Sexual democracy, cultural alterity and the politics of everyday life in Amsterdam

Paul Mepschen

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Sexual democracy, cultural alterity and the politics of everyday life in Amsterdam

PAUL MEPSCHEN

ABSTRACT   Cultural and religious alterity, associated with postcolonial and labour migrants and their descendants, has become a matter of growing contention across Europe. Various scholars have discussed the situation in the Netherlands as exemplary of European anxieties about national cohesion and cultural homogeneity in which culturalized and racialized conceptions of the nation and its Others are central. Mepschen examines how these public discourses and politics are played out in the context of a pluri-ethnic, working-class neighbourhood in Amsterdam New West. Taking an ethnographic approach, he points to the ways in which 'white' Dutch citizens—imagined and construed as autochthonous, literally 'born from the Earth itself'—come to recognize themselves in, identify with and appropriate the images and rhetorics that circulate within culturalist, autochthonic symbolic economies. Following up on his previous work, Mepschen focuses here on the role played by discourses surrounding sexual liberty and LGBTIQ rights in these dynamics. Continuing with an ethnographic approach, he foregrounds the complex interplay of religion, secularism and sexuality in the 'making' and 'doing' of autochthony in an everyday, local context, a complexity that is lost in much of the existing analyses of Dutch multiculturalism.

KEYWORDS   Amsterdam, anxious politics, culturalism, Europe, homonationalism, the Netherlands, race, secularism, sexuality

Cultural and religious alterity, associated with postcolonial and labour migrants and their descendants, has become a matter of growing contention across Europe. Various scholars have discussed the situation in the Netherlands as exemplary of European anxieties about national cohesion and cultural homogeneity in which culturalized and racialized conceptions of the nation and its Others are central.[1] This article examines how these public discourses and politics are played out in the context of a pluri-ethnic,

1   See, for example, Peter Geschiere, *The Perils of Belonging, Autochthony, Citizenship, and Exclusion in Africa and Europe* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press 2009); and Jan Willem Duyvendak, *The Politics of Home: Belonging and Nostalgia in Europe and the United States* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2011).

working-class neighbourhood in Amsterdam New West. Taking an ethnographic approach, I focus on the ways in which 'white' Dutch citizens —imagined and construed as *autochthonous*, literally 'born from the earth itself'[2]—come to recognize themselves in, identify with and appropriate the images and rhetorics that circulate within culturalist, autochthonic symbolic economies. Following up on my previous work,[3] I focus here on the role played by discourses surrounding sexual liberty and LGBTIQ rights in these dynamics.[4] Continuing with an ethnographic approach, I foreground the complex interplay of religion, secularism and sexuality in the 'making' and 'doing' of autochthony in an everyday, local context, a complexity that is lost in much of the existing analyses of Dutch multiculturalism. I will analyse the everyday effects of a new regime of sexual nationalism in which sexual democracy and sexual liberty have become intimately tied up with secularity and 'modern' Dutchness, while religious and cultural alterity has come to be associated with (post)migrants and coupled with ideas of sexual conservatism and homophobia.[5] As secular ideologies and practices have grown increasingly important in nationalist ideologies and practices of belonging, the religious has become framed as out of sync with 'liberal' secular moralities, as Other. Muslims have been the most conspicuous objects in recent years of what Sarah Bracke refers to as 'secular nostalgia'.[6] They are framed as trespassing on a sacrosanct, secular moral landscape, distorting the dream of a unified, secular and morally progressive nation.

This paper is based on fieldwork in a pluri-ethnic, socially mixed neighbourhood in Amsterdam New West, from September 2009 to May 2011. The project took as a starting point the emergence, in the extended aftermath of decolonization and the Cold War and amidst the withering of the Fordist-Keynesian compact in Europe, of what Nicholas de Genova has referred to as 'the "European" question', or the problem of Europeanness.[7] The reanimation of nationalism in Europe, which is expressed in the rise and growing social and political influence of exclusionary political formations, practices and ideas, calls for an anthropology that turns attention precisely

2 Geschiere, *The Perils of Belonging*, 2.
3 Paul Mepschen, Jan Willem Duyvendak and Evelien H. Tonkens, 'Sexual politics, Orientalism and multicultural citizenship in the Netherlands', *Sociology*, vol. 44, no. 5, 2010, 962–79.
4 LGBTIQ is a term denoting non-heteronormative identifications and modes of being in the world, and stands for 'Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Questioning'.
5 Sarah Bracke, 'From "saving women" to "saving gays": rescue narratives and their dis/continuities', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2012, 237–52; Mepschen, Duyvendak and Tonkens, 'Sexual politics, Orientalism and multicultural citizenship in the Netherlands'.
6 Bracke, 'From "saving women" to "saving gays"'.
7 Nicholas de Genova, 'The "European" question: notes toward a postcolonial perspective on migration, nation, and race', paper presented at the 9th IMISCOE Annual Conference, Amsterdam, 28–9 August 2012.

to those European populations construed as native or *autochthonous*. In Dutch social research and popular debate, autochthony has implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) functioned as the unreflexive norm, a neutral category, a natural fact without a history or relational context. It functions, like whiteness, as a 'reference category' against which deviant cultures can be measured, or as a cultural 'whole' into which minoritized and racialized Others can be reasonably expected to 'integrate'. Willem Schinkel has pointed out that, unlike the supposed 'cultures' of Others, autochthony is not understood as an ethnos, denoting the sense that everything that is not autochthonous is automatically 'ethnic', while the notion of 'autochthony' itself is exempt from ethnicity and as a result from social scientific scrutiny.[8] As a scholar working in the Netherlands—and as someone categorized as autochthonous—I felt it was necessary to contribute to a critical anthropology of autochthony: that is to say, a critical, reflexive ethnography of the white majority. A focus on sexual politics offers one inroad into this complex question.

