New Babylon in aanbouw takes issue with the sociologization of the 1960s. At least, this is how I conceptualized the project when I began to research for my dissertation back in 1991. What I noticed about some of the social scientific literature on the postwar period – and several social scientists I met – was a belief in the great social processes as objective descriptions of reality, and the relative powerlessness of human beings to stop these processes. One political scientist told me that the ‘regents’ of the late 1960s, in their more flexible policies toward law and order, were making rational responses to the necessities of the situation. Indeed, both scholarly and popular understandings of the 1960s carry many of the ‘modernist’ sociological constructions: modernization, urbanization, rationalization, politicization, democratization, individualization, secularization, emancipation and even vulgarization.1

As an historian, I have relied on sociologists and political scientists to inform me of the basic contours and trends of the Netherlands during the 1960s – a subject then largely ignored by my colleagues in history. I am, therefore, quite indebted to the Netherlands’ long-standing strength in historical sociology which laid the foundation for my own work: Ellemers, Zahn, Middendorp and the sociologists of youth cultures and the churches. Part of my training at the University of Iowa, however, had been in intellectual history, with a particular attention to critics of the historical profession, from Nietzsche to Hayden White. Although I eventually opted to leave intellectual history in favor of political, social and cultural interests, my previous studies led me to what is now commonly called ‘the New Cultural History’, which is particularly concerned with how the fabric of society is ideologically manufactured through language or ‘discourse’.2 The new history need not lead to the postmodern conclusion – both unhelpful and untrue – that there is ‘nothing outside the text’. It would be wrongheaded, for example, to maintain that sociologists only make reality through their descriptions and analyses, and do not in any sense discover what is already there. But the new historical emphasis on the power of discourse has cast a shadow over the social histories of the 1960s and 1970s by questioning whether social processes themselves are enough to explain historical change.

Many sociologists, of course, have been aware of the role that people’s cultural context plays in determining how people see reality, an insight long held by
anthropologists. Zahn’s *Regenten, rebellen en reformatoren*, probably the single most important model for my own book, is obviously immensely interested in the differences in political culture between Germany and the Netherlands. And Middendorp himself writes in a footnote that cultural conditions form a two-way street with structural change. But through ‘the linguistic turn’ scholars in the social sciences have become aware that language does help shape social reality, and that language itself determines and limits the range of human responses within any historical context.

In this way I became interested in both the language of modernity and anti-modernity and how these languages have engaged each other since the 18th century. I was impressed by the relative absence of ‘anti-modern’ language in postwar Holland (and H. W. von der Dunk’s notion of the country’s ‘anonymous conservatism’). Moreover, I was similarly much struck by the advent of a language of ‘modernity’ and how this language of secular progress and the belief in the inevitable decline of ‘tradition’ defined the rapid social changes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These intellectual concerns and the cultural history approach soon led me to view the language of modernity – from its use of words like ‘secularization’ and ‘democratization’ to its articulations about ‘modern man’ – as reifications of reality, part of a larger ideological structure that helped frame Dutch postwar society. So I resolved to examine the great social processes as themselves part of a collective discourse which defined and directed the changes in postwar Holland. It was primarily this consideration that led me to a study of Dutch ‘elites’, whose own understanding of change in postwar Holland had far-reaching effects.

1 Elites as the carriers of modernity

*Nieuw Babylon in aanbouw* ascribes a central role to elites in explaining the cultural change which turned the Netherlands, in the space of a few years, from a relatively traditional society into a relatively open one. Instead of focusing on either a ‘protest generation’ or a battery of socio-economic forces, the book argues that it was, paradoxically, the generally centrist and cautious politicians, intellectuals, clerics, newspaper editors and other ‘pillarized’ leaders of the Netherlands who were the most important (and generally the least acknowledged) agents of this cultural change in the Netherlands. In order to ‘keep up with the times’ and thus control and direct a rapidly changing society, these elites either initiated significant changes or (more often) proved to be rather receptive in reacting to the ‘modern’ forces with which they were confronted. Although these elites weighed a host of practical and ideological considerations in determining their course of action, it is clear from their rhetoric that the dictates of modernity constituted an important component in their understanding of postwar Dutch society. For these elites, ‘progressive’ policy and a certain adaptability was both prudent and necessary in the face of this purportedly ineluctable
modernity. *Nieuw Babylon in aanbouw* shows how this was not just the case in one or two sectors of Dutch society, but on a whole range of fronts: the ‘modernization’ policy of the postwar period, foreign affairs, religion and morality, cultural issues, law and order and political life. Dutch elites thus generally used the considerable influence and power at their disposal to smooth the path of modernization in the Netherlands, seldom offering full-scale resistance to the forces of change that swept over the country during the 1960s.

