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# **Report on the Dutch round table**

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The sixth national round table in the Ford Foundation funded project 'Voices for the *Res Publica*: The Common Good in Europe' was held in the Netherlands in June 2008, under the auspices of the London-based Institute for Jewish Policy Research (JPR) and the Amsterdam-based Foundation and cultural centre, Felix Meritis. The purpose of the round table, as defined in the Project's manifesto, was to bring together a carefully chosen group of opinion-formers and academics to foster a frank and in-depth 'off the record' exchange of views on the conflicts, underlying fears and deep defensive reflexes that exist within each minority or majority group; in other words, those factors which had led to a weakened common public space.

It is, of course, very difficult for the person who conceived the entire project, and planned the round table programme to write an 'objective' report on the round table's outcome. I trust that my non-Dutch astigmatism will compensate for my deep involvement in the very shape of the project. I can only hope this will contribute to a more detached reading of the proceedings. I hope the Dutch participants will feel challenged by this summary, much as I was throughout the entire two days of debates. Nevertheless, when reading what follows, please bear in mind this personal *caveat*.

Summarizing a two-day round table with such a diverse group of participants inevitably implies confronting several risks. The first is that of generalizing on the basis of what a given number of individuals present said, when other participants in their place might have raised different issues or addressed the same issues in a different manner. The second risk is that of 'essentializing', i.e., attributing a given person's comments to his or her ethnic background, political or religious affiliation, age or gender. Each individual is, of course, a sum of different experiences and identities which, at times, clash or reinforce each other in defining that person's outlook. Essentializing is a particularly dangerous proposition, especially for a project

which seeks to build a new *res publica* on a wide set of intertwined multiple identities.

Yet, it is impossible not to generalize at some level if one is to use the round tables as a starting point for further *res publica* debates. In the pages that follow, I have referred to given group identities (such as Christian, lay, Jewish, and also Muslim, but at other times Moroccan or Turk – conservative or progressive) only when what was being said stood out for having been said by a member of a given group who clearly invoked his or her given identity while grappling with the issue at stake. Similarly, I felt it was worth reporting when only members of a given group took stands on a given issue while others who belonged to other groups did not jump into the debate. Lastly, I refer to 'generations' when there was a clearly defined cluster of statements cutting across identities by persons of the same age group.

### Preliminary remarks on the round table

The Dutch round table was composed of sixteen Dutch participants, plus the British director of JPR and myself, with a more continental and French perspective.

The Dutch participants constituted a highly diverse professional group. There was a well-known economic commentator, a university anthropologist, an academic publisher, a judge, a lawyer active in the defence of the rights of women, a young philosopher active in civil society, a teacher also involved in general publishing, a civil servant responsible for the development of Dutch culture in the former colonies, an artist working on issues of religious and cultural identity. To which were added a rich mix of NGO activists focusing on issues as diverse as democratic education and development, the human rights of asylum seekers, local level youthful social entrepreneurship in the tougher neighbourhoods of Amsterdam, and grassroots European integration alternatives. In a country as small as the Netherlands, the issue of geographic representation was clearly less important than in the larger countries, although one participant had a Frisian background and another lived and worked in the Dutch South.

There was also a good sociological mix. In religious

terms there were Catholics, Protestants, Jews and Muslims present, as well as lay voices. One person was very active in the Dutch Protestant church. The Muslim woman wore a headscarf, whereas a Muslim man advocated assimilation to the point of forfeiting any religious prescriptions against alcohol or certain foods. One of the Jewish voices was Dutch but with an Israeli background. The Muslims came from Turkish and Moroccan backgrounds, and there was also a voice coming from the former Dutch colony of Suriname. In social terms, some of the voices came from simple immigrant backgrounds, others belonged to the middle classes, with a few probably stemming from the Dutch elite.

The Dutch round table stood out in comparison to all previous ones for four highly specific reasons:

1) The murder of Theo van Gogh at the hands of a native-born Moroccan who killed him for 'religious' reasons because he had dishonoured the Prophet, and who threatened a similar fate to the Somalian Dutch writer and political activist Ali Hirsi Ali, coming after the earlier murder of the populist candidate Pym Fortuyn continued to constitute a powerful (even if by now unmentioned) backdrop for the debates. The country as a whole and the participants were still visibly trying to overcome this traumatic recent past. The collective introspection and search for a national identity these two murders initiated was clearly not over. Indeed one could feel that the country had still not found a stable inner equilibrium, and that just about every aspect of national life was under heated debate and critical reconsideration, after decades of unquestioning acceptance, if not contentment. With the exception of Poland (but that round table took place at a particularly tense moment in Poland which subsequently improved with the arrival of a new Prime Minister and governing coalition), the Dutch round table was the most critical with respect to its national institutions: the state, the administration and the entire roster of regional and local governments, along with all official bodies. Neither the media nor the citizens themselves were spared. Only the Law and the judicial system seemed to retain some legitimacy. One had the impression that the country needed a massive overhaul, as though it had not undergone conceptual repair work in decades, and the round table discussions reflected this malaise,

not just with the present but with the past.

2) In thematic terms, one could sense that the van Gogh murder had instilled a deep fear of an uncontrollable 'Islamist' presence in the country, and this fear conditioned all sessions. The net result was that issues linked to 'Dutch Muslims' or 'Muslims in the Netherlands' were ever-present, well beyond the specifically designated sessions. Some of the participants sought to 'defuse' it, but that only encouraged others to bring the topic back to the table. The result was a strange sequential perspective on the country, with older problems contemplated uniquely through this more recent Muslim lens. It was as though the 'law and order' positions of the 'man in the street' had found an echo in the thinking of some social activists and intellectuals, normally prone to less emotional positions. The result was that there was as much argument among the 'old' Dutch as to how to approach these issues as between the 'old' and the 'new' Dutch. These 'down to earth' fears over Islamist violence and terrorism thus loomed large and, quite interestingly, they spanned all generations, in ways that simply did not occur in the other national round tables, where the younger voices were far more optimistic. Perhaps all of these issues were exacerbated by the fact that the country is so geographically small and the number of immigrants so highly visible, especially in the many cities of the Netherlands. But the almost obsessive nature of this reference showed that Holland was indeed crisis-ridden on this count.

