

How (never) to become Dutch

Testing the civic integration test

Comments on Geschiere

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Since the early nineties the language of Dutch researchers and policymakers has been 'enriched' by a new conceptual pair, the terms *allochtoon* and *autochtoon*. The term *allochtoon* for immigrants was used for the first time in 1971, in a volume edited by the sociologist Hilda Verwey-Jonker to capture a heterogeneous bunch of residents, according to the elaborate subtitle: "repatriates (so-called, from Indonesia), Ambonese, Surinamese, Antillians, foreign laborers, Chinese, refugees, and foreign students."¹ At that time the Netherlands considered itself as a seriously overpopulated country. Until far into the 1960s government had been propagating emigration rather than immigration. In his book *Perils of Belonging*² Peter Geschiere relates how one of the contributors to the book and now Nestor of Dutch migrant studies, Hans van Amersfoort, had come up with the term *allochtoon*, a term he was acquainted with from physical geography, where it was used to speak of allochthonous sediments. Verwey-Jonker was very happy with this alternative, because it carried no political connotations whatsoever. But apart from a few academic researchers, the terminology did not really catch on. Van Amersfoort himself for instance, spoke of immigrants. It was only when the WRR (the Scientific Council for Governmental Policy) in a report published in 1989 replaced the term ethnic minorities with *allochtonen* that the word gradually became adopted, first by researchers and policymakers, then by the media and subsequently the public at large.

It is worthwhile to go back to the text of the 1989 WRR report and reconstruct the Council's initial motives for introducing this terminology. Why depart from speaking about *ethnic minorities*? Because, the Council explained, this term did not capture groups whose culture is from strange origins ('van vreemde origine') but who do not occupy the lower ranks of the social ladder. In other words: it did not capture groups who were ethnically different from the indigenous Dutch yet not in a minority position. Why not *immigrants*? Because it suggests permanent residence which need not always be the case (here we see the WRR also still struggling with the Netherlands being an immigration country, which elsewhere the Council acknowledges), and (more to the point) because it does not capture the position of the children of immigrants who often face the same kind of obstacles as their parents.

1. Verwey-Jonker 1971.

2. Geschiere 2009: 148-149.

The definition of *allochtonen* proposed by the Council encapsulated *all* immigrants (foreigners, former foreigners who naturalized into Dutchmen and all Dutchmen from overseas territories) and added to that members of the second and third generation *in so far as* they still to some extent wished to identify themselves with the origins of their (grand)parents. By doing this, the Council explicitly acknowledged the phenomenon of double loyalty of many migrants and their offspring with both the country of arrival and the country of origin. The Council conceded that this definition, because of its mixture of objective and subjective elements, had its drawbacks. But the advantage was that it gave second and even third generation immigrants the opportunity to indicate for themselves whether they wanted to be registered as *allochtoon* or not.³ In other words: in this initial proposal children of immigrants were given room to identify themselves, and hence be registered by official statistics as autochthonous.

Alas, this was apparently too complicated a proposal for researchers of institutions like the CBS of SCP to handle, and the definition was quickly objectified such that all second generation offspring of at least one allochthone parent became registered as allochthone too. Moreover, by subsequently introducing a distinction between western and non western *allochtonen*, where the decisive criterion for a non western group is not its geographical origin but its 'socio-economic and socio-cultural position', the notion of ethnic minorities got in by the backdoor again.

Obsessions

I agree with Peter Geschiere that it is instructive to trace the stories of origin of the terminology of allochthone and autochthonous in West-African and Dutch-Flamish discourse. However, such a comparative undertaking does not so much show that we here observe the same discourse being used be it that the backgrounds are different, as Geschiere claims, but that, although the same words are used, the discourses are quite different. While in the French speaking African countries, it was *autochthony* that was of the first concern, in Dutch the usage started with *allochtoon*. Obviously, if you introduce one part of a pair, the opposite other comes with it for free. But the sequence matters in that, so I would argue, it has lead to quite different obsessions. While, as Geschiere convincingly shows, in the West African discourse there is an obsession with autochthony, and 'allochthones' becomes the rest category, in the Netherlands we have become obsessed with allochthones, and 'autochthonous' is the rest category.⁴

