An Historian Answers His Sociological Critics

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I have felt it a great honor to have had various Dutch social scientists offer their critique of *Nieuw Babylon in aanbouw* and my lead article in the *Sociologische Gids*.

All the more the honor, since my work as a cultural historian often differs from what most sociologists do.

I certainly learned a great deal from the comments, and enjoyed the theories presented. As I read the articles, it was reassuring to see that sociologists, like historians, disagree with each other about a great deal. The divergent views on, for example, the significance of generations in accounting for change in the 1960s was revealing for an outsider. Fascinating, too, was the range between 'soft' social scientists like Paul Lucardie and brazen empiricists like Peer Scheepers. I didn’t know the latter category could still function in a postmodern world. But this only suggests that I overestimated the progressiveness of post-1960s Holland.

Nevertheless, sociologists and fairly conventional social historians like Hans Righart have asked similar questions about the 1960s. Which social developments drove the changes of the 1960s? When did such changes occur? What effects did these changes have on people according to socio-economic status, religion, age, gender, ethnicity, etc? To the extent that my book concerns itself with the same 'what' and 'why' questions which sociologists ask about the 1960s, it relies rather heavily on pedestrian sociological explanations, like the rise of an alternate youth culture, or the prosperity brought on by, say, the Slochteren gas bell (briefly mentioned, incidentally, in my book).

At the same time, *Nieuw Babylon in aanbouw* was not intended as a repository for the newest sociological interpretations and data about the 1960s. My question was really rather different than has usually been asked of postwar change: Who—or what—allowed the social and cultural changes, and why? To be sure, some sociologists have long asked the ‘who’ question, and a couple of authors have suggested that I should have been more indebted to, or enriched by, the Weberian tradition. Moreover, Laeyendecker is quite right in saying that the role of Dutch bishops and Catholic intellectuals has been covered before (which explains why I regard my segment on the Catholic Church—and the KVP—as the least original and interesting in my entire book). Ellemers’
famous ‘secondary elites’ theory has been around for years. Finally, Ultee insists that sociologists like himself have already taken worldviews seriously by systematically examining the relationships between technological change and ideological evolution.

My interests, however, are oriented toward the construction of reality— in this case by ‘elites’ through the construction of a modernist teleology. In this fundamental sense, I part ways with sociologists and kindred spirits, most of whom (if my esteemed respondents are any indication) remain committed to answering how, when and to what extent the Netherlands modernized after the Second World War. I use the word consciously, because most of their research concerns coalesce around how the Netherlands changed from a ‘traditional’ to a ‘modern’ society. Instead, I am interested in the myth of modernization: how and why was the belief system in the inevitability of modern life constructed by elites, and what effects did the consequent discourse have?

If I am repeating myself, it is because several of my respondents misunderstand me on this crucial point. I am not, as Becker and others suggest, a modernization theorist— far from it. Instead, I take some pains to point to the myths which held that modernization (as variously defined by elites) was inevitable and that one had to be ‘progressive’ (as variously defined by elites). Clearly, this rather different understanding of the modern was a stumbling block to Andries van den Broek, who says that I believe my elites were modern, instead of ‘traditioneel-verzuild’. I see no reason why deeply pillarized types could not have made every attempt to be modern as they understood it. Nor does the modernity-mindedness of my elites mean that they were really progressive; I stress that their social and political impulses were rather conservative and traditional. Finally, the self-conscious modernity of Dutch elites doesn’t necessarily mean that they truly understood the youth (as I stress twice in my article); in fact, I find the Kleijer and Tillekens adendum quite plausible. It also doesn’t mean that middle-class parents and older elites became spitting images of their children, which Scheepers charges I am saying. It simply means that many of them were insecure enough about their own principles, and sufficiently sympathetic to the concerns of ‘the youth’, to accommodate them on an impressive scale: subsidized youth clubs, greater allowance for civil disobedience, attention to the ‘radical’ wings of several mainstream parties, university reforms, etc...

The ‘myth of modernization’ also makes my book something more than another study about perennially tolerant Dutch elites. New Babylon is not just about extending the ‘schikken en plooien’ story of timeless elites into the 1950s and 1960s, as Righart rather blithely asserts. Rather, it is about the responses of Dutch elites working within a mental framework which, while showing important continuities with the past, was particular to the cultural climate of the postwar period. The modernization of which I speak is thus— while showing continuities with the past— also peculiar to the postwar period: the high modernity of the late 1950s and 1960s, when tradition seemed to be ineluctably losing out to modernizing forces.
I occasionally wonder if many educated Dutch—and many Dutch social scientists in particular—are so wedded to a modernist framework that it is difficult for them to posit that modernity is not the cast-iron result of certain social forces but a fiction, a myth, by which they continue to order their mental worlds. But that is an openly speculative question, and like many other speculative observations, I throw it out for your consideration.