‘Elites’, of course, can be a slippery term. Each chapter of *Nieuw Babylon* outlines who these elites were, whether in the areas of socio-economic policy, foreign affairs, the churches, cultural affairs, the public order or the political parties. The elites of my narrative were not just anyone who convinced the book’s argument, but were specific people with a specific function and with specific opportunities to influence Dutch public life. The chapter on public order, for example, distinguishes between administrators (including police functionaries), politicians and intellectuals as distinct elite groups with their own set of concerns. In some of the other chapters (such as the chapter on Dutch culture and counterculture), these relatively precise distinctions are less evident: who can define cultural elites in a fully satisfactory way? Making definitions of who constitutes a cultural elite, however, is not impossible as long as the net is cast widely to include television producers, artistic subcultures, cultural critics, writers, and relevant government ministers.

At the same time, I am not particularly interested, for example, in giving an extensive sociological definition to elites as exhibited, for example, in Gerrit van Vegchel’s *study on postwar elites and their political culture in Emmen or in Ton Duffues’* investigation of the Catholic pillar in nineteenth and twentieth century Arnhem, with its analysis of the density of elite networks. In the first place, a comprehensive and sweeping history does not easily allow for close sociological differentiation, and it necessarily generalizes to a degree not practiced by those committed to smaller, local studies. But there is another, more substantive reason for this relatively loose definition. I am most interested in the language a broad range of elites used to resist, channel or encourage the path of change in the Netherlands. Thus *Nieuw Babylon* paid more attention to the language articulated by various elites than to using traditional sociological methods to carefully identify and place all of these elites within networks of influence and cohorts of identity. In other words, my book thus treats Dutch elites not only as actors within their respective spheres of influence but also as the constructors of the discourse of modernity (as the ‘builders’ of New Babylon). To be sure, their role as actors is also essential to the telling of the story, but only in the context of the story’s deeper and wider concern about their collective mentalities and discourses – particularly their sense of time (how they regarded the past, present and future).

This should explain why elites are so important to the narrative of *Nieuw Babylon*. They were the ones who largely molded the metanarratives of modernity, and thus
largely formed the public discourse about what was happening in postwar Holland. This does not mean, of course, that they were the only ones to construct an interpretation of what was going on. *Gereformeerde* teenagers in Kampen, Communist men in Finsterwolde, and upper middle-class women in Bloemendaal all had their own views of Dutch society that cannot be subsumed under ‘elite opinion’. Nor can elite opinion itself be reduced to a univocal or monolithic whole, and it is necessary to differentiate the various shades of opinion among elites themselves. But at the same time, elite opinion in postwar Holland was both remarkably convergent and able to shape public life in powerful ways through the authority and the means it possessed (Frits Bolkestein even now complains about the power of the media to shape opinion). These elites were the most decisive groups to define the problems of modern Holland, and ultimately, I further argue, they were the ones who defined many of the modern solutions.