3) The European dimension was also far more present in the Dutch round table debate, both in terms of time devoted to it and of the passions it evoked, compared to all the other round tables. Perhaps, in the round table, just as during the referendum, 'Europe' played an *ersatz* role for frustrations raised at the national level against a weak and passive political class, in a setting where any Dutch national consensus was extremely fragile. It could also be that Europe's legal, political and economic presence loomed far larger on Holland's horizon, given the country's small size, and its feeling of no longer being 'in control.' Suffice it to say that the debates over Europe shed important light on the current weakness of the entire EU project.

4) Finally, the Dutch round table was also the one

to have the highest number of young participants (under thirty). These younger voices shared many of the fears of their elders concerning Islamist fundamentalism and pessimism over Europe, so there were no real generational divides on this count. Their social and political (in the extended sense of the term) commitments, however, offered a somewhat upbeat reading of a Dutch situation that ranked only second to the Polish round table in terms of pessimism. But the voluntarism of the younger voices was, above all, the result of this surrounding pessimism. 'Things could only get better', precisely because they had become so bad.

A comment on the round table dynamics. The Dutch round table, given the situation, ran the risk of becoming either excessively polarized or conversely, of going stale with too many participants falling victim to battle fatigue by having 'overtalked' or 'rehashed' these questions, which had dominated Dutch media since the murders. Fortunately, this problem did not arise. As an outsider, I had the impression that opinions collided and tough things were being said in a series of very frank exchanges, precisely because many participants had not had the possibility of such 'off the record' face-to-face encounters in the past, where no one was labelling them as belonging to camp 'x' or 'y'. During one session there was even a clash that led one participant to storm out of the room (he returned after much parleying on the part of the national partners). This was the first psychodrama in the entire cycle of round tables.

One participant in particular stressed that he had chosen to attend the round table because he was tired of contributing 'soundbites' to the media which then inevitably distorted them out of context in an increasingly polarized public debate. He was happy with this two-day period of intensive off the record discussions that would respect content and nuances. Another participant stressed that she had chosen to attend because the debate did not presuppose a 'token Muslim voice' but instead sought to integrate such a voice in a very different, far broader, *res publica* context. For some participants, the round table offered the first occasion for serious conversations with Dutch Muslims and, conversely, for the latter with Dutch non-religious Jews. One had the feeling that even Dutch Catho-

lics and Protestants saw each other in a different light through the double impact of Jewish and Muslim voices in this national debate. At the end of the meeting, when I asked the participants to reflect on whether the 'timeline' was moving upwards or downwards in terms of progress, most stressed that it was slowly inching upwards, if only because people were beginning to 'look' in the same direction, even if they did not see things along similar lines. All in all, the round table seemed to reflect a modest but important change in a national setting that was far more fragile and polarized and permeated with a feeling of national powerlessness than any other round table.

These feelings were quite visible in the way participants addressed the six key topics of the round table: 1) National identity and shared values; 2) The Dutch past and the shaping of group identities; 3) The role of the state in Dutch society; 4) The status of minorities; 5) The bases for a *res publica*; 6) Europe.

### **National identity and shared values**

The participants did not waste any time in entering the fray and, as with the German round table, the very first session was among the richest, since all the national dilemmas were brought out in the open, at times quite starkly. The Dutch round table on this count excelled in calling 'a spade a spade'.

The tone of the round table was set at the very start by one of the younger voices who stated that the lack of trust in institutions was perhaps the most important Dutch 'shared value'. The institutions in question were all-encompassing: the state where the three branches of power (the *Trias Politica*) were in deep collusion; political parties who failed to confront any of the major social problems besetting the country; the media, which addressed issues superficially and with a desire to shock and even elicit fear while seeking to substitute themselves to the legitimate but stultified sources of power. He then added that political power in the Netherlands counted for very little, since all major decisions were taken in Brussels and not in the Hague. In a provocative manner, he claimed that Microsoft had far more power than the Dutch state. It was interesting to note that this sweeping verdict on the

Netherlands came from a young immigrant voice, who was not just concerned about issues linked to immigrant Muslims, but with the very fibre of Dutch society for all. He called for new, far more responsive institutions at the local and regional levels, and also for a new Europe that would step out of its traditional emphasis on the 'never again', which was no longer valid for younger generations.

There were many reactions to this opening salvo. The anthropologist warned against such a dramatic reading of a Dutch society, stressing that there had been similar crises of trust in the 1890s and 1930s. He further stressed that historically, relations between Catholics and Protestants had never been calm or based on 'trust', as many Dutch and foreigners believed. These groups were just as locked into their own self-contained worlds as present-day Muslims were perceived to be. In brief, he felt that the Netherlands had never been 'one nation' but had always been composed of groups that maintained a great cultural distance from each other. For those who accused Islam of bringing 'back' religion in highly secular societies, he stressed that the country had previously experienced waves of de-secularization, for instance after 1848. One could only wonder whether this 'lack of trust' was not perhaps a longstanding shared value.

Another participant wondered whether politicians could address this lack of trust. He feared that they often hid behind the 'forces of globalization' as an excuse for their own disastrous incompetence since they had created such an abyss between citizens and politicians. His concern was that politicians were undermining traditional divisions of power by encouraging the media to take on a policing role in lieu of the incompetent police, in the hunt for criminals (and terrorists). Citizens should not become vigilantes. Again this voice came from an immigrant Moroccan background, but the issues he raised transcended any particularist 'Muslim' vision.