I do not wish to suggest that my ‘New Cultural History’, as a history of discourse, is elevated above the reach of mere sociological mortals. Several contributors raised important and substantive questions about my work and its explanatory power. The first is the international question: how do postwar changes in the Netherlands—and the role of Dutch elites—stack up internationally? I make no apology whatsoever for making suggestive comparisons between the United States and the Netherlands; I made them not because the U.S.-Netherlands comparison is the most fruitful of all comparisons, but because I am American, consciously American, studying Dutch history. Many Dutch readers have been appreciative of precisely this quality of my work. At the same time, my work cannot in any true sense be called comparative or internationally oriented, as Becker, Laeyendecker and others would have liked. That would require an in-depth examination of the political culture of other countries after the Second World War, something that I did not and could not do. Righart’s plea for a more systematic comparative approach makes much sense. I have my doubts about the importance of the generational factor in such studies—the numerous peculiarities of each national history seem to greatly relativize the generational component, even in his short piece on Britain—but the comparative approach is sound. There are good reasons to believe that the peculiarities of Dutch history provide much that is unique in the history of postwar Europe. At the same time, I am interested in the question to what extent, if at all, other national elites, responded in ways significantly similar to Dutch elites.

The second issue raised asks, in effect, if we wouldn’t be better served if my elites were further differentiated. Ellemers and Laeyendecker think so, and I take Lucardie’s interesting conceptual piece to argue, among other things, that elites conceived of modernity in at least two rather different ways. I maintain, as I maintained in my introductory article, that on Nieuw Babylon’s broad level of generality it is difficult, even counterproductive, to give watertight definitions of elites. This is especially so, since Dutch elites have historically been a rather diffuse group, from the local to the national level. A more serious consideration, in my judgment, is the question whether these elites can be grouped as whole. It is true, as I have often stressed, that these rather variegated elites were not monolithic, and the challenges of the 1960s prompted some sharp internal dissent among them. And even if they did accommodate themselves to change, their motivations ranged from heartfelt conversion to pure opportunism. I do make some allowances for these variations in Nieuw Babylon, but perhaps I could have taken greater pains to distinguish between, say, Wiert Berghuis,
Barend Biesheuvel and Hendrik Algra. Still, the reason why I have not made more of the differences is because I find striking similarities in the kinds of modernity discourse among elites – despite ‘reactionary’ protest from persons who, more often than not, found themselves increasingly at the margins of their respective organizations for being ‘old-fashioned’.

Did this discourse of modernity really have the power to transform the Netherlands? Then why didn’t the 1960s happen in the 1940s? These are important questions raised most systematically in Ellemers’ article, which is at once the most perceptive of Nieuw Babylon’s weaknesses and the most willing to debate me on my own ground. To be sure, the Nederlandse Volksbeweging’s pounding on the drums of modernity did not bring about Doorbraak after the Second World War. My thesis, however, has never suggested that elites possessed complete control over all developments through an all-powerful discourse. Elites could not simply will vernieuwing by publicly articulating it. But by making vernieuwing and modernization the mental and discursive framework by which they understood the world, they limited their ability to resist change. This had an effect on more conservative elites as well, who found that any open and principled resistance to change was shackled by this ‘common sense’ view of developments. Moreover, the rhetoric encouraged their participation in – or acceptance of – other changes. In this broad sense, their rhetoric doesn’t strike me as powerless or insignificant at all. This discourse could not be used in an instrumental sense, with direct effects, as when politicians decide to increase old-age pensions. But that doesn’t mean it didn’t exist, or didn’t have accumulative effects – over several decades – on policy.

Finally, some of the questions center on the suspicion that elites, or, for that matter, parents were simply accepting a series of faits accomplis in the 1950s and 1960s. That is certainly the gist of Van den Broek’s (and, by extension, Laerman’s) argument: elites hobble after social processes of modernization; they don’t initiate them. I would prefer taking a broader view of matters. In the first place, accepting a fait accompli has a different cultural significance than not accepting a fait accompli; it is the difference between resistance and accommodation. It’s not as if elites (or parents) had no choice. Deeper commitments to, or greater certainty about, their own position might have solicited a different response. In short, reducing elite rhetoric to merely after-the-fact rationalizations of ‘objective’ reality is to a) deny the cultural significance of their ‘capitulation’, which frequently encouraged the following round of change; and b) ignore the indications such discourse gives us about the already changing worldviews of these elites.

Alexis de Tocqueville’s L’Ancien régime et la revolution (1856) came to the conclusion that the French Revolution, as it were, had already taken place before 1789. There is much that Tocqueville did not explain about the Revolution, and he obviously could not rely on extensive sociological data to enrich his account. Despite these limitations, research into the cultural changes of the 1960s, both in the
Netherlands and elsewhere, seems to require a Tocquevillian turn. The cultural changes of the 1960s have until now been understood in terms of either changing social conditions or the advent of a new generation with new values. It is time to understand that the Dutch ancien régime of the 1950s and early 1960s bequeathed much to the velvety cultural revolution of the 1960s. Its bequeathal was not chiefly resistance to change, further causing the sans-culottes and peasantry to seethe with discontent, thus making the revolution all the more intense. Rather, its important legacy lies with both the institutional arrangements postwar elites made (yes, they are important) and, as I have emphasized in Nieuw Babylon, in the worldviews they articulated. It is these worldviews which have been largely neglected until now. Without examining these worldviews, the 1960s remains the caricature that found its origins in that decade: the conflict between young and old, or between the modern and the traditional. As the 1960s recedes, both sociologists and historians are in a position to move into other, greener pastures.