The ‘crisis in authority’ in 1966 is one of many examples illustrative of this consciously modern sensitivity, although it is certainly one of the most important. In responding to the Amsterdam riots of June 1966, many politicians and intellectuals came to believe that traditional approaches to law enforcement had become ‘old-fashioned’ or obsolescent, and that a more modern approach to law enforcement would be the only way to prevent a rising pattern of chaos. On the face of it, one might attribute these beliefs to common sense; after all, institutions and policies cease to be effective over time unless they are amended to new circumstances. But the proposed changes were also accompanied by a bundle of assumptions and expectations that were self-consciously modern. Judging by the language of the mid-1960s, authority itself had become the problem, for *de moderne mens* had grown to adulthood and would no longer tolerate ‘authority old-style’ – a sentiment with parallels in child-rearing philosophies of the period and in the Vatican II theology sweeping across the Roman Catholic Church. Restraint and a higher degree of tolerance now became the watchwords of law enforcement, at least in the country’s large cities and towns. The options open to Dutch authorities following the Amsterdam riots were thus largely restricted to responses that appeared best suited to the demands of a modern society and a modern citizenry. Numerous intellectuals, politicians and (even) police functionaries held in the last half of the 1960s that the new age dictated less repression, and greater doses of applied sociology and psychology. Thus, the rather significant shift toward greater tolerance of authorities vis-à-vis ‘the citizen’ did not stem only from pragmatic considerations of the situation, but from a whole discourse of modernity that informed the way they thought about and discussed the challenge that lay before them.

My understanding of this discourse of modernity is indebted, of course to Foucault’s special understanding of the word ‘discourse’, that is, a special language that effectively controls what it defines. Dutch elites did develop a specialized language to understand and hence control social change. Their understanding of *beheerste*
modernising, for instance, defined legitimate – and illegitimate – responses to the challenges facing postwar Holland. Families unable to cope in modern society became ‘problem’ families which needed special help to adapt them to postwar society. Certainly the discourse of modernity also effectively shut out either ‘radical’ or ‘reactionary’ responses to postwar problems, thereby leaving the field open to the work of moderately progressive elites. I do not think, however, that the ‘discourse of modernity’ only served to promote the interests of the elite groups who articulated it. It was not always the case that an increase in power is the effect (or necessarily even the intent) when elites construct a dominant mode of ‘discourse’. One of the main underlying themes of Nieuw Babylon in aanbouw is, in fact, that Dutch elites themselves fell victim to the same discourse of modernity that they had done so much to construct. Nothing very bad happened to them, of course, but their essentially modernist assumptions and articulations of the problems confronting them limited the range of response to the various challenges they faced. In other words, they were not only aided but also trapped by their modernist explanations of social change.

Nowhere are the entrapping consequences of this modernist discourse more evident than in the most celebrated – and still widely believed – modernist assumptions about the 1960s: the so-called generation gap. The language of the generation gap in the Dutch context is the subject of the next section.

2 The ‘generation gap’ and the politics of modernity

No scholar would deny that the causes of the social and cultural changes that became evident during the 1960s are both varied and complex. Sociologists, with their attention to multiple social processes, know this better than anyone else. But it is the generation gap that – at least in popular imagination – continues to define the essence of the 1960s. In this view, a libertine, progressive and rebellious generation, waxed fat on postwar prosperity, overthrew (or at least tried to overthrow) the conservative morality and social order wrought by their parents. Academic subscription to this view is evident in at least three ways. A few scholars openly assert that this generation conflict was the central event of the 1960s, at least in the Netherlands. Ronald Inglehart – whose Silent Revolution (1977) is widely known among Dutch sociologists – made the difference in generational ‘values’ the central thesis of his impressively broad study of the postwar shift toward ‘Post-Materialism’. J. E. Ellemers’ more modest contention of a younger ‘secondary elite’ also exerted much influence in scholars’ understanding of those years. Hans Righart is obviously the most recent and most direct proponent of this view, with his thesis of a ‘double generation crisis’ as the ‘epicenter’ of the 1960s.

The second indication of a continuing legacy of the generation gap is the great attention given to the rise of youth culture(s). The literature on pop music, youth subcultures and (to a lesser extent) on the counterculture of the 1960s is simply
enormous, both in the Netherlands and the United States. Implicitly, at least, the sheer volume of the material suggests that ‘the younger generation’ and their countercultures were the most notable force of the decade. To be sure, this literature is more engrossed in the collective life of a single generation than the generation gap per se; anyone over thirty only plays a secondary role in these analyses. Still, the inordinate amount of attention showered on the protest generation – or more properly, parts of that generation – suggests that its advent was the signal event of the 1950s and 1960s. Finally, our own sense that the 1960s were – for good or for ill – a major watershed for the West in general and the Netherlands in particular tends to lead us to conclude that the fault line must have had something to do with the rise of a younger generation, which saw things in a radically different way than their parents. In short, it was the protest generation, consisting alternately of free spirits, political radicals or feminists, who are widely believed to have brought us into the current epoch. It used to be common to suppose that they brought us out of the Dark Ages; it is at least as fashionable today to imagine that they brought us into a new Dark Age. In either case, the near-universal faith that the 1960s represented the great break of the twentieth century, among both celebrators and critics, tends to assume (it need not logically) that some difference in generation must account for the break that we attribute to that decade.