In the West African discourse everyone who does not fully fit in, who is not purely autochthonous, falls outside this privileged category and is hence relegated to

3. WRR 1989: 62.

4. A simple wordcount in the WRR report of 1989 for instance shows that the word *autochtoon* is used 110 times, the word *allochtoon* 360 times. In the database Lexis Nexis, which contains articles of all Dutch newspapers, the word *autochtoon* had nearly 1500 hits in the last two years, while *allochtoon* was used at least twice as much (more than 3000).

the rest category of second class allochthone citizens. With this come deep anxieties and uncertainties about who may count as autochthonous, as well as anxieties about traitors 'from the inside'. In the Dutch discourse on the other hand everyone who is not allochthone counts as autochthonous. With this come uncertainties and ambiguities about who counts as allochthone: by official definition, for instance, all immigrants and all Dutch residents with at least one parent who was born abroad are allochthone, but in the common usage the term may refer to everyone who is not white (very broad sense), or only to people with a Muslim background (very narrow sense). In any case: the anxiety is not about traitors from the inside. More so, it is not even directed at everyone who is not purely autochthonous, witness the unproblematic position of for instance western immigrants, Dutch Surinamese or Dutch Chinese. The anxiety and distrust are currently directed at one very particular group of (non western) allochthones, i.e. Muslims. Muslims (and all residents with a Turkish, Amazigh or Arabic background are perceived as Muslims) are perceived as potential members of a fifth column, as enemies of the liberal democratic constitution and of liberal values such as freedom of religion, freedom of speech and sexual equality. Their presumed double, or straightforward *disloyalty* is not ascribed to their originating from alien soil, but to their religious and cultural background.

However, although it is entirely true that allochthones can never, by sheer definition, become autochthonous, it is not precluded that not only in the juridical, but also in the cultural and emotional sense they can become 'Dutch'. And here of course the pitfalls of the culturalization of citizenship that Geschiere worries about, abound. For currently it is not merely assumed that immigrants can become Dutch, but that should become Dutch.

Some examples of the Dutch integration exam aptly illustrate, or so I would want to argue, how immigrants in the Netherlands are thus confronted with an ambiguous if not paradoxical message: you can and should become exactly like us, but don't you ever forget: you will never be truly like us.

Testing the integration test

You are sitting in an outdoor cafe with a colleague, at a table further on you see two men caressing and kissing each other. You are disturbed by it. What do you do?

1. *You remain seated and pretend you don't mind*
2. *You tell the men that their behavior disturbs you and ask them to stop.*
3. *You and your colleague leave and go to another outdoor cafe.*

Since 2007, non EU immigrants who have lived in the Netherlands less than eight years before their 16th birthday, and who are between 16 and 65 old, have to pass a civic integration exam (*inburgeringsexamen*) before they are granted the official right to live and work in the Netherlands or can ask for naturalization. The exam tests immigrants for their language and social skills, for their knowledge of practical issues, of Dutch laws and regulations, and it assesses whether candidates are

sufficiently acquainted with the rules of everyday interaction, with “how things go in the Netherlands.” The above multiple choice question is an example of this last part of the civic integration exam.⁵

Of the three alternative answers, the first counts as the right one because, as the explanation goes: “In the Netherlands, coming out with homosexuality is not forbidden. Hence, the two men are allowed to kiss each other in public. You may not agree with that, but you are not allowed to express yourself about it in a discriminatory way. In other words: a negative response is not the way to do react.”

The idea that it is possible to test the extent to which people are ‘integrated’ into society by means of a multiple choice exam, is built on the mistaken assumption that it is possible to identify one unambiguous (i.e. Dutch) code of conduct, one set of norms or rules shared by all citizens.