The peripheralization of homophobia

The Netherlands have in recent decades witnessed a quite remarkable shift in the social location of gay politics as they relate to the rise of anti-multiculturalism in Europe. LGBTIQ rights and discourses are employed to frame Europe as the 'avatar of both freedom and modernity',[9] while depicting especially Muslim citizens as backward and homophobic. In the words of the queer theorist Jasbir Puar, who coined the term 'homonationalism', gay rights have been recast as an 'optic, and an operative technology' in the production and disciplining of Muslim Others.[10] Cases of homophobia among Muslim citizens are highlighted, epitomized as archetypal and cast within Orientalist narratives that underwrite the superiority of European secular modernity.[11] That is to say, homophobia has increasingly become represented as peripheral to Dutch culture. This symbolic representation at the level of the nation is also played out at the level of Amsterdam as a geographical space: whereas the centre of Amsterdam is produced, in public discourse concerning the city, as modern, secular and as possessing gay capital, the city's racialized peripheries are represented as religiously conservative, intolerant, homophobic and perilous for LGBTIQ people.

8   Willem Schinkel, *Denken in een tijd van sociale hypochondrie: aanzet tot een theorie voorbij de maatschappij* (Kampen: Klement 2007).
9   Judith Butler, 'Sexual politics, torture, and secular time', *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 59, no. 1, 2008, 1–23 (2).
10 Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2007).
11 Mepschen, Duyvendak and Tonkens, 'Sexual politics, Orientalism and multicultural citizenship in the Netherlands'.

This complex junction of sexuality, religion and race is pivotal. Central to the construction of Dutch autochthony is a peculiar anxiety about achievements at the level of sexual citizenship, culminating in a culturalization and racialization of sexuality. In this process, sexual liberty and sexual democracy have become associated with secular liberalism and pitted against the allegedly backward—and perilous—'cultures' of migrants, especially Muslims. This articulation of secularism, cultural alterity and sexual democracy operates not only at the level of public discourse and political debate, but has significant impact on the lives of individual subjects, affecting and reconfiguring perceptions, routines, habits and practices that define everyday experience. While the academic literature on the subject has focused on analysing shifting public and political discourses, much less attention has been paid to what these transformations mean in terms of the self-understanding and practices of subjects acting in local contexts.[12]

The efforts at the level of LGBTIQ politics of the former district chairman of the Amsterdam ward Slotervaart, one part of the mostly working-class, ethnically diverse area of Amsterdam in which I did ethnographic work from 2009 to 2011, provides an important case study.[13] On a Saturday morning in August 2009, Amsterdam mayor Job Cohen and the chairman of Amsterdam Slotervaart—the Moroccan-Dutch Partij van de Arbeid (Labour Party) politician Ahmed Marcouch—jointly opened the yearly Gay Pride boat parade in an unexpected place. Unlike previous years when the opening of the Pride Canal Parade—the signature event of Amsterdam Gay Pride—took place in the liberal, 'cosmopolitan' centre of Amsterdam, an international gay destination, this year it took place in Marcouch's pluri-ethnic, 'disadvantaged' district, hardly ever visited by tourists, gay or straight. Amsterdam Slotervaart has been described on the blog *GeenStijl*, the apex of right-wing irony and nihilism in the Dutch public sphere,[14] as 'a permanent danger zone' because of its image as crime-ridden and its large numbers of citizens with a Muslim background. The novelty of the opening of the Pride parade taking place in such a notorious district attracted a lot attention both across the city and nationally.

Besides Marcouch and Cohen, various representatives of the C.O.C.,[15] the oldest still existing lesbian and gay emancipation movement in the world, were also present. Several prominent public figures participated as Marcouch's

---

12 Oskar Verkaaik and Rachel Spronk, 'Sexular practice: notes on an ethnography of secularism', *Focaal*, no. 59, Spring 2011, 83–8.

13 The district Slotervaart fused with two other districts to become New West in 2010, while I was doing research there. In 2014, due to another policy reform, New West ceased to exist as an administrative unit. However, I still use the term New West to indicate a geographical area in Amsterdam, though not a distinct administrative unit per se.

14 See Merijn Oudenampsen, 'GeenStijl en de dubbele bodem van de rechtse ironie', *Joop*, 13 July 2013, available on the *Joop* website at www.joop.nl/opinies/geenstijl-en-de-dubbele-bodem-van-de-rechtse-ironie (viewed 4 March 2016). Translations from the Dutch, unless otherwise stated, are by the author.

15 The Cultuur en Ontspanningscentrum (Center for Culture and Leisure) was founded in 1946 as the Shakespeareclub.

invited guests, while popular artists and comedians entertained the crowd. Most of these people joined the mayor and the district chairman on the boat of the Amsterdam municipality, which took part in the Pride Canal Parade.

This was an important day for Marcouch, a self-identified liberal Muslim, who had been lobbying for months to bring the opening of this yearly festivity—a more or less national celebration in the Netherlands that brings tens of thousands of people to the country's capital—to his district. During his tenure as chairman in Slotervaart, he had set in motion a homo-emancipation policy in his district that had gained some prominence and attention, culminating in various expert meetings and other local events. One consequence of this policy was the hotly debated policy paper on homo-emancipation in Slotervaart in April 2009, which catapulted Marcouch into the public spotlight. The chairman had also spoken out in favour of making homosexuality *bespreekbaar* (speakable) and 'visible' within Muslim communities, to the dismay of some local Muslims, including some of his compatriots in the New West chapter of his Labour Party.