This positing of a generation gap as a central feature of the 1960s is not entirely off the mark. The concept of distinct ‘generations’ rising up to take history in a new direction has been a time-honored approach in historical writing since Dilthey. I also find Henk Becker’s delineation of the four generations convincing. Like Righart, I subscribe to Becker’s assertion that there were significant differences in collective experiences between the ‘prewar generation’ (born between 1910 and 1930) and the protest generation (born between 1940 and 1955) that had repercussions for the relationship between people of both generations. I would even go so far as to say that these differences were deep enough and widespread enough to contribute to the ‘crises’ of the 1960s. But – as other critics have already pointed out – the capacity of the generational theory to explain the changes of the 1960s is quite limited.

The most obvious problem is that all generations are ‘partial generations’ (to use Becker’s own terminology), at least on a behavioral level. For example, very few members of the protest generation protested; we know that the numbers of protesters was quite small. Certainly the notion that members of the protest generation were particularly leftist needs to be qualified; young Dutch voters also demonstrated a strong attraction to right-wing parties during the late 1960s and early 1970s. If instead of left-wing politics one takes rock music – and the values and fashions it espoused – as the center of widespread generational rebellion, the concept of a protest generation carries more weight. It is clear that rock ‘n roll captured the imagination of countless Dutch youths, and that it that helped define a line between young and old – and thus antagonisms between them. But adherence to rock music is
too diffuse a taste to define a protest generation all by itself; many teenagers loved rock music without it leading to much anti-authoritarian behavior. The responses of youth to the rise of their own cultures were hardly univocal. The best studies of youth cultures in the 1950s and 1960s, in fact, recognize that we need to delineate particular youth cultures, with their own distinctives, rather than attributing to generational cohorts the same characteristics.¹¹

A second problem with the generation gap in the context of the 1960s is that it does not in itself explain conflict. Becker himself admits that other factors (like class) override generational lines, and certainly a large component of what seems classic examples of generational conflict—such as the Provo disturbances of 1965 and 1966, carried a strong class element. I have argued that political context also plays an important role. Inglehart points out that differences in values between generations was less in the United States than it was in the Netherlands. Yet it was in the United States where the generation gap possessed a much sharper edge than in the Netherlands: Vietnam and the Civil Rights issue made a great deal of difference in this respect. The question then arises: If there are no issues to sharpen generational conflict, is the difference in values between generations important? In one sense, the answer is yes; the shift in values is in itself an important social trend, certainly in the Netherlands and in much of Western Europe. But if there are few 'issues' to exacerbate the generational tension, the shift from one set of values to another may be relatively peaceful. In such cases, it would be inappropriate to identify intergenerational conflict as the 'epicenter' of the 1960s. In my book, I have argued that this was the case in the Netherlands; without any truly polarizing issue (except perhaps, for a brief moment, the marriage of Beatrix and Claus), generational conflict never became a unbridgeable divide. In West Germany, where the Nazi past heightened the considerable generational differences (which Inglehart maintains were greater than in the Netherlands) the divide across generations was far more profound; the criticisms of many younger people were sharper, and the defensiveness of many older persons more severe. It is not, therefore, that generational difference is itself insignificant, but it is not necessarily a sufficient basis for conflict.

Furthermore, it is possible that a perceived difference in generational values may have served to reduce tensions in a time of rapid social change. In other words, certain attitudes and postures by one or both of two distinct generations might have made serious conflict less likely. This is what I think occurred in the Netherlands during the 1960s, when many members of the prewar generation made accommodating and conciliatory gestures toward their children and their students, diffusing in part, if not in whole, many of the postwar generation's concerns. Their attempts to diffuse the generational conflict through dialogue and compromise did not necessarily mean that its practitioners understood 'the youth', nor need we attribute purely benevolent motives to their attempts to comprehend them. I simply mean that the habits, sensibilities and ideologies of the prewar generation—however different from those
of their children – helped contribute to the relative lack of conflict in Dutch society during the 1960s.