There was much debate over the issue of journalists and citizens involving themselves in crime prevention. Some felt that these two groups had to fill in for incompetent police officers, as the only way of denouncing police ineptness. Others felt instead that this new culture of fear was actually stoked by the media who played into the hands of popu-

lists. One participant stressed that the 'true' face of Dutch society had come out in the new, far more restrictive asylum laws, which showed that perhaps the most commonly shared identity of the country's citizens was xenophobia, which then led to type-casting. The Israeli-Dutch artist confirmed that as a Jew born in Baghdad before the creation of the state of Israel, he was now perceived by policemen as a 'dangerous Iraqi'.

The debate then shifted to the issue of whether one could refer to 'common values'. The judge felt these underpinned the lives of responsible citizens; otherwise no justice could ever be administered. But she was quick to destroy another positive myth about 'the Dutch' when she claimed that the country was anything but avant-garde in its legal traditions. She told the group that women were only given full judicial independence (from fathers, brothers or husbands) in 1956. This was a way of relativizing the 'backwardness' of immigrant groups who came from countries which still practised similar judicial restrictions.

Other participants preferred to highlight the need for 'minimal values' linked to the constitution and its fundamental freedoms, while others stressed that whatever common values one needed, these should be 'clear' above all. Clarity concerning the national rules of the game was the key component of any possible future 'togetherness'. Others were far more blunt. They clearly called the vital common values, 'Western values' which are strongly rooted in fundamental freedom and human rights. In other words, there should not be any coming together of 'old' and 'new immigrant' Dutch values. This elicited a more radical response from some participants who stressed that values were not fixed in stone and were constantly changing. These voices claimed that any reference to 'Western values' would, almost by definition, leave out those who did not come from the West and thus compromise any attempt to make society all-inclusive. The anthropologist stressed that Dutch 'identity' went beyond the constitution, which was merely an instrument which presupposed a more important 'moral' component in the very notion of citizenship. Identity instead, was the fruit of power struggles and negotiation, and therefore in constant evolution.

The session had just begun when one self-defined 'post-modern' participant asked *the* question which showed the extent to which the Dutch remained in the grip of the van Gogh murder, and the subsequent fear that the Netherlands was losing control of its identity to creeping 'Islamization'. His question was couched in terms of political theory. If two thirds of the Dutch people wanted *Sharia* law, should (or must) that jurisprudence become the law of the land? Should democracy itself be negotiable? The anthropologist, with a pique of provocation confronted with such an implausible scenario, said 'yes'. The judge qualified it by saying that, of course, democracies were built on the protection of the right of minorities, so that majorities could not rule unconditionally. *Sharia* law as interpreted in distant Muslim lands, could not really be applied in the same manner in the West. In no other round table were such 'what if?' scenarios envisaged, much less discussed.

The debate became clearer when two participants with a Muslim background tackled the issue of 'Dutch identity' in differing ways. The more assimilationist voice argued that, rather than dismissing it, the notion of Dutch identity warranted discussion, for there was such a thing. It was composed of a set of values, a historical canon, the constitution, and a certain way of living. One could modify articles of the constitution, re-read the past, but certain pillars remained. A national identity implied certain minimum requirements and a set of clear rules, and exclusion was an integral consequence of such prerequisites. Any national identity, especially a democratic one had to correct extremists.

The Muslim voice arguing for greater identity 'needs' stressed that as society changed, rules also had to change. Not just rules, but also the law. She gave as proof the legal changes that now allowed gay marriage – a very interesting and somehow unexpected reference when used by a Muslim woman who chose to wear a headscarf and sought to have it accepted inside Dutch institutions. She based her argument on the legal fact that one could oppose 'human rights', among which freedom of religion was supreme, to 'constitutional rights.' The Convention of Human Rights, unlike constitutions, was neither time bound nor geographically defined.

This position did not go unchallenged. A philosophical voice stressed that when Catholics and Protestants achieved political and social co-existence with the Treaty of Maastricht of 1674, no religious camp abused anyone else's freedoms, whereas Muslim immigrants today did, with respect not just to their wives, daughters and sisters, but also towards society at large. A European activist added that freedoms could only be preserved through checks and balances and the European context fortunately prevented countries from going astray on their own path of compromise. This statement gave legitimacy to the previous observation that 80 per cent of laws in Holland were European anyway, so that freedoms would be preserved by respect for checks and balances. Democracy had to be procedural and inclusive, but pluralism did not rule out some exclusions. In other words, extreme Islam had no place within Dutch society, individual freedoms of religion notwithstanding.

Only one participant sought to expand the debate beyond the fixation on Muslim extremists, by invoking the need to curb the extreme right as well. Another stressed that fear should not dictate values. Neither statement was picked up by the rest of the group. The session concluded with a shared feeling that the Dutch tradition of consensus and respect had been replaced by one of fear and mistrust, and that no way had been found to overcome this state of affairs for the time being. As an outsider, I could not help feeling that the participants of the round table had no particular feeling of 'pride' or even 'pleasure' at being 'Dutch', so that there was no nostalgia for a simpler or more homogeneous past in their world view.

### **The Dutch past and the shaping of group identities**

This session built on the preceding one to produce an even more polarized and anguished description of Dutch reality. Groups were not described in terms of their status within society but in terms of their different 'essences' and yet again the Muslims were found to be wanting in their relative integration. One could only be struck by the degree to which anti-Muslim positions were presented openly and without intellectual qualification, as if

'the Muslims' constituted one compact and equally dangerous group.

The anthropologist kicked off the session with an opposing view. He stressed that group identities were a historical fact, but that the past did not repeat itself. What did repeat itself was the inclination to use the past as a blueprint. Yet, even though groups existed, what counted most in his eyes beyond ethnicity and religion was the importance of social class. Society was composed of many 'different differences' so that it was unfair to focus on ethnicity or religion alone.