Bringing the opening of the parade to New West, this 'permanent danger zone', was supposed to be a centrepiece of Marcouch's initiatives with respect to lesbian and gay politics at the district level. According to Marcouch, the idea came to him when he was invited by the organizers of Amsterdam Pride to join them on one of the Canal Parade's boats that year. He felt that if the organizers really wanted to have political impact, the Pride should not take place in Amsterdam's city centre, but in neighbourhoods like that of New West. Marcouch had even lobbied for the minister of Youth and Education, André Rouvoet, to be present at the opening, arguing that the presence of an orthodox Christian—Rouvoet was a member of the ChristenUnie (Christian Union), a party of orthodox and evangelical Protestants—would be educational for orthodox Muslims in his district, whose conservative views on homosexuality Marcouch wanted to affect and provoke. To Marcouch's disappointment, however, the minister declined.

The attention given to and discursive noise surrounding this event—and the politics of homo-emancipation in Amsterdam New West in general—were not isolated phenomena, but part of the new configuration of sexuality, nationalism and cultural alterity discussed above. This new 'sexual nationalism' is animated by a spatialized cultural politics in which ethnically diverse neighbourhoods have come to figure in public discourse as places of fear, invisibility and alienation for LGBTIQ subjects, as 'danger zones'.[16] As such, pluri-ethnic neighbourhoods like New West—construed to be inhabited by hateful homophobes who cannot respect LGBTIQ visibility and gay rights[17]—have increasingly come to be imagined as a constituency outside of a celebrated, Dutch homo-tolerance.

16 Building on the notion developed by Jasbir Puar, my colleagues and I organized a large conference on the concept of 'sexual nationalisms' at the University of Amsterdam in January 2011.

17 See Jin Haritaworn, 'Queer injuries: the racial politics of "homophobic hate crime" in Germany', *Social Justice*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2010, 69–89.

In September 2011, a media frenzy broke out across the Netherlands when a gay male couple in The Hague accused a group of neighbourhood children, aged 8 to 11, of incessant harassment and bullying. The kids were said to have verbally abused the two men by calling them 'dirty homos', to have thrown rotten fruit at their windows and besmirched the walls of their home. The issue was raised by the local chapter of the right-wing, anti-immigrant populist Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV, Party for Freedom), which underlined the migrant backgrounds of the alleged harassers, implicitly emphasizing the gay couple's 'nativeness' and their whiteness. The PVV thus framed these events as battles between inimical cultures. The harassed couple also used an anti-immigrant frame to interpret and represent what had (allegedly) happened to them.

The story was broken on national television by PowNews, a right-wing television programme whose cameras were also present when the leader of the PVV, Geert Wilders, visited the victimized couple in their new home, accompanied by an openly gay PVV-politician who was a member of the city council in The Hague. PowNews presented the bullied gay couple as prototypical white victims of devious immigrants in a pluri-ethnic society, while Wilders kept up his rhetoric of support for 'ordinary' Whites and insisted that the children, 'the scum' as he called them, should be removed from the neighbourhood: 'If necessary, we can put them, with their parents, in containers on an industrial estate.'

This case was not an isolated incident, but one episode in a series of events that have been framed as a clash between white gay men and minoritized, post-migrant youths. Indeed, anti-gay harassment and homophobic violence in the Netherlands are increasingly seen through a culturalist lens: as a clash between white victims and ethnicized young perpetrators, most often Dutch-Moroccan young men. Marcouch's initiatives surrounding lesbian/gay politics did, in other words, not emerge out of thin air. They must be understood in relation to an increasingly effective discourse that suggests that progress made at the level of lesbian/gay emancipation and physical security was under threat due to the influx and influence of cultural and religious Others. These concerns have been especially salient in Amsterdam, which has had a reputation of being a forerunner in homo-emancipation since the 1970s, and which has recently reinforced its older ambition to be a global 'gay capital': a global city that attracts gay business, gay tourists and middle-class LGBTIQ inhabitants. Of interest to me here is the relationship between the image of the city as gay capital and the alterity of those Others—especially young men read as Muslim —that help to construct certain areas of the city as 'danger zones'.

Questions surrounding the homo-tolerant image of Amsterdam are not new: homo-negativity and anti-gay violence have been experienced and represented as 'on the rise' since the early 2000s.[18] Even then, this

18 Laurens Buijs, Gert Hekma and Jan Willem Duyvendak, '"As long as they keep away from me": the paradox of antigay violence in a gay-friendly country', *Sexualities*, vol. 14, no. 6, 2011, 632–52; Mariten Zebrackie and Emiel Maliepaard, 'Amsterdam Gay Capital af', *Geografie*, January 2012, 24–5.

alleged rise in anti-gay incidences had been dominantly understood in and through the same culturalist frame: as acceptance of LGBTIQ rights have come to be understood as typically Dutch, homo-negativity has come to be associated with cultural 'outsiders', especially young men with a Muslim background. As the cultural theorist Murat Aydemir puts it:

> . . . received wisdom now has it that the relationship between Dutch gays and lesbians—because of *our* sexuality—and Moroccan young men— because of *their* culture or religion (read: race)—can only be antagonistic to the extent that the needs, wants, rights, interests, desires, and claims of the two groups can only ever be mutually exclusive. The cultivated conflict between Dutch homosexuals and immigrant teens indicates a perceived rupture between interpellations based on sex and those based on race, a rupture that is part of the very way we think, experience, and live sex and race.[19]