This point is perhaps best illustrated in the person and behavior of A. D. Belinfante, rector magnificus of the University of Amsterdam during the Maagdenhuis revolt of 1969. Becker maintains that members of the prewar generation possessed a wanbegrip of the protests of the 1960s, and he cites Belinfante’s De utopie is een gevaarlijk wapen (1974) as example of this misunderstanding. Belinfante, born in 1911, belongs to the prewar generation, and his role in clearing the Maagdenhuis in May of 1969 (and his subsequent reservations about the far-reaching democratization of the university in De utopie and elsewhere) earned him the antipathy of many self-styled radicals. But Belinfante is a problematic choice as representative of the prewar generation’s wanbegrip, and not only because we know in hindsight that he played a central role in preparing the University of Amsterdam for a democratization of its organization. It is true that Belinfante was decidedly anti-utopian and that he had little taste for either the style or aims of the leftist students who dominated his university in the late 1960s and early 1970s. But Belinfante also belonged to a rather self-consciously enlightened group of ‘regents’ who prided themselves both on their understanding of social developments and on their own tolerance. In his book, he makes clear, for example, that he regarded the state’s declining interference in the life of the individual as a good thing; he simply wanted, he said, for private citizens to accord the same tolerance to each other – a practice he implicitly blamed political radicals for neglecting. My point is not that Belinfante’s democratic ideals were identical to the convictions of his opponent Ton Regtien; politically, they were miles apart. It is only that Belinfante’s own commitments to a tolerant and democratic society allowed him to accommodate student demands to a considerable extent, thereby opening the way for a further democratization of the university. Belinfante, either because or despite his membership in the prewar generation, was prepared to negotiate and make real concessions to his opponents.

What prompted established, prominent figures of the prewar generation to moderate their position in the face of rising protest and critique? Obviously, in the case of Belinfante, it had much to do with the traditions of prudence and tolerance that generally characterized the Amsterdam regenten (and which differed considerably from, say the Brabantine officialdom which handled the Tilburg student crisis). Reasons for a widespread accommodating attitude are not merely to be found in the schikken en plooien of Amsterdam’s political elite, nor was the spirit of accommodation restricted to high politics. It seems clear that prominent middle-class parents frequently possessed sympathies with the ideals of their newly adult children, and showed a readiness to interpret their ‘radical’ and ‘anti-bourgeois’ attitudes as extensions of their own commitments to democracy, to ideological fervor (the absence of which they had frequently lamented) and to progressive social and political views, however defined. There are doubtless other causes why the
prewar generation, whether parents or university rectors, acted as they did. But one of the prime background motivations in this accommodation lay in their own growing conviction that they were themselves increasingly unwilling guardians of an old-fashioned, brittle past.

The idea of a generation gap was a major component of this pervasive belief in a surging modernity. In a fast-changing society, Comte noted a century and a half ago, elders no longer have the authority which custom and ritual once afforded them; rather, it is the youth who hold the future. G. C. de Haas argues that the Second World War in particular undermined the confidence of the older generation in their own authority; having messed up the world themselves, they expressed a willingness to surrender their authority to a better, younger generation. The substantial changes in postwar Holland – evident in many facets of public and private life – contributed to the perception of a generational divide itself. As interest in religion and church declined among the young (a trend especially evident after 1955), as the political parties failed to effectively rejuvenate themselves, and as the young developed their own subcultures it was difficult for many older persons not to construe these developments as part of a modern tide that was slowly but surely eroding the fabric of the world they had known. The great sensitivity to modernity and its unstoppable processes made parents, pastors, professionals and politicians belonging to the prewar generation especially sensitive to the concerns of ‘the youth’, or at least as much as they were able to understand of these concerns. It did not matter that some sociologists and other observers saw the nascent youth cultures as more ‘primitive’ than ‘modern’ in character; most Dutch writing on generational relations tended to understand the generational dynamic in terms of modernist teleology. As De Haas pointed out, they themselves tended to equate ouderdom with conservatism, hardly a favorable synonym in Dutch political culture. And if the prewar generation’s religious, moral, social and political views remained as old-fashioned as many younger persons frequently complained (and as Righart portrays them in De einde-loze jaren zestig), it was frequently in spite of their efforts to meet the concerns of ‘modern youth’ with considerable deference.