One participant with a Jewish background countered that these two factors prevailed nevertheless and gave as proof that many Christians preferred to see their disaffected churches become discos rather than mosques. Another with a similar background replied that the Dutch debate over identity was conditioned by the impact of Muslim fundamentalism which had instilled fear across the entire society, even adding the fear of verbal terrorism specifically against the Jews. As a counter-statement, another participant replied that racism and xenophobia were 'natural' to all groups.

A participant with a Surinamese background, who defined himself as being the voice of the 'man in the street' stressed that, in his opinion, Muslims were the only group in Dutch society who had proved unwilling to integrate, unlike the dark-skinned Surinamese, African Blacks or Jews. He pointedly referred to the fact that Muslims 'bothered' the established values of society.

His extremely frank views were rebutted by one Muslim voice, who stressed that Muslims entered the society *de facto* as scapegoats, and that if the *Zeitgeist* surrounding them were different, they would also behave differently, and less defensively. She continued to say that if the Muslims were perceived to be a threat, they then became a threat. This position did not go unheeded. Even the anthropologist was forced to admit that Muslim fundamentalists were feared not in any abstract manner but because of their attacks and terrorism, not only on Dutch soil but in the world. Others added that Muslims did not want to 'really' integrate because they had a vision of ruling the world one day. An-

other voice added that Muslims were feared because they were not 'transparent', unlike blacks or Jews. While yet a third stressed that the Chinese were probably the least transparent of all, but in the eyes of another participant, they did not constitute a threat.

The group did agree on one thing: minorities of all types, including small native ethnic minorities, were always looked upon with suspicion in case they harboured extremists who might challenge the established order. One participant with a Frisian background spoke about how he was interrogated by the police, simply because he had attended a conference of separatists from all over Europe out of curiosity.

As if to stop this debate over *ad nominem* identities, the judge wondered whether there was an optical problem with the issue of Muslim 'integration'. The more they were invisible and remained closed off within their own group, the more they appeared to the rest of society to be 'integrated' because they kept a low profile. Whereas once they stepped out of their closed communities to enter the wider world, they all of a sudden appeared to be 'less' integrated, since they aired their own needs and identity considerations. The point was extremely interesting. Some members of the group, however, did not buy this analysis, stressing once again that Muslims were dangerous because they tried to impose their own standards on others.

The one and only dissenting voice over this whole debate was that of the youngest voice with a Moroccan immigrant background. He quite simply said that he was a child of the 1990s and as such, was no longer interested in the 'identity quests' or emancipation movements of his immigrant elders. What were most relevant to him were the class divisions within Dutch society, divisions that were shared by poor immigrants and white Dutch alike. These social tensions were responsible for the weakness of Dutch society, and the only way out of the Dutch malaise was to address them head on in social and economic terms. In one of history's ironic cycles, he announced to the group that he had just begun reading Marx.

Once again the debate continued with an apparently

theoretical reflection which then turned out to be filled with a *priori* readings. The issue centred on whether groups were formed from within or created from the outside by society. The anthropologist stressed that groups became 'tangible' only when they were imposed, with some hostility, from the outside. This tendency to define people from the outside was particularly insidious because, according to the scarf-wearing Muslim woman, there was virtually no cohesive internal 'Muslim identity' in the Netherlands. The outside world turned a group of low-class immigrants, who happened to hold onto very different religious identities within Islam, and who came from very different regions, such as Morocco and Turkey, into one single 'pariah group'.

One of the participants, perhaps because of his Jewish background (and the polemical definition of the 'Jew' by Jean-Paul Sartre as being someone others defined as a 'Jew') adamantly refused such a reading, stressing that groups were formed from within. Theory moved into reality when the debate centred on whether Muslims were imposing their values and world views onto others. Some participants denied this was the case. Others felt that the extremists were imposing their violence on others, thus disrupting society as a whole. One participant claimed that it was impossible to generalize on the basis of a small violent fraction inside a group, to which another stressed that holding on to such a reading was 'intellectually deficient', given the fact that it was always small groups that created danger.

The Moroccan voice arguing for Muslim assimilation within Dutch society stressed that extremists were also formed by external and not internal group conditions, and he cited the impact of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in this context. Interestingly, this conflict had never been mentioned in the other round tables with respect to Muslim extremism....Were the Dutch simply being more outspoken or direct than others on this count? He proposed that Dutch society needed to work on coalitions to counter extremists from all sides.

The first step, in his opinion, was to overcome major misunderstandings. He cited the work of one Muslim educator who sought to introduce the teaching of Islam in Dutch public schools *precisely*

to counter the negative influence of radical imams who taught in some of the country's mosques. Most commentators had instead seen in his proposal a dangerous desire to introduce political Islam inside Dutch education, thus undermining the country's values. The group's response to this example revealed much about the tense Dutch climate. Many had not really heard about his proposal, and if they had, they had assumed his was the voice of a Muslim extremist who wanted to introduce radical Islam into the public curriculum. They seemed genuinely surprised to learn that he had the opposite aim in mind.

The more conservative commentator listened with interest but replied that 'appearances mattered' and that this man's 'missionary like style' frightened the wider public, who, helped along by a hostile press, was not able to see the positive democratic aspects of his proposals. He, along with many in the group, put the blame for this state of affairs on the Muslim community itself, arguing that if it had voiced more open opposition to Muslim extremists, the credibility of its advocates would have been infinitely stronger.

The two Muslim voices, who had opposed each other on many of the other issues, were unanimous in their anger this time. They both replied that moderate Muslims had condemned all acts of terror, including 9/11 and the van Gogh murder, and other extreme actions, but that no one was interested in their condemnations. Also, was it fair to ask Muslims who defined themselves as fully-fledged Dutch citizens to have to take responsibility for the crimes or violence committed by other Muslims in distant lands as their own? The media bore a major responsibility on this count for conflating identities by only paying attention to and broadcasting extremist voices. Basically, Muslims remained suspect and 'guilty' if they were silent or if they spoke their minds. They were discriminated against by appearance.