These representations of the entangled relations between sexual politics, religion and national belonging are inscribed in the urban fabric. That is to say, the *gay capital* of the city—the visibility and the cultural and commercial presence of 'gayness' in Amsterdam that plays such a key role in the city's global iconography—is unevenly distributed across space, with some areas that seem to possess more 'mainstream' gay capital being represented and seen as being more Dutch. While the Amsterdam city centre and some of the affluent neighbourhoods close to it are viewed as having a large amount of gay capital, the less affluent and more peripheral neighbourhoods are seen and represented as potentially homophobic and dangerous. Hence, we can identify a process in which Dutch homo-tolerance and Amsterdam's gay capital come into being in and through a process of peripheralization of spaces marked by greater ethnic or racial diversity: while homo-tolerance and gay capital come to be associated with the cultural and spatial centre of the city, homophobia has become tied up with imaginaries of culturalized and racialized peripheries.[20] Amsterdam New West, I am suggesting, is one of these racialized peripheries: post-migrant spaces that are marked as perilous for LGBTIQ subjects.[21] In what follows, I turn to my ethnographic work in New West, to explore how these dynamics concerning religion, race and place are played out in the local context of Amsterdam New West.

19 Murat Aydemir, 'Introduction: Indiscretions at the sex/culture divide', in Murat Aydemir (ed.), *Indiscretions: At the Intersection of Queer and Postcolonial Theory* (Amsterdam: Rodopi 2011), 9–30 (9–10).
20 See also Haritaworn, 'Queer injuries'.
21 Anouk de Koning, 'Creating an exceptional problem neighbourhood: media, policy, and Amsterdam's "notorious" Diamantbuurt', *Etnofoor*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2013, 13–30.

Gay men and their Others

In May 2010, while doing fieldwork, I was invited to the first reception (*borrel*) of Pink Nieuw West, organized by local gay men, some of whom I had already encountered in my research. That various 'pink' neighbourhood receptions had been taking place across Amsterdam in previous years was connected to the uneven distribution of gay capital in the city and the process of peripheralization described above. While most LGBTIQ people in Amsterdam lived—and live—their everyday lives in socially mixed, pluri-ethnic neigh-bourhoods outside the highly expensive city centre, most of these neighbour-hoods have no lesbian/gay-oriented social or commercial facilities. The *pink borrels*—supported financially and symbolically by local authorities and the C.O.C.—were seen as one way to build LGBTIQ community in such places, and help LGBTIQ people to feel more at home in their local neighbourhoods, and hence to develop gay capital in spaces outside the 'globally gay' city centre and as such include them in the global imagery of Amsterdam as Gay Capital.

While a number of *pink borrels* had been organized in middle-class and gen-trifying neighbourhoods closer to the city centre, in New West no such thing had yet been organized. And—as one of the events' initiators put it—there was in fact 'nothing for gays' in the neighbourhood, except the gay cruising area (where gay men could go to have sex) at De Nieuwe Meer. But the sexual character of this meeting place according to the organizers 'only con-tributed' to the stigmatization of gay men. The *pink borrel* was, in other words, meant to offer a meeting place for gays and lesbians in their own neighbourhood that was not focused on sex, and to increase the level of *gay capital* in the district.

I went to the *borrel* with Francesco, a gay colleague who lived in New West and had been invited by his neighbours. The reception was held in one of the neighbourhood bars on Plein 40–45, a frequent hang-out for mostly autochtho-nous, 'working-class' Amsterdammers. Popular Dutch folk music played from the loudspeakers and the bar was decorated with orange flags that were left over from the annual Queens Day celebration—a national celebration of the birthday of Beatrix, the mother of the current king who was herself still queen of the Netherlands at the time—held a couple of days earlier. As I ordered a beer, I encountered Michel, a gay New West politician and council member for the free-market liberal party Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (VVD, People's Party for Freedom and Democracy), whom I had interviewed a few days earlier. After greeting me with three kisses, he wrote down our names on a sticker, which we placed on our shirts so that others would be able to address us by name.

I introduced Michel to Francesco and we chatted a bit before Michel had to go and welcome other guests. A group of men soon noticed us and invited us over to talk. One of these men, named Mark, told me that if all the gay men in his apartment building would come, the bar would be full of people. He lived

in one of the large flats north of the Sloterplas—all owner-occupied apartments and hence symbolically distant from the less affluent area in the neighbourhood, which was dominated by public housing estates. Mark noted that the *pink borrel* was a good idea, in his view, because New West had a large gay population but gay people had no places to meet and were invisible.

The conversation became interesting when we started to discuss my research. We were now talking in a group of five men, mostly in Dutch, so I think Francesco stopped paying attention because his knowledge of Dutch was still rather basic at the time. Animated by the discussion, two of the men who were both in their fifties soon invited me to visit them at their home to 'have a few drinks'. While this clearly was an invitation for activities beyond drinking, the two were genuinely fascinated by my interest in the multicultural aspects of New West. They told me—assuming I would agree completely—that they could obviously not really be themselves where they lived. Part of the 'leather community', they often travelled to Berlin to 'be themselves', something they felt had become impossible in Amsterdam. They argued they had come to see Amsterdam as a relatively conservative city in comparison to Berlin, 'where everything was possible'. One of the men, Frank, told me he could not live out his fetishes in public: he went out in the leather-oriented Warmoestraat in the city centre a lot, but explained that he would only change into his outfit once he reached his destination. Otherwise, according to him, it was too dangerous, even in the city centre. 'This has nothing to do, by the way, with Moroccans per se', he offered, an unsolicited comment. He told me that not long ago he had been beaten up by a couple of right-wing 'skinheads' in Schiedam—a poor, working-class town close to Rotterdam—because he was read as gay. 'It's not just Moroccans, that's important to stress. You can also encounter homophobic Dutchmen.'