In summary, I uphold Inglehart’s assertion that generational differences, in terms of values held by the prewar and postwar generations, were greater in the Netherlands than the United States. But for many of those in ‘the prewar generation’, the generational differences only highlighted the need for accommodation with the younger generation. The Dutch case, therefore, presents a paradox: the perceived ‘gap’ in values between the modern protest generation and the old-fashioned prewar generation had the effect of intensifying the desire of the latter to accommodate the youth as much as they could.

For many of the middle-aged elites formulating the course of the churches, youth organizations, education, law enforcement and political life, generational differences were thus frequently understood in the light of modernity. And with this understanding
of the world, it became less likely that Dutch elites running the country could offer
much ideological or principled resistance to the ‘new’ ideas generated by their
generally younger opponents during the course of 1960s. Johan Fabricius, the
dyspeptic columnist of De Telegraaf, wrote about the need for older persons like
himself to keep up the appearance of being modern. Fabricius mocked the desire of
his peers to appear as modern and progressive:

‘Ik behoor tot deze deemoedigen, beste lezer, want net zomin als u ga ik graag voor
achterlijk door. Ik vind alles belangrijk wat eigentijds is; deze muziek die mijn trom­
melvliezen verscheurt en mijn zenuwen foltert tot ze op barsten staan, deze pop-art
monsters en figuratie schilderijen die mij in het gezicht gebraakt worden...Ik praat
er net als u op m’n tijd een aardig woordje over mee...’

Writing in Provo 6, Henno Eggenkamp interpreted Fabricius’ article as proof that the
older generation was ‘hypocritical’: while talking a progressive line, they were in
reality just as achterlijk as they pretended not to be. But however strained or half­
hearted these efforts may have been, it frequently had the effect of giving the Provos
and other protest movements associated with the youth a higher level of consideration
than they would otherwise have been given. The fast-ticking clock of ‘modernity’
made many older people sensitive to generational dynamics – and more willing to
accommodate the demands and desires of ‘the youth’.

Thus I contend that in the Netherlands at least, the perceived presence of a
generational divide actually helped to facilitate social change and intergenerational
dialogue. It is true enough that from the perspective of many young people, the
generation gap meant one thing: weg met de ouwe lullen. But it is also true that
modern sensibilities to generational difference made many middle-aged elites more
malleable in their approach to the social, cultural and political changes they faced.
There was a real difference in values between generations, but elites’ attention to the
difference – anticipating, even exaggerating, its significance – committed them, in
various ways to a course of change and vernieuwing. It is thus a paradox that the
perceived difference in generations actually had the long-term effect of smoothing
the way for changes in Dutch public life during the 1960s.

3 The Netherlands and the United States

Did not the same dynamic of modernity exist in the United States during the 1960s?
It can hardly be contested that the same changes that swept over the Netherlands (not
to mention Western Europe) swept over the United States as well, and with significant
effect. Nor were Americans unaware of many of the changes. They, too, could
scarcely fail to notice the hypermodernity taking place within their own country.
‘ricans – particularly from the late 1950s to the mid 1960s – shared an optimism that
the world was changing for the better. Southerners, both black and white, all sensed
by the early 1960s that the Old South was disappearing, even if it soon became apparent that the changes were not as great as some had hoped, and others had feared. And despite the shared values, both old and young were aware of a widening generation gap in the 1960s, as ‘alienated youth’ preferred their own company rather than that of their parents. ‘Never trust anyone over thirty’ became one of the memorable clichés of the decade. Nor were older Americans necessarily hostile to a new generation of rebels; as historian David Steigerwald has noted, ‘sympathizers looked to alienated youth as the saviors of the world and in so doing helped to exaggerate the existence of the gap’. In the US, too, both youth and the future they represented were more highly valued than past traditions. Many American parents had no greater desire to be ‘square’ than their Dutch counterparts. American religion also faced the metamorphosis that swept most of the Dutch churches in the 1960s; American Catholics rejected their insular anti-modernism in favor of a more ‘open’ and ‘modern’ Catholicism, and as mainline Protestantism began to suffer serious losses to ‘secularization’. (The ‘God is dead’ theologians of the mid-1960s, it should be remembered, were all mainstream American Protestants.) By the mid-1960s, the mass media in general and Hollywood in particular shifted the accepted norms and mores of American society. Nor was the ‘liberal’ elite influence only evident in mass media; in politics, the universities, and many of the churches; in the professions and in even in business, a liberal tone, open to progress and change, was manifest in American public life in much of the late 1950s and 1960s. In some ways, important segments of the American WASP ‘Establishment’ functioned in parallel ways to Dutch regenten during the Sixties: defining, accepting and channeling change along moderate lines.