As Peter Geschiere also argues, this perspective denies the actual internal dynamics of everyday culture, and ignores the fact that the settlement of immigrants will inevitably have some effect on existing cultural codes and rules of everyday conduct. It also denies, I would add, the actual differentiation within the non-immigrant population in terms of class, religious, regional, (sub)cultural and linguistic differences.

Moreover, when we take a closer look at the set up of the part of the Dutch civic integration exam that tests people’s acquaintance with ‘the rules’, as it is phrased, it is ambiguous as to the *kind of rules* about which candidates should be knowledgeable.

Sometimes, the rules concerned are mere *regularities*: they explain the way in which Dutch people usually behave and expect others to behave. The moral standing of such rules is put between brackets: the candidate is merely tested about her knowledge of how ‘we’ *happen* to do things ‘over here’. Take the following question: “A colleague is getting married. She gives only a small party, you are not invited but you would like to do something. What do you do?” The decision to send her a postcard rather than give a present or an envelope with money, is judged to be the right choice because, it is explained, in cases where you are not invited this is ‘customary’ (*de gewoonte*).⁶

In other cases, it is suggested that the knowledge tested is not about habit, but about *moral rules*, about what in the Netherlands is regarded as civilized and/or morally appropriate conduct. Judging by the explanation of the correct response

5. This question is from a test example designed in 2005, meant to give indigenous Dutch citizens an idea of the kind of questions asked at such an exam (<http://www.teleac.nl/nationaleinburgeringtest> (retrieved January 10. 2006)). The real exams differ in so far as they use simpler language, the questions are introduced with a short video film and the requirements are less stringent. It appeared that many ‘autochthonous’ Dutch who did the test, failed miserably. See Kirk 2010 for an extensive and critical analysis of the assumptions behind and the implementation of Dutch civic integration policies.

6. This question is also part of the test example, see <http://www.teleac.nl/nationaleinburgeringtest>

to the case of the two men kissing ('you are not *allowed* to express yourself in a *discriminatory* way') this question belongs to this second category.

Finally, the exam also tests a candidate's knowledge of the law, i.e. her ability to interpret *juridical rules* and how they should be applied. In the presentation of the case of the two men kissing, the assumption is that the person addressed is disturbed by their behavior. This disturbance in itself is not condemned, on the contrary: it is presented as a conceivable option: "you may not agree with that." However, even if it troubles her, a fully integrated citizen will not show her disagreement, neither in words (asking the guys to stop) nor in deeds (going someplace else), because "in the Netherlands, coming out with homosexuality is not forbidden."

But this of course quite an awkward explanation. Obviously in any society there is a range of behaviors and activities that are not outlawed, yet can be experienced as anti-social, irritating, indecent or immoral. In such cases, people will feel inclined, justified, sometimes even obliged, to show their disagreement or displeasure. When I presented the case of the two men kissing to some of my white, quite liberal and progressive Dutch friends, they could very well imagine feeling irritated. Their irritation, they told me, would not be caused so much by the fact that it was two *guys* kissing, but by the ostentatious show of intimacy that would have bothered them too if it was performed by a heterosexual couple. One of my friends therefore chose answer number 2: she would tell the guys that they made her feel uncomfortable, and ask them to stop or at least restrain themselves a bit. Another friend went for answer number 3: he would leave and look for another place to enjoy his beer. Not only did my friends tell me that this was how they would *actually* respond, they also were quite capable of explaining *why* they thought their reaction was morally defensible and not discriminating of homosexuality at all. Evidently, my friends were not the only native Dutch who indicated that all three responses could be defended as customary and/or morally acceptable.

Making up the right wrong answers

Apparently, the testmakers received similar criticisms, because within a couple of months of its first issuing, the test exam offered a different set of alternatives:

1. *You quite loudly vent your opinion about homosexuality to your colleague*
2. *You remain seated and pretend you don't mind*
3. *You tell the men that they have to sit somewhere else*

This correction provides us with a nice illustration of the relational dimension in the Dutch (but of course in any) account of self.⁷ For in our clarifications of who we are, we may attempt to communicate a truth, but we also seek to persuade, influence, and act upon the other. In recent accounts of the Dutch self, such as the civic integration tests, this inscribed other clearly is the non-western Muslim immigrant.