But the conversation quickly shifted when the other man, Mark, accused Frank of being politically correct. I summarize:

> Come on, man! There are too many Muslims in this neighbourhood and homosexuality is simply incompatible with their beliefs. It makes things more difficult for us. We are going backwards instead of forwards [when it comes to gay emancipation: PM]. And that's because of those backward Muslims (*achterlijke moslims*).[22]

At this point Frank started to change his narrative, and said—as if making a confession—that it was indeed true that there were 'too many satellite dishes' in the neighbourhood. 'Turks, Moroccans. Something has to be done about that (*Er moet wel iets aan gebeuren*). Because, as a gay man, one feels uncomfortable among them.' Frank also pointed out to me that—thankfully,

---

22 While I have translated the term *achterlijk* here to mean backward, in Dutch the term also carries the even stronger connotation of 'retarded'.

in his views—the apartment building in which he lived was like a 'white bastion' (*wit bastion*). Not that every one of his neighbours was gay but 'there are many gays you know, there are always a lot of guys around on Grindr.'[23] Mark became even more animated at this point, and responded emphatically:

> It has simply become impossible to go on to the street as a gay man. You always have to be careful. That is because of the religion of those people. They are aggressive. Even in Berlin it's getting worse and worse. And that is because of the Turks . . . even though, the Turks in Berlin seem more progressive than the Moroccans here. At least, I think so. I don't know exactly, but it seems like that.

This brief excerpt from the conversation illustrates how dominant images concerning homosexuality, Islam and migrant communities, which have emerged in the context of an increasingly dominant 'homonationalism',[24] seep into everyday conversation, while deeply affecting experience and perception in everyday life. While someone like Frank was acutely aware that homophobia cannot be reduced to a problem of young migrant men—'you can also encounter homophobic Dutchmen'—the association between homophobia and racialized Others, especially 'Muslims'— nevertheless took on a matter-of-fact form. 'Too many satellite dishes' came to index the presence of citizens originating from and oriented to Muslim-majority countries and had—in interaction with hegemonic, Orientalist discourses concerning the Arab and Muslim Other— created a sense of alienation and fear of abjection among these white, more or less middle-class, gay men. Frank's more nuanced perspective, when criticized as being *politically correct*, was very quickly discarded for the anti-Muslim sentiments that Mark posited, as anxieties about the abrogation of Frank's freedom to be homosexual were projected on the backwardness and threat of violence of Muslims not only locally, but also in a European context.

Such representations arguably derive from representations that associate white middle-class culture with homo-tolerance and *gay capital* while associating young post-migrant men with tradition, aggression and homophobia. In this way, 'peripheral', pluri-ethnic neighbourhoods, regarded as lacking sufficient gay capital and at the same time housing too many Muslims, are construed as spaces of discomfort and alienation for LGBTIQ people. One important aspect of this dynamic is the implicit, probably unconscious, association of gayness and sexual tolerance with whiteness and indeed with *Dutchness*. To come to a better understanding of these dynamics, I now turn to an ethnographic exploration of what I call 'everyday culturalism' to take a look at the commonsense logics that come into being in the current situation. This section introduces Stefan, whom I first met at a *pink borrel* in May 2010.

---

23 Grindr is the most popular gay dating app in the Netherlands (and beyond).
24 Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*.

Enacting culturalism

On an evening in October 2010 I attended a debate entitled 'Amsterdam between Mokum and Mekka', organized by neighbourhood residents who were part of an 'intercultural' network in Slotermeer, a local initiative that had begun to hold activities in the late 1990s but had only gained momentum after the 9/11 attacks in the United States. The district administration, worried about the local fall-out of that global event, had taken an interest in 'doing something': more than ever, the feeling was, it was necessary to bring people together in 'intercultural and interfaith dialogue'. One year after 9/11 a revamped and now ambitious network was launched. This particular evening eight years later brought together between sixty and eighty people.

As soon as I entered the building I started looking around the room for familiar faces. Steven was there and I went to greet him. I had met him in March 2010, during the election campaign for the Amsterdam and New West municipality, in which he was a candidate for the ChristenUnie, a small political party of evangelical and orthodox Protestants. Steven was involved in a conversation with a number of other people, including Wart and Maria, a couple in their fifties, who were very active locally. I had met them several times before. They lived in an alternative, ecological living community in New West. There were also two other people involved in the conversation whom I had not met before: a woman named Els and a man named Stefan.

After I was welcomed into the circle of soup-eating people, they continued their discussion. The topic of their debate was the dialogical axiom of the inter-cultural, inter-religious network organizing the event that evening: the mission was 'to let it come from two sides'. Stefan passionately disagreed with that dialogical command, and his discontent was in fact why he had come to the meeting. 'It is nonsense. Because it always comes only from one side, from our side', he said. 'We give, they only take. And when we give one finger, they take the whole hand.' Considering the dialogical imperative of this 'intercultural' event, I mistakenly expected others around the table to protest. But Stefan's remarks proved less out of place than I had expected, at least at this point in the conversation. Indeed, his remarks were greeted with mild approval, and Stefan elaborated on how the changes in the neighbourhood had frustrated and angered him: 'Muslims despise ordinary western people (*gewone westerse mensen*)', he argued. 'They tell us that we are perverse.' He was also of the opinion that friendship with Muslims was impossible because 'they only had regard for themselves'. Stefan argued that he was speaking from personal experience. To my surprise, Wart responded to this by saying that, yes, he thought Stefan was partly right, while also trying to be more nuanced.