Wherein, then, lies the difference? Why did the cultural changes of the 1960s – which clearly had an effect everywhere in the West – seem nonetheless to have been least complete in the United States, with its relatively conservative morality, religion, and social and political views? It is an extremely precarious task, of course, to attempt a comparison of two so very different countries. In Nieuw Babylon in aanbouw, I close with a brief essay on how the Dutch negotiated the 1960s in a way that was substantially different from the American experience of that decade. I suggest that conservative resistance to cultural change was more robust in the USA because it was not apparent to millions of Americans that ‘the times’ necessarily had to change, or that resistance to this change was futile. This is because the foundation of modern American social, political and economic structures are actually older than those in the Netherlands, extending back into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Americans have long believed in the almost timeless stability of American institutions and values, given to them by the Founding Fathers for all time. Neither were many American elites – with the exception of American intellectuals – prepared to understand the changes of the 1960s in terms of inevitable evolution and change. Even the ‘liberal’ Supreme Court decisions which articulated the new ‘right to privacy’ –
Griswold v. Connecticut (1965) and Roe v. Wade (1973) – did so in terms that read that right into original fabric of the American Constitution. Even the new was frequently regarded as merely a deepening of what America had always stood for, not a departure from it.

But there is more that can be said in accounting for the difference. Another way of addressing the question follows from Mark Noll’s research into the fate of religious practice in Canada, which, like the Netherlands, ‘was consistently more conservative, group oriented and traditional than the United States’ in the century prior to 1960.21 According to Noll, the ‘secularizing forces’ of technology and prosperity that hit Canadian culture after 1945 undermined the ‘communal, top-down structures of traditional Canadian religion’. In contrast, these forces tended to work alongside the more fragmented, populist structures of American churches.’ He concludes:

‘Canada, a society more cohesive and deferential to authority, has experienced rapid loss in church adherence [since 1960], as its political, economic, cultural, and educational leaders turned from traditional faith. The United States, a sprawling, diffuse society in which leadership remains largely a function of democratic appeal, has absorbed secularizing changes with fewer obvious changes in patterns of church attendance or adherence.’22

The relative inability of elites to guide and direct the more populist and democratic United States goes a long way toward explaining why the United States has remained, in crucial respects, more ‘conservative’ than Canada and European nations like the Netherlands. Traditional commitments and beliefs were far less dependent on elite support for their continued viability. Thus elite mentalities and actions are more crucial to understanding postwar change in a well-ordered society like the Netherlands than it is in a country like the United States, where their role was less important and less effectual.

This strength or weakness of social cohesion did not lead only to differences in sociological effects. The strong sence of society in the Netherlands – and the relative lack of it in the United States – helps account for the divergent ways in which the Dutch and the Americans perceived change. People consciously living in a ‘social’ state like the Netherlands have a different sense of time than people in an ‘individualistic’ country like the United States. Their sense of time is necessarily more coherent and collective – related, as I noted in my book, to a sense of social development and change. All social, political and cultural changes are considered part and parcel of wider historical developments. Americans, in contrast, do not usually understand the social and political challenges they face in the light of a historicist understanding of history. Many whites in the American South – and not least their political leaders – sensed by the early 1960s that legal segregation was dying, and that a new era in race relations had dawned. Most of them, however, did not attach further significance to this change; it did not necessarily mean an end to their way of life, or
to most of the values they held. Although they recognized the change as significant, they did not believe that the winds of change dictate that they think and act in radically new ways. And this is the way many Americans—including American elites—went through the 1960s. Although they saw much change about them, they often did not perceive the change as a radical shift either in their own values, or in bedrock values of American society itself. Nor did they regard the emergence of ‘new’ values contrary to their own as an inevitable sign of a new age. Changing behavior was a matter of individual volition; it did not depend on social developments. Unlike many Dutch elites, they did not perceive that ‘modernity’ itself required adaptation more than switching to new technologies and methods. They tended, in other words, to be more atemporal and ahistorical in their understanding of what was happening during that turbulent decade of American history, because it was ultimately individuals, not societies and social processes, who decided history.

