects about 'subjects' and 'overseas citizens'" of the Dutch empire. Dutch politicians position themselves towards the decolonisation after the Second World War, postcolonial migration, as well as towards 'the Dutch community' and society. Dutch scholars about citizenship theories have so far not looked thoroughly at the position of postcolonial citizens, which justifies the focus of this study. Postcolonial citizens vary in status, in visibility, in how they are watched or overlooked, in whether and when they become the focus of attention or remain unmentioned, and this variation is historical as well as political. A particular group of postcolonial citizens can suddenly find itself at the centre of a certain 'issue', which provokes a new phase in the production of the discourse, but this discourse can equally suddenly disappear. Inclusion and exclusion are key terms here. Jones regards "the political discourses on nationality, admission, civic integration and integration as techniques of inclusion into and/or exclusion from Dutch society". Politicians, but also other influential groups, such as journalists, and specific organisations have a crucial role in this process. They connect or disconnect, and demarcate borders between "the Dutch imagined community and the Dutch legal community". Jones shows convincingly that exclusion and inclusion can follow one another in quick succession: for some time one group is accepted, after which they are excluded and another group becomes accepted. This has been a process traceable from the 19th century onwards, and these remarkable contrasts continue well into the post-war, postcolonial period.

The book contains a sharp analysis of the first three decades after 1945 when the Dutch East Indians settling in the Netherlands were positioned as an easily-adjusted, problem-free minority integrating in Dutch society. This positioning was sharply contrasted with the Caribbean migrants coming from Surinam, who are presented and perceived as more problematic. Recently this categorisation of problematisation has changed: 'the Surinamese' appear to have been lifted from and

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disappeared from the Dutch infamous concept of “allochtonen” (literally, those born outside the Netherlands; but used predominantly for those ‘others’ who are considered ‘problematic’ at a certain time), whereas another category of Dutch Caribbean men, the “Antillians”, are regarded as more problematic than before.

Jones insightfully analyses the language of ethnic and racial terminology and difference used by Dutch politicians in this period. Terms and words are tried out, rejected, replaced and changed again, “common-westerners”; “white Europeans and others”; “immigrants”, and in particular ‘strange’ and “strangers” are often used¹. The social scientist John Schuster has been a source of inspiration, in particular his term “symbolisch vreemdelingschap”, symbolic stranger-ness.

The racialising terminology of colonial civil servants and authorities is explored, and Jones shows that the words and sentences with which these white Dutch indicate the black or brown-skinned inhabitants of Surinam, the Antilles, the Dutch East Indies or the Moluccan Islands are part of an elite discourse, used by leading civil servants and at the highest levels in politics. Among international scholars of racialisation, inclusion and exclusion and categorisation of outward appearance such as skin colour, the terms ‘race’ and ‘racism’ are common. Jones appears to avoid this terminology, with the exception of racialisation.

This is in line with trends in Dutch academic discourse, where scholars and politicians prefer to use replacement terms for ‘race’, such as culture, ethnicity and minority. A similar avoidance of race in academic and political discourse can be found in German studies. It may be explained, to some extent, by the wish to do away with the terminology of ‘race’, ‘ras’, or ‘rasse’ that had become so tainted by the Nazis use of it during their racist regime, but can also be regarded as an indication of attempts to avoid the longer history of race relations and racism. Although he does not name it as such, Jones’ study convincingly shows that there is in this period a form of Dutch racism in higher circles of politicians and amongst senior civil servants. It is a flexible and ambivalent kind of racism both in its changing focus on various groups, intensity, and impact, during different periods, and it is persistent and consistent in the terminology of exclusion. Whereas exclusion suggests an active act of refusing entrance or rejecting acceptance, more passive and more silent attitudes were at play in the Dutch colonial period. There was little migration from the colonies to the Netherlands for a very long time, and the effect of this was that of an invisible but also self-evident border between the Dutch living in the Netherlands and the Dutch living overseas. Jones notes that “[i]n the colonial era, nationality, the admission and the integration of overseas citizens were not linked to reflections on their ties with the imagined Dutch community on the North Sea. The Dutch nationality of the overseas population and the related rights were not yet linked to reflections on the Dutch nation.” Real and perceived distance between Europe and the Asian and American colonies was kept intact and prevented the imagination of the colonial Dutch as Dutch.

This situation, which was not the subject of much debate, changed after World War II when, first the Dutch East Indies, and 30 years later, the Caribbean colony of Surinam, became independent. The political discourse on colonial citizens shows an “inner contradiction between empire and nation”, writes Jones. “As Dutch subjects or overseas Dutch citizens, they were of Dutch nationality. But their political

¹ This is probably best understood a closer translation to the French term ‘*étranger*’ or the English word ‘alien’.

acceptance as members of the Dutch community on the North Sea was established with more difficulty.” All former colonial groups were problematised to some extent, but not all at the same time. The first group were the Eurasians and the Moluccans in the 1950s. In the second half of the 1960s, the Surinamese – in particular the men – became objects of problematisation, and after for all these groups the problematisation dissolved, in the 1990s the Antilleans became the target, a process that has continued until today, most recently even more direct than long beforehand by the new radical rightwing politicians of the Freedom Party (PVV) led by Geert Wilders.

Apart from the Antillean Dutch, also the Moslem minorities are targeted by these as well as other politicians. Jones speaks of “new distinctions between ‘we’ and ‘them’: the Moslems are spoken of as “the ‘others’ within the borders”. These recent developments illustrate Jones’ conclusion that the Netherlands show a “dynamic relationship between nation, nationality and citizenship”, as well as between “legal alienage and citizenship”. While terms such as flexibility and dynamism have a progressive, modern and fresh ring, people who can suddenly become the target or object of this invariably negative political discourse may well perceive the current atmosphere and its historical roots as a source of significant uncertainty, fear and threat in their everyday lives as Dutch citizens.