> They are a bit better at thinking of themselves than we are. But you have to differentiate between groups. We suffer from Moroccans because they have failed on all accounts. Even when it comes to crime, they have failed. The

> Chinese, for example, they are not addressed for their lack of integration. Why not? They too have problems. They too are involved in crime; there is exploitation within their own community. They don't speak Dutch. Many of them are here illegally. But they keep it within their own community. Moroccans, however, harass us on our streets. That's why they provoke so much resistance (*weerstand*).

Stefan, ignoring the more complex substance of Wart's remarks, responded: 'Look, we are being despised. They think we are corrupted (*ze vinden ons verdorven*). They came here and they immediately started to curse us.'

When I asked Stefan what he meant and if he had personal experience with this as well, his answer was simply: 'Just watch television.' Echoing narratives that I had become familiar with in the course of my fieldwork in Slotermeer, and that I also recognized from conversations in my own daily life, Stefan continued: 'Even small children [of post-migrant background: PM] say: "Just wait, in ten years we are in power here". When you hear that, you know what kind of language is used at home. Because children speak the truth.' Wart seemed to agree with this: 'We should stop blaming society for the trouble with migrant youths. It all starts at home. That's where things go wrong.' Els responded to that: 'Yes, in the Berber culture. That's simply a backward culture (*een achterlijke cultuur*).' Wart responded further:

> There is no harmony in the family culture. It starts even with marriage. We marry first of all mostly because we love each other. But, in these cultures, people don't marry out of love. They marry because they are supposed to marry. Moreover, the ten-year-old son is already boss in the home, especially because the father doesn't speak Dutch. When there is no harmony at home, the children go on to the streets. And thus a street culture develops. And that's when we are confronted with it. That is what we suffer from.

The most important aspect of this conversation is the self-evident way in which the Other is produced as a knowable object. This is a pivotal dimension of the Dutch politics of culturalization: the notion that the migrant Other—especially when he is of Moroccan and/or Muslim descent—is always already known to 'autochthonous' Whites. This sense of knowing can be achieved because the culturalist framework rests, precisely, on collective representations of reified 'groups' whose members are thought to be defined by social stereotypes that are seen as inherent to their groups' collective life and culture. Indeed, before the Other can be known—and can be distinguished from ordinary neighbours—a particular discourse has to be in place: a field of knowledge that enables people to distinguish between neighbours and strangers. As Nitzan Shoshan points out in his study of far-right sentiments in Berlin, the pundits of nativist culturalization circulate 'discursive topoi that have seeped as citations into the situated politics' of people like Stefan,

Wart and others.[25] This process coincides with what Sara Ahmed has referred to as 'stranger fetishism',[26] the process through which identity is relationally established via the encounter with alterity. She points out that such encounters presuppose 'other faces, other encounters of facing, other bodies, other spaces, and other times'.[27]

> . . . encounters between embodied subjects always hesitate between the domain of the particular—the face to face of this encounter—and the general—the framing of the encounter by broader relationships of power and antagonism. The particular encounter hence always carries *traces* of those broader relationships. Differences, as markers of power, are not determined in the 'space' of the particular *or* the general, but in the very determination of their historical relation (a determination that is never final or complete, as it involves strange encounters).[28]

To return to the discussion on gay men and their Others—and thus the relationship between the everyday experience of homophobia and the politics of representation—encounters with alterity can be said to be grounded in an economy of misrecognition. What appears as immediately visible, as authentic or real, is in fact always already 'culturally and socially conditioned by received frames and formats'.[29] It is within such an economy of misrecognition that notions of alterity take shape: difference is 'imbricated in and generated through a web of somatic modalities that incorporate alterity into material things'.[30] Within such an economy of misrecognition, the multicultural neighbourhood comes to be seen and experienced as a place of encounters with hostile strangers, with 'space invaders' that are held responsible for all kinds of social problems: homophobia, symbolic displacement, violence. The culturalist framework has—I argue—been central in producing and normalizing this everyday field of knowledge that constructs a particular distribution of the sensible in which the migrant figures as a cultural stranger, one who is out of place. As a peculiar strangeness comes to stick to bodies, sounds, languages, smells and sights, the pluri-ethnic neighbourhood becomes experienced, by some people, as a site of crisis and peril.

   This is especially clear in Stefan's narrative. For him, the call for dialogue that inspired the evening in De Bron was lost on his Muslim neighbours: they were seen by him as unwilling to enter into conversation. Dutch

25 Nitzan Shoshan, 'Placing the extremes: cityscape, ethnic "Others" and young right extremists in East Berlin', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2008, 377–91 (387).
26 Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (London and New York: Routledge 2000).
27 Ibid., 7.
28 Ibid., 9 (original emphasis).
29 Thomas Blom Hansen, *Melancholia of Freedom: Social Life in an Indian Township in South Africa* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2012), 3.
30 Shoshan, 'Placing the extremes', 381.

Muslims—or, more precisely, those perceived to be Muslim by Stefan—thus emerged here as radically different from the autochthonous self, a fundamental alterity that made dialogue an impossible dream. Moreover, Islam emerged in Stefan's narrative as a threat not only to himself but also to the very integrity of the nation: he was convinced that 'Muslims' planned to take power. 'I know what kind of language is spoken at home. Children speak the truth.'