To which one participant replied that unfortunately, this was how all societies worked. Hence Muslims needed to work much harder to make their moderate voices heard, while also promoting greater education inside their communities so as to facilitate integration. The Muslims present replied that

the moderates were not able to do 'PR' as well as the extremists and that many people inside the communities were eager to work with and form alliances with Jews, and to fight together against extremists. One young participant felt that much had to be done on this front, because most Dutch were afraid that Muslim community spokesmen making moderate sounds were, in reality, little more than 'wolves in sheep's clothing'. Most agreed that the press bore a heavy responsibility for the general picture the country had of Muslims.

As a timid sign of hope one Muslim participant stressed that Muslims were learning to maximize their own interests in a democratic manner. For instance, she cited that the community had decided not to make any protests when the film 'Fitna' by the Dutch parliamentarian and filmmaker Geert Wilders came out with its extremely anti-Islamic positions. Because they had not fallen in the trap the Dutch media had prepared for them, in the end the film received very little public attention and a replay of the cartoon tempest was avoided. Muslims, according to this view, were becoming better at showing that Islam was perfectly compatible with democracy and human rights and that the fundamentalists were only a minority fringe inside the community.

A cultural activist stressed that some groups were now working to introduce young Moroccans to Dutch wartime history, by making them participate in the commemorations of Dutch resistance and also of Jewish deportations, as a way of gaining a better understanding of the identity stakes of a country that had been too silent over its own past for too long far. He felt that a leader such as the mayor of Amsterdam, Job Cohen, had confronted the immense problems of his city and had played a key role in defusing group identities, which were certainly 'mellower' than five years earlier. Greater Muslim visibility meant that the group was beginning to participate actively in Dutch public life and in schools.

These last-minute observations were reassuring, but they came late in the debates, which continued to show the degree to which Dutch society (even in a group as select as the round table participants) still remained profoundly divided and fearful over

'Muslims', not just among conservative elders, but also within progressive youth.

### The role of the state in Dutch society

The feeling of Dutch malaise continued with the session on the state. Significantly, I was surprised to see that the entire round table seemed to agree that the reference to the 'state' meant the 'welfare state'. In this they took the very opposite tack from the Swedish round table. Whereas I had assumed that the Swedes would spend a significant amount of time discussing the decline of their iconic welfare state, they did not do so. They concentrated on the state as the purveyor of norms, power, and identity, resting on the strong foundations of the historical regalian Wasa state. The result was a far calmer reading of their own society.

The Dutch, instead, gave the impression of having no similar strong state background to fall back on. As in the British round table, no reference whatsoever was made to their constitutional monarchy. But unlike the British case, 'government' was not perceived as a useful presence helping society to 'muddle through'. In the Dutch case, 'government' and its administrative elites, as presented by the round table participants, lay at the very heart of Dutch problems. More specifically, participants agreed that the Dutch welfare state (still praised in Sweden despite its shrunken resources) was inherently responsible for the crumbling condition of Dutch society.

The retired civil servant who had worked in the field of immigrant integration minced no words in describing the dysfunctional perverse effects of the Dutch welfare state in assuring social equality and a feeling of national belonging. He stressed that, of course, no one 'starved' because of its subsidies, but that these were mere handouts that produced lethargy and passivity on the part of the immigrants, who were not integrated in the society through work. This state of affairs had come about because the entire concept of the welfare state was based on 'condescension' towards those one had to govern and a belief in superior social engineering on the part of the central but also local state administrators, planners and social workers. At all levels of Dutch society, government officials pre-

ferred to have one interlocutor for neatly boxed-in groups rather than take into account the very real needs of individuals beyond their sociologically determined identities. Furthermore, according to the participant who was very active in the Protestant Church, those in charge of the welfare state had no real understanding of poverty and no firsthand experience of it. Instead, churches did because the poor often came to them for direct help.

The conservative commentator agreed, stressing further that the state should only concentrate on those sectors of society that the liberal market did not know how to cope with: mainly, the just distribution of ever scarcer resources. The young local-level political activist who felt that social cleavages were far more important than ethnic or religious ones in explaining the failings of Dutch society, confirmed that in his 'problem' neighbourhood of Amsterdam, people wanted and hoped for change at the local level and had no trust whatsoever in the national level. They wanted greater empowerment above all. The judge stressed that in some cases, among the disabled and the elderly, who were unable to make their own choices, others had to take on such responsibilities, so that one could not do away with the welfare state tutelary traditions, but these had to be steeped in humanism, not technocracy. A few participants felt that the Dutch paralysis was due to the fact that most civil society institutions also lived thanks to state subsidies and handouts, and so were not able to be as critical of society as they should. This was refuted by one NGO activist who felt that these subsidies in no way conditioned their work or link to the state. The anthropologist felt, instead, that the state had never been neutral with respect to society and of course played a role in favouring some NGOs over others. Others spoke of how foundations were able to circumvent the blockages of the state at all levels, but that they did so often through collusions at the top of society. The result was that the activities 'on behalf' of society continued to carry great weight, thus preventing the rise of a grass roots and spontaneous collective social life.

This dysfunctional state of affairs was confirmed by the local level activist who stated that after the murders the Dutch state had given quite a lot of money for projects among Moroccan youths,

whereas Turks and poor whites received very little attention, not to mention society's marginals who were not even visible on the radar screens of the state. Money was thus given out in function of criteria of immediate crisis, irrespective of the number of people involved. One participant even wondered whether, in the future, the handouts given to 'Arabs' might not recede with the arrival of Romanians. All agreed that a small class of managers 'at the top' took political and financial decisions without the necessary consultations.

