

The nationalization of desire: Transnational marriage in Dutch culturist integration discourse

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Abstract: Dutch discourse on “integration” is currently characterized by a strong focus on the “culture” of especially Turks and Moroccans, two minority populations in Dutch society mostly of Muslim orientation. This article discusses the issue of the “import bride” as a case study of contemporary culturist discourse. It argues that this issue is problematized because transnational marriage is construed as circumventing loyalty to Dutch society and nation-state.

Keywords: culturism, Dutch integration debate, transnational marriages

Current Western European discourses on “immigrant integration” have become increasingly characterized by a strong focus on the “culture” of especially Muslims. In the Netherlands, Turks and Moroccans, two minority populations in Dutch society of recognizably Muslim origin, are a main object of discourse. This article discusses the characteristics of the logic through which this discourse operates. It specifically pays attention to the thematization of issues of a religious or intimate nature. It argues that these issues are problematized because they are perceived to circumvent loyalty to both Dutch “society” (*samenleving*) and the Dutch nation-state. Intimate life, for instance by way of transnational marriage, involves transnational forms of loyalty, while religion possibly entails loyalties that altogether transcend the nation-state. As an extended case, I specifically pay attention to the issue of “import brides” and the construction of both bride and husband as “outside society.”

Current Dutch discourse on “integration” in general can be interpreted as one way to discursively demarcate the space occupied by “society.” The idea of a “Dutch society” is fixed precisely through the production of a marker of “society” vis-à-vis the “non-integrated” “outside society” that is part of the process of globalization unsettling the notion of “Dutch society.” Its continuous identification is secured by means of the systematic observation of those deemed “non-integrated.” These are said to be “outside society,” thereby demarcating the boundaries of “society” (Schinkel 2007, 2008). Observing such individuals—mostly migrants and their offspring, but also certain elderly, ill, criminal, unemployed, and insane—as residing “outside of society” is politically stimulated, state-initiated, social science-facilitated, and mass media-communicated.

Thus, “society” is constructed by analogy to an organic body: as a whole consisting of parts that form a unity. Indeed, “integration” is a key

term in an organicist terminology (Schinkel 2007) that is seldom explicitly thematized (although metaphors of “health,” “growth,” and “development” are amply present) but that implicitly structures a common-sensical notion of “society” that is active throughout integration discourse in media, politics, and policy. By means of the attribution of various problems to those “non-integrated” remaining “outside society,” the body social is cleansed of problems such as class inequality or crime. For as soon as a person commits a crime, he or she resides “outside society.” “Society” itself is thus discursively cleansed of crime and other problems, which are attributed to a chaotic environment that, in the case of the Netherlands, is not Belgium or Germany, but a misty realm beyond the Lethe, where those “outside society” roam. “Society” is thus always a counterfactual ideal, a normative and strategic notion excluding certain individuals and categories from the social. The real crevice lies not between the well-integrated and the non-integrated, but between those who have received a dispensation of integration and for whom “integration” is not an issue at all, and those for whom it is, however “well” their integration is proceeding (Schinkel 2007, 2008).

I propose to see current discourse on integration as characterized by a functional equivalent of racism that can be called *culturism*. As in Balibar’s (1991) notion of “neo-racism” or Stolcke’s (1995) observations on the transformations of racism, culturism explicitly distances itself from racism by assuming the essential neutrality of the ground of a person’s being. Racism operates based on what can be called a *terrannormativity*: it identifies some form of *ground*, be it in a natural (a biological ground: *Blut*) or a transitive sense (as in the soil: *Boden*). Culturism, in contrast, operates based on an *agranormativity* and assumes that it is the cultivation of this neutral ontological soil that has caused “incompatibilities” between cultures (Grillo 2003, 2007). If “Muslims,” to take the topical example, are deemed “intolerant” toward secularism and “oppressive” of women, that is a consequence not of their blood or place of birth, but of their immersion in a cultural environment infusing

them with such ignoble but lasting sentiments and habits. Culturism thus deploys a culturalized and “agrarian” logic that enables it to identify cultural incompatibilities. I believe it is important, if only for the purpose of analytic accuracy, to recognize the differences between the (functionally equivalent) logics of racism and culturism. Culturism is not quite the same as racism in disguise (Fiske 1998; Guillaumin 1995; Taguieff 2010; Wikan 1999). Nonetheless, racism does lie at the core of culturism. For when the question is posed which “culture” is supposed to assimilate to the other in case of “cultural incompatibilities,” the answer is that the “dominant culture” was “here” first. In other words, a terrannormativity is still at the heart of the culturist logic that structures current integration discourse in the Netherlands.