Stefan's constructions of post-migrant, especially Muslim, alterity thus functioned as a starting point for a dialogue about the perceived Otherness of post-migrant neighbours among these 'white', 'autochthonous' residents of Slotermeer. Most of the participants—although not Stefan—considered themselves opponents of the nationalist populism of the likes of Geert Wilders and his PVV, and tried to point this out a number of times. Wart and Els, for instance, expressed this by arguing that 'you must distinguish between groups' and 'you mustn't put everyone under the same umbrella'. But their speech acts reproduced the culturalist interpretive frame as opposed to negating the substantialist carving up of society into discrete cultural 'wholes'. Moreover, while I was initially surprised by the conversation, which seemed out of place at this particular 'multiculturalist' event, in hindsight I realized that it in fact remained well within the boundaries set by the substantialist premise inherent in the notion of intercultural dialog as propagated by the event's organizers, which precisely relied on an imaginary of fixed and discrete cultural entities.

Maria and Wart told me later that evening that they were in fact embarrassed by the 'racist' turn Dutch politics had taken. Contradicting his earlier remarks, Wart told me: 'In the end, these problems [with post-migrants youths: PM] are all social problems. Multicultural society is already a fact. We must think of these things as social problems, not as cultural problems, I guess. Yes, that sounds better.' This mild embarrassment with the culturalist framework notwithstanding, the culturalist 'perspective *on* the world',[31] by which the habits, ways of life and moralities of post-migrants were framed, interpreted, discussed and classified, took on a matter-of-fact, indisputable form during the whole conversation. The commonsense articulation of these stereotypical languages unveils a normalized discourse that 'equates ethnic categories with social groups under the name of "community" and . . . identifies each community with a reified culture'.[32] The cultures ascribed to ethnicized minorities become framed as explanatory of social problems of persons in minoritized groups, including behaviour construed as deviant. My argument is that these discourses must be taken seriously in the study of everyday life: it is not enough to deconstruct them; it is necessary to understand how they are performed, and how they shape self-understanding and

31 Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press 2004), 65 (original emphasis).
32 Gerd Baumann, *Contesting Culture: Discourses of Identity in Multi-Ethnic London* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press 1996), 188.

urban space. In the next section I shall focus on my interviews with Stefan to shed some light on how the neighbourhood comes into being in and through culturalist misrecognition.

Weaving the urban landscape

I now turn my attention to the biographical and historical context in which Stefan and others like him articulate and come to be interpellated by exclusionary culturalist rhetorics of self and other. These culturalist and nativist discourses, I argue, are woven into everyday symbolic behaviour and languages and thus come to 'channel social interaction and organize commonsense knowledge and judgments'.[33] Why do these scripts make sense to people like Stefan? My interviews with him in the weeks after the conversation discussed above suggest at least a part of the answer—and force us to return to the complex intersections of religious alterity, gay identification and secularism or—more precisely—secular passion. To understand Stefan, we must begin with the fact that he is gay and comes from a strict Roman Catholic background. His identification as a gay man takes place in the context of his life in a pluri-ethnic, multireligious neighbourhood that is marked as poor, troubled and perilous, and in which the religious alterity of neighbours is visible in and through somatic and material particularities, like the hijab, the djellaba and the satellite dishes.

I went to visit Stefan at his home weeks after I met him. I had called him by telephone after our meeting and he was eager to talk to me. I was excited, yet troubled, by his eagerness to participate in my research. I felt uncomfortable with becoming complicit in his discourse surrounding white voicelessness and post-migrant viciousness. Nonetheless, I wanted to understand him better. Stefan lived on the fourth floor of a 1950s apartment building at the edge of the small neighbourhood in which I was working, above a number of kebab restaurants and bars, an evening shop, a small greengrocer run by a Dutch-Moroccan man and a shop with North African wedding dresses. It was one of the few relatively lively corners of this otherwise extremely residential and quiet part of Slotermeer. It was the corner's liveliness that also gave the area a bad reputation. Early on in my fieldwork, while looking for a temporary place to live in Slotermeer, people warned me to avoid this particular corner of the area. The atmosphere in the kebab place I sometimes visited was buzzy and noisy: a television set thundering in the corner, teenage guys running in and out, joking with the man behind the counter. It was somewhat different from the working-class domesticity and respectability of the rest of the quarter.

Stefan's apartment was on the top floor of a four-story building and was inexpensively decorated, with dark brown carpeting, a number of old sofas and chairs, a 1970s coffee table and a lot of knickknacks everywhere. The walls were decorated with some mildly homoerotic drawings. Stefan had been living on disability benefits for years—the result of psychological

33 Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*, 11.

problems—and had to survive on relatively little income, like many of his neighbours in this part of Amsterdam. A couple of days a week he worked as a volunteer in the local hospital, a ten-minute bicycle ride away. He had prepared himself well for my visit. He had even typed up four pages of notes so as not to forget anything he wanted to tell me. He had looked me up on the Internet, and had found things out about me. He now saw me as an expert to whom he could pass on his 'knowledge' of the neighbourhood, a 'knowledge' that he complained he was not permitted to narrate because of the political correctness 'destroying everything' (*dat alles kapot maakt*).

Stefan's story started in the 1950s in the Dutch Catholic south, where he grew up with an orthodox Catholic father, who was a labourer in the textile industry, and his mother, who was a housewife. His father was, as Stefan put it, 'possessed with religious fanaticism'. This would have a strong formative influence on how Stefan acted and looked at the world. His distaste for organized religion and religious (sexual) conservatism was palpable:

> My father was always like: God this, God that. Terrorizing. God as a bogeyman. It wasn't nice. It was like a heavy yoke. You always were afraid: what would God think? I remember going to kindergarten for the first time, but I was afraid of the nuns who were the teachers. So I ran away. And I have this vivid memory. Of those devilish nuns running after me.