It did not take long for the debate to return to the fixation on immigrants viewed once again through the Muslim lens. The young European activist raised the issue of the massive use of the welfare state by immigrants as one possible explanation for its crisis and the need for it to be pared down drastically. To which the more combative Muslim political activist replied curtly that this was simply not the case. Immigrants who used these services excessively were simply sent back to their countries of origin. The more moderate Muslim voice instead stressed that immigrants should be admitted to the country only if they had already been previously acculturated to its values. He also agreed that the 'cuddling to death' by the welfare state was preventing responsible citizenship. He added that trade unions had been of no help whatsoever in promoting immigrant integration or the retooling of immigrants for employment. This was slowly occurring through the second generation who could be more active socially because it had mastered the language.

What emerged from the discussions was the degree to which Dutch immigrants were divided and often pitted against one another. More than one participant stressed the degree to which the Surinamese were jealous of the attention the Moroccans were now receiving. The Moroccans felt the Turks were better organized (and therefore listened to), while the Turks were apparently terrified of Moroccan youths. Listening to this set of pecking orders one had the impression that the entire society was trapped in identity prisons, perhaps inaugurated with the rigid divisions that had allowed Protestants and Catholics to co-exist.

For some of the 'old' Dutch voices, the problem lay

elsewhere. These tensions were provoked by the 'inhuman' conditions of the big cities, and by the distant technocrats who managed them. For others instead, the city was the place where a vibrant new and all-inclusive culture was emerging. There might be a weak sense of belonging to 'The Netherlands', but many immigrants had no problem defining themselves as being from 'Amsterdam.' It was less clear that they would take on a 'Rotterdam' identity or one linked to the smaller towns of the country.

This moved some of the younger participants to stress the need for a totally revised urban planning system. Some praised, while others excoriated the multi-purpose buildings that had cropped up in immigrant neighbourhoods. These buildings often combined administrative and social services with cultural centres, sports facilities, rooms for banquets and marriages and even prayer rooms. One participant felt they were social traps that further isolated immigrants from the rest of society, curtailing any spontaneous encounters one would have in open spaces. Another felt instead, that these buildings gave immigrants an anchor in an otherwise anonymous urban setting. Either way, the debate over the buildings seemed to be a metaphor for the far larger debate over the Dutch state.

The only aspect of the Dutch state that was given positive ratings in a very negative panorama was the Dutch judicial system. The 'law' did not occupy as central a role in underpinning the *res publica* as in the Swedish and German round tables, perhaps because it was not the emanation of a strong state, but at least it came out of the general institutional debacle relatively unscathed. Participants of all stripes tended to agree that the judicial system in the Netherlands offered a fair and equitable justice. Above all, even the immigrant Muslim voices stressed that their communities respected the law and those who enforced it. According to one voice, immigrants were not willing to protect 'their own' if they had broken the law, a sign of hope for a future *res publica* mentality. The law still stood supreme in its claim of neutrality, whereas politics was wrapped up in the complicated issue of colonial heritage (for the Surinamese) or of relations with Muslim 'others' (with respect to the new immigrants).

There was however, much debate as to whether Dutch law protected Muslim women as much as they should be or if it was too lenient with Muslim men in their understanding of women's rights. The judge and the lawyer with a Muslim background insisted that criminal law had to be equal for all, even if some judges did take into account the cultural background of those who committed violence against women. Others were less sanguine and felt that the law was not doing enough to sanction honour killings inside the Muslim community. To which others replied that the judges must be left alone to assess the situation, without group or media pressures, provided they stood for legal continuity irrespective of whether the inculpated were Muslim or not. The divisions established earlier in the round table continued to resurface on all of these issues. But it was important to see that for the judge, the law, so far, 'worked', even though she was worried that judges were stifled by a growing demand for procedures that allowed them less time for quality reflection.

### The status of minorities

In a less tense national setting, this would have been the session which would have addressed the issue of immigrants, the 'otherness' and 'belonging' of minorities and their changing status in society. But as we saw, this topic hit such a raw nerve in the Dutch context that it coloured all the previous sessions as well.

It was thus somewhat surprising to see that when the time came to address the topic head-on, the round table participants were less negative and less polarized than in the previous sessions (perhaps because they had got to know one another better and learned to trust one another more).

The more 'assimilationist' Muslim voice kicked off the debate by stressing that Muslims as a minority must integrate in the wider society. This meant that Islam had to be modernized and its tenets had to be rendered compatible with the requirements of a minority religion. This could be done because the essence of Islam would not be hurt under such a status in the West. As concrete proof of this change, Imams had, for instance, to accept to shake a woman's hand. But conversely, Dutch

media and the wider society should highlight the importance of this modernized Islam and these Imams and not focus only on its more backward pockets. All the more so, the political activist with the headscarf stressed, because Islam had a strong social and not only spiritual dimension which was totally compatible with a democratic setting. Concretely this meant, in her opinion, that the Dutch state should subsidize mosques, so that they did not fall under the control of foreign powers and could then teach an Islam that was compatible with Dutch *mores* and laws. But in correlation, Dutch Muslims should be given the same rights as any other religious group in Holland, including the right to their own Muslim schools, for the vast majority of Muslims lived lives that were fully compatible with Western standards.

The artist with an Israeli background stressed that the problem with Islam lay in the fact that there was no central authority, so that no modernized current could curb an extremist one in the name of a revised 'doctrine'. The conservative commentator who had been quite critical of a radicalized Islam all along, found this presentation of a modernized democratic Islam far too angelic to his taste and sought to bring the discussion back to the dangers of 'real' Islam with stoning to death in Iran, honour killings, and female circumcision. His words were greeted with great impatience from the group as a whole. The consensus seemed to be that yes, there were these excesses elsewhere, but they were not pertinent to Dutch Islam. Upon hearing this, the commentator stormed out of the room claiming that he was raising vital questions for the Dutch future, since extremists were to be found within the country, questions which the other participants were minimizing on purpose.