Intimate life and national loyalty: The case of the “import bride”

John Torpey (1998) has emphasized that apart from a legitimate means of violence, the state is defined by a control of the legitimate means of movement. This pertains to a prominent example of state interference in the personal life of migrants: the regulation of what is called “marriage migration.” This is one theme that is discursively nested within the broader integration discourse in the Netherlands. It pertains to the transnational character of the intimate life of migrants, and hence to their perceived *loyalty* to the state as subjects of that state. It speaks to the state as a body of the control of the legitimate means of movement. For it is by means of a control of movement that loyalty is regulated. Transnationalism increasingly tends to defy this control of legitimate means of movement, and it is in this context that the connection between “integration” and transnational marriages is to be understood. In the Netherlands, “mixed marriages” are promoted, which are taken as a sign of “integration” (CBS 2008). This is an old theme in social science. Julius Drachler for instance wrote that “it is evident that the higher the proportion of inter-marriage ... the higher is the degree of

assimilation with other groups” (1921: 19). Or as Simon Marcson said: “amalgamation, or the crossing of racial or ethnic traits through intermarriage promotes assimilation” (1950: 75). Furthermore, describing (and critiquing) the sociology of marriage in his days, Marcson notes:

“Intermarriage, in sociological writings, has come to represent the surest index of assimilation. It is reasoned that when a groups has lost its social visibility sufficiently to participate in intermarriage it is “assimilated”. In this sense it is only the “social visibility” which inhibits intermarriage. The disappearance, or outgrowing of the group’s social visibility, results inevitably in assimilation and intermarriage. The final result would inevitably be an ethnically homogeneous society” (1950: 75).

Such presuppositions appear to undergird much of current discourse on transnational marriage. When the issue became politicized in the Netherlands, around 2000, it was in relation to a failing “integration” (Hooghiemstra 2003). The Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR), which did not problematize the issue in an influential 1989 report, related it to “unease” about the participation of certain “groups” “in Dutch society.” So-called family building immigration would hence be evidence of a “lack of orientation toward Dutch society” (WRR 2001: 75). Less transnational movement thus means more “integration.” The tightening of immigration controls, specifically those pertaining to marriage is related to this. Integration policy has, during the first three Balkenende cabinets, in effect been immigration policy. Minister Rita Verdonk quite openly stated that tighter regulations restricting the number of transnational marriages was a means of promoting “integration,” because the burden that immigrants posed to the Netherlands could only be managed by permitting fewer marriage partners from abroad.

Political labels can be used to tag transnational marriages. When in 2004 an increase in such marriages became visible, MP Jeroen Dijsselbloem (Labor) spoke of “Verdonk-marriages,”

blaming Minister Verdonk’s harsher immigration policy as the cause of the increase. However, in 2006, after the new integration law came into effect, the number of transnational marriages was significantly lower (Van der Zwaard 2008; Van Huis 2007). Specifically with respect to Turkish and Moroccan immigrants (the ones for whom the harsher law was intended), this declining trend continued (CBS 2008). In popular language, however, used both throughout the entire spectrum of the Dutch media and in political discourse, the issue is labeled as concerning “import brides.” The “import bride” has become an index of the problematic integration mainly of Turks and Moroccans, that is of those immigrants most readily recognized as Muslims.

The “import bride”: A question of loyalty

What I call “transnational marriage” here is in policy language called *gezinsvormende migratie*, that is migration aimed at forming a family. The phenomenon of transnational marriage is studied by social scientists in the Netherlands under the heading of “ethnic intermarriage” or “ethnic endogamy.” The standard type of research analyzes marriage with “co-ethnics” by constructing a dummy variable for “women” and a “race” variable involving, for lack of self-identification in Dutch census-data, “white” vs. “non-white” (Van Tubergen and Maas, 2007). This type of research shows many characteristics of the correlation between marriage and assimilation noted by researchers (e.g., Drachsler 1921; Marcson 1950). Such studies do, however, produce statistical data that highlight certain interesting features of the popular discourse on “import brides.” Although a significant number of “autochthonous” men marry women from abroad, the issue of “import brides” has become discursively pertinent in case of Turkish and Moroccan so-called second generation migrants in the Netherlands, who find a marriage partner in Turkey or Morocco, respectively (Van der Zwaard 2008). Between 1995 and 2004, for instance, half of all women who migrated to the Netherlands to marry, married so-called autochthonous Dutch men (Van der Zwaard 2008: 11;

on the “chthonic” terminology see Geschiere 2009).

Given such figures, it is interesting that the pejorative label of “import brides” is applied here. First the issue at hand does not at all confine itself to “brides.” Statistics indicate that it is as much about women finding men abroad as it is the other way around (Hooghiemstra, 2003; Kalmijn and Van Tubergen 2006; Van der Zwaard 2008; Van Huis, 2007). Thus right away, there is a significant gendered coding of the issue.