To sum up. Nieuw Babylon does not contest that the long-term social processes like secularization, democratization and urbanization contributed to the great changes throughout the West during the 1960s. It does not contest that these social processes were in some respect ‘silent’ or (or as Gerard Dekker would have us think about the gereformeerden) ‘quiet’ revolutions, surreptitiously taking place without anyone being much aware that they were happening. ‘Sociologizing’ the cultural and social changes of the 1960s, however, is also problematic, since sociological descriptions were themselves part of the historical landscape. The relative importance, for instance, of sociologists in postwar Holland—and the discourse of modernity they helped articulate for other Dutch elites—was itself an important component in the Dutch politics of modernity, as Marja Gastelaars and Ed Jonker have informed us. But the ‘discourse of modernity’ found its voice beyond sociological circles, taking a dominant role in much of Dutch public life in the postwar decades. That Dutch elites were especially alert and sensitive to modern trends, and that they possessed the influence to ‘define’ and ‘solve’ these modern problems, made the ‘politics of modernity’ in the Netherlands more potent than it ever became in the United States. This is the thesis of Nieuw Babylon in aanbouw, and this is where ‘the New Cultural History’ breaks with traditional historical sociology.

Noten

1. ‘Politisering, democratisering en individualisering’ are, of course, taken from C. P. Middendorp, Ontzuiling, politisering en restauratie in Nederland: De jaren 60 en 70 (Meppel: Boom, 1979). The last three concepts were articulated not by a sociologist, by the ‘cultural historian’ C. Rijnsdorp in Veranderend Nederland onder Juliana (The Hague: Boekencentrum, 1979).


5. Gerrit van Vegchel, De metamorfose van Emmen: Een sociaal-historische analyse van twintig kostbare jaren (Amsterdam/Meppel: Boom, 1995); Ton Duffues, Generaties en patronen: De katholieke beweging te Arnhem in de 19e en 20e eeuw (Baarn: Arbor, 1991). The point here is not that either Van Vegchel or Duffues have neglected the ideological component—Van Vegchel is particularly interested in ‘political culture’—but that they give a highly differentiated picture of ‘elites’ that differs from your own ‘looser’ approach.

6. The general unwillingness of Dutch scholars—more true of Dutch historians than Dutch sociologists—to undertake large projects and their preference for more circumscribed ‘local’ topics continues to fascinate me as an American, though I am certainly not the first to note this hesitancy. Certainly one of the major aims of Nieuw Babylon in aanbouw was to write a comprehensive history of the 1960s, regardless of the generalizations that such a study would necessarily involve. I wonder if Dutch scholars are increasingly drawn to more comprehensive studies; while in the Netherlands I encountered much unhappiness among scholars with the ‘pieterpeuterig’ quality of some Dutch monographs.


11. I do have not perceived a similar care to distinctions in scholars’ portrayal of the older generations. This has much to do with the fact that studying the older generations (as older generations) in the 1960s has received nowhere as much attention as the youth cultures that were ostensibly opposed them. But the same diffuse commitments were true of the prewar generation. People born before 1930 obviously never constituted a monolithic whole, either—even though many young people in the 1950s and 1960s may have thought so.


14. I became aware of this this generational dynamic—and its effects on postwar Dutch culture—in G. C. de Haas’ Andere tijden, andere zeden: Jeugdgedrag en jeugdcultuur na 1945 (Bilthoven: Ambo, 1971). Although I do not always share his assessment of the relationship between generations, De Haas provided an important basis for my own reflections on the 1960s.