During his absence, the judge stressed that for such a moderate Islam to flourish, it was important that the non-Muslim Dutch stop holding their own Muslims accountable for what was being done, in the name of Islam, in distant and alien lands. The anthropologist emphasized that these traditions predated Islam and could not be attributed to it. Others stressed the degree to which the second generation, the children of the immigrants, had ever weaker ties to their country of origin, and therefore did not want to be held accountable for

what was going on there. Their struggles, references and future were to be found in the Dutch context, the only one that truly counted for them. Furthermore they had loyalties to their families, perhaps to the region of their ancestors but not to the 'old country' whose institutions they barely knew and would not have approved of, and to which they often did not even return for holidays.

The publisher with a Frisian background asked how non-Muslims could help further the integration of their Muslim fellow citizens. To which the Muslim advocating assimilation replied that they should learn to listen to what was being said inside the communities. He cited the fact that as early as the 1980s moderate Muslims had been the first to warn of the danger coming from radicalized foreign Imams who were allowed on Dutch soil. Unfortunately, no Dutch authority was interested in listening to the community at the time, and so no precautions were taken against this threat that later turned into a reality. Twenty years later, Muslim communities in Holland needed constructive and friendly criticism above all, not suspicion and fear. A non-Muslim participant stressed that the Dutch majority should stop speaking of 'tolerance' toward their minorities because the term was condescending and largely based on indifference. One 'tolerated' only those whose views one rejected.

On the issue of Muslim schools, most agreed that they would be no more dangerous than other religious schools, which ultimately taught very little 'religion' and were almost identical to state schools. The judge stressed that such private denominational schools were allowed since 1918 and one could not prevent Muslims from having their own by 'changing horses in midstream'. She added that there was nothing to fear because Dutch law defined their conditions for existence, their curricula and their obligations.

Clearly everyone in the round table made an effort to sound somewhat more positive on these issues, including the person who stormed out of the room and who was convinced to return to the meeting. The session still ended, nevertheless, with many unsolved questions. Despite stressing the importance of having an open and vibrant multicultural society with many identities and cultural refer-

ences, with all the cuisine and music that accompanied such cultural openness, the Muslims at the round table continued to wonder whether Muslim Dutch were truly given the opportunity of becoming 'Dutch'. They even wondered whether the majority of Dutch citizens saw anything positive in their immigration.

Things became even more complicated when certain non-Muslim Dutch, in a gesture of good will, sought to compare Dutch Muslims to Dutch Jews with their strong religious and cultural identity and ties to Israel, which they assumed could also be applicable for Morocco. The comparison was immediately refuted by many others (not just the Jews present) who stated that Jews were 'different' and not comparable. Israel was not a country of origin; Jews were fully integrated and of course there had been the Holocaust. This was, by the way, the first time the Holocaust was mentioned at the round table. Those who refused the comparison showed their fears of a possible Muslim immigrant 'double loyalty', not to mention the 'single loyalty' of the Islamic extremists inside Dutch society. This small moment of tension offered yet another window on a society that had not come to terms with either its past ghosts or its present tensions. But it also raised a more European dilemma: using the Jewish reference was a problematic example with which to assess the possibilities and also limits to identity, belonging and multiple allegiances.

### **Building the *res publica***

This session showed the degree to which each participant had given a great deal of thought to how best to create a *res publica* in the Netherlands, probably because its current weakness seemed so flagrant. The teacher who kicked off the session was not overly optimistic, fearing that it was difficult to create shared commitments in affluent societies. The judge, instead, used the return of the participant who had stormed out as an example of hope in dialogue.

There was consensus around the fact that any future Dutch *res publica* had to be built on political and social modesty rather than on the previous ambitious and arrogant social engineering that had led to the current crisis. For the anthropologist,

development had to be 'organic' and based on local knowledge. Those who had espoused knowledge from above as 'authoritarian architects' were out of touch with what people wanted at the local level. A young NGO activist as well as the judge agreed that the key word for the future was 'organic' and only a *res publica* rooted in individual and small social initiatives could work. This moved the former civil servant to ask sceptically whether they wished to dismantle governing bodies through new groups. The young social entrepreneur denied this and based his vision of the *res publica* on five key concepts: citizenship; institutions based on self-help and local initiatives; creative knowledge beyond an often stultified educational system; a strengthened secular society that allowed for religious needs; and the restoration of all sorts of rituals in order to integrate everyone inside society. These five goals could only be attained if people became involved and even took risks on behalf of social development. Equally important, the new organizations that stemmed from this risk-taking could only innovate if they represented people beyond their ethnic or religious identities in terms of their shared needs inside a wider society. Another NGO activist stressed that one could only have responsible citizenship if the government first gave the example of political and social integrity. The philosopher stressed that there could be no *res publica* without commitment to collective proposals and projects.

Several participants, including the judge, were worried about the *res publica* falling prey to an ever-growing emphasis on 'procedures' which killed individual contributions and also transformed technical means into often shallow ends. The publisher rebutted that it was far easier today to circumvent the restrictions of rules because there were many different counter-forces compared to forty years ago. Others wondered whether religion could provide a 'connecting tissue' among groups, or whether the family might play such a role, in lieu of crumbling institutions. Not everyone was convinced, preferring to think of the *res publica* as a secular space in which people made collective commitments for the common good, beyond their immediate blood, ethnic or religious ties. To the question of whether the time line was moving 'upwards' or 'downwards', there was a consensus that things were looking better, because as the

anthropologist said, different groups were beginning to look in the 'same direction'. Another participant stressed that, after all, Holland had a good economy and a still functioning welfare state safety net, so that with a new type of political willpower and more responsible citizens, things could change significantly for the better in a relatively short time. Another participant stressed that it would be worthwhile going back to 'basics' and asking questions such as 'Who are the Dutch?' and 'What is the importance of the constitution?' to raise citizen awareness. Much could be changed through modest and untechnocratic 'planned' pedagogy.