Second, the notion of “import bride” not only bears the negative economic connotation that prefers export to import, but it also entails the mingling of the economic in general with the sphere of intimate life. It thus portrays “import brides” as part of marriages that stand under the suspicion of being fake marriages. Fake marriages is the term used to describe marriages taking place only as a guarantee of legal entry with chances of naturalization. However, such marriages to a substantial degree involve the “import” of men, who are over-represented among so-called illegal immigrants (Staring 1998; Van Meeteren et al. 2008). The “fake” of the marriages involving “import brides” is due wholly to the economic association implicit in the term. It is reminiscent of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century “mercenary marriages,” in which women were sold as commodities (Tague 2001). These marriages were critiqued as part of popular English literature and drama, which emphasized the rights of women to be treated well. In effect, the emancipation this brought literary women meant a renewed (domestic) confinement, this time in what became the connection between marriage and love. The opposition between the mercenary marriage and the loving marriage dates from this time. It involves the first ever connection between love and marriage—one that has, sociologically speaking, been a success. And it coincides with an arrangement of both public and private life as restrained, orderly, clean, healthy, and with *politesse* that emerged during the Enlightenment (Smith 2007).

The issue of *loyalty* is the crucial theme in connection to “import brides.” The very *act* of “importing” is indicative of a pre-Enlighten-

ment contractual and economic view of marriage. In that sense, it indicates an *excess* on the part of migrant men: an excess of pre-Enlightenment economic reason. But it is also indicative of a *lack* to the extent that it signifies an absent loyalty to the Dutch state. The issue is apparently that for these men, Dutch women are not good enough. Their lack of affection for Dutch women is then construed as a lack of emotional bond to the Dutch nation-state. That the issue is restricted to men “importing” brides is due to the fact that it is men who are the real danger to the unity, cohesion, and integration of “society,” and it is Muslim men who supposedly suppress women in defiance of enlightened Dutch “tradition.” As Baukje Prins has formulated the issue: “migrant women have problems; migrant men create problems” (2000: 34).

The economy of desire

The migrant male is thus constructed between the extremes of an *economic excess* and an *emotional lack*. His transnational orientation in matters of marriage and sexuality undermines the unity of the body of the nation. His lack of loyalty to that nation never becomes more explicit than in his most profound and intimate choice: that of his marriage partner. He is, in essence, accused of having the wrong desire. The faulty desire for a marriage partner that has the status of an “import bride” signifies his lack of desire for the social body of the nation and for the *corpus mysticum* of “Dutch society.” The “foreign-born” (*allochtoon*) who marries “one of his own” and, at that, “from his own country,” is thus committing a nationalized form of adultery. The collective body of society, defined in neo-nationalist terms by the paradox of an “enlightened tradition,” is—as medieval organicists such as St. Thomas and John of Salisbury said—a *corpus morale et politicum*. Having an “import bride” bespeaks of a lack of loyalty to that body, which is enlightened and morally superior. It is an affront not so much to Dutch women, but to the collective body. Here, the logic of the two bodies, historically described by Kantorowicz (1957) and documented as Douglas (1996), im-

PLICITLY structures the construction of an adulterous male whose marriage of economic excess evidences a lack of loyalty, even a betrayal, to the body of society in which—to use a key organicist concept (Schinkel 2007)—he is thus not well “integrated.” If, as Douglas says (1996: 80), “the body is a microcosm of society,” the choice of an “import bride” is a form of adultery to the body social.

The discursive thematization of the issue of “import brides” dates from the early 2000s, when it became evident that “second generation” migrants engaged in transnational marriages in great numbers. This had been expected from their parents, who, starting out as “guest workers” in the 1950s and 1960s, had their wives come over in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Generally, “first generation migrants” were deemed more likely to search for a marriage partner in their country of origin (Hooghiemstra 2003). When it became clear, to a large degree due to studies by government sociologists such as Hooghiemstra’s (2003), that the “second generation” sought a marriage partner in their parent’s country of origin, a policy response followed. As of 2004, future marriage partners are required to complete an “integration exam” (*inburgeringsexamen*) overseas after enrolling in a course that costs €5,000 (see Bjornson 2007). Their age has been raised from eighteen to twenty-one, meaning effectively that Dutch residents can marry other Dutch as of the age eighteen, but non-Dutch and non-EU only after they turn twenty-one. The new right-wing cabinet (starting in 2010) has proposed to raise this age to twenty-four, and to allow migration only when the spouse residing in the Netherlands earns at least 120 percent of the minimum wage. It also proposes a “collateral” or “deposit” (*borgsom*), although it remains unclear what this is to entail (Regeerakkoord VVD and CDA 2010).