Stefan's views on the 'horrible, horrible changes' in Slotermeer since the influx of post-migrants in the neighbourhood were deeply coloured by his distaste for religion in general and Islam in particular, which he saw as a threat to his sexual identity as a gay man. The presence of Muslims in the neighbourhood made him uncomfortable, bringing back, he said, his religious trauma. He constructed his post-migrant neighbours as a more or less undifferentiated group of grim, conservative, hostile Others, who were not to be trusted and whose fundamental alterity and grim conservatism was somatically identifiable by means of dress, bodily composure, habits and sounds.[34] He spoke accordingly: 'The children are always crying, always loud. The family in the apartment below, to give an example. The children running, boom boom boom. . . . I always call them the noise people (*het lawaaivolk*). They just never shut up. They make a lot of noise.' This somatically identified alterity was counterposed to an idealized notion of autochthonic, middle-class Dutch conviviality, which seemed far removed from Stefan's everyday lifeworld. For Stefan, his world was characterized by the proximity of poor working-class post-migrants, loud kids and young men marked as threatening and dishonest:

> Just the other day, I was walking in the park, a bit further down, you know, where those expensive, free standing houses are. A completely different kind

34 See Shoshan, 'Placing the extremes'.

> of people live there! It's really beautiful there! Their kids were also playing, but
> it was really nice. Not like it is here. It was peaceful. There was chocolate milk,
> everything . . . Nice! But these were genuinely western people (*echt westerse
> mensen*). . . . Over here, the atmosphere is grim (*grimmig*), also among children.
> They are always fighting, they are loud and aggressive.

This narrative illustrates a dynamic that Nitzan Shoshan calls 'the somatic weaving of an ethnicized urban landscape' in which 'sensualities of otherness weave political significations about ethnic groups . . . into the tangible fabric of the multi-ethnic city'.[35] The urban landscape that emerges in this perspective on the world is a deeply culturalist and classed one, in which sensorial Otherness comes to be delineated as morally and politically significant.

   Here, the 'loudness' of the neighbours comes to be culturalized, imagined as a cultural and religious problem. When young Moroccan-Dutch and Turkish-Dutch young men—his neighbours—try to chat with Stefan as he walks by, he interprets this as a sign that they want something else: to know the intimate details of his life; to extort some cash; to find out whether or not he is gay. When he sees a woman wearing the hijab or a man wearing the djellaba on his way to the mosque, he interprets it as an attack on his way of life, sexual identity and personal moral values. As he told me:

> It's not that they are not allowed to wear a headscarf. In the past, old women in
> the Netherlands also used to wear a headscarf. But it's the message that they
> want to convey. 'We are pious, you are bad.' They see all western women as
> whores. The message is: we are the good ones in a corrupted world.

This moral superiority that Stefan sees as woven into the aesthetic disposition of ethnicized Others becomes construed, in his narrative, as an explicit attack on his gay sexuality. Stefan delineates it as 'unbelievable' that he is confronted, on a day-to-day basis, with what he perceives as the visible signs of orthodox religious homophobia. Had he not escaped his own religious past? Had his friends not fled the orthodox Calvinist Dutch Bible Belt? 'We live in a world city, for crying out loud, and we are still under that backward yoke! Isn't that unbelievable?'

   Stefan's narrative thus brings together the pivotal elements of a new anxious politics surrounding LGBTIQ identifications and the politics of cultural alterity in urban space, in which racialized, migrant Others—associated with religious conservatism—come to embody a more generalized heteronormativity.

Conclusion: a secular passion

The evidence thus points to the centrality in contemporary Netherlands of a peculiar 'secular passion' and the role of sexuality in it.[36] While the academic literature on the subject has focused on analysing

---

35   Ibid., 380, 378.
36   Verkaaik and Srponk, 'Sexular practice'.

shifting public and political discourses, there has been much less attention paid to what these transformations mean in terms of the self-understanding and practices of actors. It seems to me that Stefan's narrative—as well as the narratives of Mark and Frank—show one way in which sexuality constitutes an intimate sphere through which secular ideologies and discourses enter into people's everyday lives, engendering certain dispositions, practices and taken-for-granted views. It demonstrates the ways in which secularism operates as a cultural practice: like religion, it constitutes 'historically contingent routines, traumas, joys, and conversion experiences [that] leave imprints upon the visceral register of thinking and judgment'.[37] Indeed, like religion, secularism depends on affect, emotional binding and the visceral.[38] Rather than approaching the tensions around gender and sexuality as a clash between reason and faith, or between rationality and emotionality, everyday debates concerning religion, culture and sex in New West point to the affective formation of secular autochthony. Everyday, local encounters are structured by public representations: they constitute enactments of widely circulating discourses surrounding the cultural alterity of increasingly proximate Others. As I have noted earlier, this process alludes to what Sara Ahmed refers to as 'stranger fetishism'. While identity is relationally established through the encounter with alterity, these encounters are always already mediated. They are contingent on commonsense modes of knowing: processes in which the bodies of strangers come to index forms of social abjection, like homophobia: forms of abjection that become transposed upon these Others and as such exorcised from the social body.

In the Netherlands today, this process in which certain images and emotions come to stick to certain bodies is the work of the increasingly dominant culturalization of citizenship. Culturalization emphasizes alterity and brings the 'strangeness' of perceived Others—most notably Muslims—into focus. Racialization is an operative component of these processes: actors enact broadly circulating discourses surrounding religion, sexuality and culture that equate homophobia with the figure of the racialized stranger and 'gayness' with whiteness.

Paul Mepschen is a lecturer in social anthropology at Leiden University and a postdoctoral researcher in the Political Sociology programme at the University of Amsterdam. He works on the politics of belonging in Europe. He has published on the racialization of sexuality and on the ethnography of populism. Email: p.j.h.mepschen@fsw.leidenuniv.nl.

---

37 William E. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press 1999), 9.

38 Ibid.