7. Butler 2005.

While the 'correct' answers among the multiple choices offered are meant to give a truthful account of who the Dutch are, the 'wrong' answers can be read as reflections of how it is expected that the immigrants who are put to the test might be inclined to respond. In the case of the two guys kissing in public, we got a clue about how the designers of the test grappled with their task to make up with alternative answers that sufficiently discriminate between what the average Dutch would consider acceptable and unacceptable behavior, while at the same time not making the 'wrong' options so obviously (i.e. universally) wrong that immigrants could also pass the test without actually knowing much about Dutch society and culture.

This relational dimension in the account of the Dutch self as presented in the civic integration test is highlighted by two other cases presented in the test.

One case is about Zara. She works in a home for the elderly, and one of her colleagues wears a headscarf. One of their clients says to Zara: "How stupid that she wears a headscarf indoors, I never do that!" The candidate is asked what can Zara do best: 1. file a complaint against the old lady, 2. pretend she did not hear the remark, or 3. explain why her colleague is wearing a headscarf.

Another story is about Ali, who works in a factory. His colleague Hans makes nasty jokes about him. Ali does not like that at all, he thinks that Hans discriminates against him. Again, the question is what Ali can do best: 1. look for another job, 2. not speak to Hans anymore, or 3. have a talk with him.⁸

Both cases present an immigrant who is faced with judgemental or discriminatory remarks by a native Dutch. We may safely assume that in both cases the last response will be considered the appropriate one. In the 'wrong' answers we recognize the stereotypical images of Muslim immigrants as people who are (too) easily offended or frustrated, and who refuse to take responsibility but turn to the authorities to solve their problem. This overly emotional and passive attitude is contrasted with the purportedly typical Dutch response in such situations, which is to remain calm, be sensible and address the problem by talking with the person who caused it. The account of the Dutch self given here can be read as a defense against the implicit accusation of the Dutch being judgemental or discriminatory. The negative remarks made by the white Dutch client or colleague, it is suggested, are not meant to do harm, but merely derive from a lack of knowledge or of (inter-cultural) sensitivity. A straightforward talk will educate them, and the misunderstanding will be solved.

With the case of the gay guys, immigrants are tested for their willingness to tolerate overt homosexual behavior, with the stories about the old lady and the joker they are tested for their willingness to endure stupid questions and discriminatory

8. See *Oefenexamen inburgering*, Kennis Nederlandse Samenleving at <http://www.inburgeren.eigenstart.nl/> (retrieved March 28, 2010)

jokes by indigenous Dutch. The three cases constitute an apt illustration of the centrality of freedom of speech and sexual equality as the core elements of Dutch identity, but they also bring the message across that it is the native Dutch who are allowed to make use of their right to self expression and free speech, while immigrants are told not to protest or complain even if they feel annoyed or hurt by that.

This seems to be a clear case of the application of double standards. Only in the Netherlands, I must add, it seems that this comes with a vengeance. For it does not so much imply that Dutch natives and immigrants are measured by a different yard-stick, but rather that the first are never measured while the latter remain subjected to measurement all the time. While native Dutch citizens are assumed to self evidently 'belong', even if they show deviant, inappropriate or immoral behavior, immigrants may pass the integration exam with flying colours, adopt Dutch nationality and fully assimilate to the Dutch way, yet they will never entirely be released from the burden of proof that they are indeed fully integrated and loyal citizens. Contrary to the native Dutch, immigrants and their children are never granted 'dispensation of integration', as the sociologist Willem Schinkel phrased it.⁹ It is precisely because the Dutch policy puts such a strong emphasis on the need for people to integrate fully into Dutch society, that it produces that which it purportedly wants to prevent: an essential and everlasting divide between autochthonous and allochthone Dutch.

9. Schinkel 2008.

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