Interestingly, the only thing the state can do to counter the economized issue of “import brides” is to levy a tax on it. In order to control and regulate the logic of economic excess of the “import bride,” the state adds to the price and ups the economic stakes involved therein. The higher price can be paradoxically construed as an eco-

nomie test of love. For real love involves paying the price, no matter how high. And here, the economic excess becomes a signifier of a love beyond money, while marriages entered only for the sake of infiltrating the nation are sifted out by reducing their cost-effectiveness. This way a genuine desire for a marriage partner is uncovered, one that does not impede on the desire for the Dutch nation-state and the body social of “Dutch society.” Both love and national loyalty are thus secured by means of an economy of desire.

The construction of the bride

Concomitant to this economy of love is the construction of the “bride.” As noted, many transnational marriages do not involve the migration of a bride but almost as much the migration of a groom. Nonetheless, the “import bride” has become the symbolic hang-up for the issue of transnational marriage. This involves a series of gendered images that are present in the Dutch integration discourse at large. Most significant, it involves the construction of the passive woman (Van den Berg and Schinkel 2009). In the transnational marriage, “woman” is a passive construct without a voice. A commodity without a will yet violated in her freedom. This mirrors the position of women in Dutch integration discourse at large. Coalitions in Dutch integration discourse between conservative politicians and second-wave feminists often revolve around the issue of male domination in case of Muslim marriage. Women are construed as restricted to the home, beneath a veil enforced on them, maltreated and oppressed in general. Of such constructions—as well as those involving the supposed intolerance of Muslims toward homosexuality—Judith Butler (2007) remarked, in the preface to the Dutch translation of *Excitable speech*, that women and gay rights were being used in order to exclude on the basis of religion. Butler argued that there is no necessary trade-off between sexual rights and religious rights, which she nonetheless observed to be the dominant construction in the Netherlands, in which “sexual freedom” would be instrumentalized in furtherance of a “racist

agenda” (2007: 10ff.). Likewise, the construction of the passive “import bride,” mostly occurring in case of Muslim transnational marriages, has all the characteristics of an “Enlightened” effort to get under the veil. This is related to Dutch neo-nationalist narrative, which frequently invokes the “Enlightenment” as Dutch heritage and as defining for the Dutch nation. In general, the construction of femininity is crucial to constructions of the nation (Yuval-Davis 1997). Given the idea(l) of women as mothers—that is as mothers of potentially troublesome (quasi-)members of the nation—women play a central role in the debate on integration and in state-led practices of citizenship, such as education (Van den Berg 2007). But they often play that role while being recoded into passive receptacles of either masculine domination or state-led civic socialization.

Love and loyalty: The nationalization of desire

Abu-Lughod (1986: 144) argues that certain attitudes toward sexuality in Muslim societies do not primarily spring from religion but are shaped in religious form to endow them with legitimacy. I would argue that all manner of arguments concerning sexuality do not spring from a primary and long-standing concern with an Enlightenment heritage, but are discursively connected to that heritage to infuse them with the authority that Habermas (1981) calls the *zwanglose Zwang des besseren Arguments* (“the forceless force of the better argument”).

The duality of the two bodies—the one being the passive female body of the “import bride,” the other the body social of “society”—illustrates the paradoxical character of contemporary culturist discourse. For the collective body of “society” is defined in neo-nationalist fashion, but at the same time it is portrayed as having no other direction or movement, no *telos* rather than “growth” in the economic sense. Thus, when it critiques the supposedly economic logic of the “import bride,” it critiques a primary logic of loyalty to “society.” Unsurprisingly, it is specifi-

cally the migrant underclass in which “import brides” are thematized. The critique of the “import bride” turns into a logic of autoimmunity the moment the policy response to the phenomenon of transnational marriage is shaped purely along economic lines. Then, the economic logic becomes the primary logic securing loyalty to “Dutch society.” On the one hand, those who can no longer afford an “import bride” seek a partner elsewhere, that is in the Netherlands. On the other hand, those who can afford one, obviously are smitten with real love. The policy raising the economic stakes thus has the effect of undergirding the loyalty of subjects to the Dutch nation-state and society by means of an economy of desire. It is the excess of the economic excess, the raising of the price and the multiplication of the economic logic into a hyper-economic logic of love and loyalty, that secures loyalty to “Dutch society.”

The paradox of critiquing the logic of desire on the very basis of that same logic is negated in such a way as to transform the logic of desire for “society” into a pure desire, based on pure reason and an autonomy uninterrupted by political or economic heteronomy. This is a way of nationalizing desire based on a model of “Enlightenment” as “national tradition.” It is why the tax on the “import bride” is not paradoxical but deparadoxizing; it strengthens the economy of desire that is discerned in the transnational marriage. The hyper-economy of desire thus instituted solves the problem of transnational marriage, as it for the most part dramatically decreases the cost-effectiveness of “importing a bride.” And those few who do engage in transnational marriage are cleansed from the suspicion of economically heteronomous desire, because the willingness to go to great lengths economically can be dubbed as a test of real love that is of autonomous desire: love the enlightened, Dutch way.

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