In the Dutch case, however, this timid optimism could not be defined within national boundaries. Perhaps because the Netherlands was so small; perhaps because it depended to such a degree on its neighbours for many vital needs, the timid optimism shown in this session came with a major proviso, which was not shared by any other national round table: the situation in Europe.

## Europe

In the preceding round tables, the reference to 'Europe' was treated almost as an afterthought and without much intensity compared to the domestic debates over national identity and social priorities. In the Dutch round table, however, the discussion over 'Europe' was inherently linked to the debates surrounding the future of the *res publica*. Europe, in brief, was seen either as the guarantor of Dutch change or as a problem that was responsible for the country's current weakness. The reasons for the Dutch 'no' to the treaty of Nice became far easier to understand given this dichotomy.

The group divided into three stances on the European issue: those who felt that Europe offered greater guarantees for the development of the Dutch *res publica*; those who felt that Europe was not conducive to a stronger *res publica*, and those who felt that the two would rise or fall together.

For some, Europe actually created the best conditions for a renewed Dutch *res publica* in that it guaranteed fundamental values that might otherwise fall victim to the moods of populist or extremist majorities. Europe offered a greater cultural

and intellectual backdrop and allowed, according to the social entrepreneur, the creation of a 'European generation' that was no longer interested in chasing an elusive 'European identity' but actually in promoting European grassroots cooperation, in other words simply 'doing Europe'. Another participant stressed that Europe 'existed' and permeated many a project. The problem was that it was increasingly taken for granted, so that people could vote 'no' to the treaty while remaining 'European'.

For others instead, Europe was a problem for the *res publica*. Not Europe itself but the fact that those who had promoted the 'yes' to Europe and who, after the 'no', tried to reconcile Brussels with civil society, were the same social engineers and technocrats who had been responsible for the collapse of Dutch society in the first place. Those against Europe abhorred decision-makers who had not been elected. Among those who needed to be rallied to the *res publica* groups in society who had seen Europe as a threat figured prominently, either in terms of identity or on purely economic grounds. In these milieus, the European ideal had simply not taken root. Perhaps, as a younger participant suggested, maybe the newcomers to Europe could best define its future, because the old Europe built on the 'never again' to Hitler rang no bells for new generations, who had entirely different cultural and above all historical and political backgrounds and references. To succeed, Europe had to dip into all pasts and not just the obvious ones that were celebrated by society's social engineers.

For the third group, Europe and therefore the Dutch *res publica* were both in danger. Institutions needed support otherwise they could easily crumble. Without them, political problems could not be addressed. But for the young social entrepreneur, it was difficult to decide in the current climate who was more irrelevant: European or Dutch politicians. For the anthropologist, Europe had still not become an 'invented community' to whom one owed spontaneous allegiance in the same way one owes it to the nation state, but he felt that, with time, such a community would come about. Younger voices were less sanguine. For the philosopher working on behalf of asylum seekers and refugees, Europe had simply become a codename for the power that kept such fragile foreigners 'out' and said

'no' to immigration. For a young European activist, Brussels, unfortunately, was far from becoming an 'imagined community' but was instead full of companies and media interests engaged in very real and detrimental business deals when not in active 'pork-barrelling'. The European 'soul' had vanished all the more easily now that there was no European accountability to its citizens. Another participant wondered whether Europe was good for each country's minorities or further deprived them of any legitimacy. Another mused that maybe the *res publica* should be built at the local level, leaving the founding values to Europe, in effect making the nation state irrelevant, especially since 80 per cent of laws were drafted in Europe.

The demise of the nation state drew no support. A European activist was quick to point out that Europe did not 'make laws', while the judge specified that all laws were made in the Dutch context following European directives. A cultural activist stressed that there was no discrepancy between a cultural Europe and the ongoing liveliness of national tradition and languages. Only the nation state could ensure the bonding of immigrants to the larger population. Other participants wondered whether Europe was not too small a horizon for Holland, which needed to be present in the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, and China). Others replied that Europe was actually the ideal vehicle for globalization, in terms of Holland's own interests.

The twinning of the Dutch *res publica* with Europe's own fate showed the degree to which Holland's small size had made it impossible for her to think of the *res publica* in purely national terms. But the twinning went further. Both elites suffered from the same democratic deficit. Both were unable to take real needs into account and both mistrusted popular opinion. In brief, the same reforms were badly needed in both the European and the Dutch contexts, with Holland being a miniature version of Europe, not a very reassuring situation.

At the very beginning of the round table, a philosopher in the group had defined the *res publica* as the equivalent of a table which both united and separated those who were sitting around it. This metaphor pleased all sides. Those who argued for clear-cut principles and founding values could make the

point that one did not negotiate the number of legs on a table: one needed at least four and they had to be solid. Those who argued, instead, for the changing role of values stressed that a table was only as important as what was placed on it (both in reality and metaphorically).

By the end of the Dutch round table both sides seemed to come together, thanks to a younger generation which stood for strong founding values (against a possible extremist Muslim threat), a strong Europe, and a total institutional overhaul of the very pillars of the *res publica*. Perhaps the spirit of the round table was best summarized by the Muslim woman who wore the headscarf when she proclaimed that she had profited from it because she had been taken out of the 'Muslim corner' and brought into a far more general debate in a context of trust and comfort.

The problems besetting Dutch society are surely far more complex than those of any other Western country, but the round table showed that out of such a crisis, new ideas and solutions were slowly emerging. This was a case of pessimism leading to a very deliberate realistic engagement for a better future. One voice mentioned that solutions could only be found if one thinks in terms of 'utopian realism' by choosing to be an optimist so as to tackle the problems in practical terms. All in all, the Dutch round table did not exude the optimism of the German round table, did not believe that the country could simply 'muddle through' as did the British round table, did not share the self-love of the French, or the angst of the Poles, or the serenity of the Swedes. It could only grapple with the society it had, and hope that 'optimism' as an attitude might actually plant the seeds of a future true optimism. By all accounts, this in itself marked a true progress.

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