‘Holland is the only country in the world where one can talk of overpopulation and where saturation can no longer be considered a distant chimera.'¹ This is in one sense a remarkable statement, not only because of what it says but because of who said it. Professor Sauvy, the doyen of French demographers, has never been especially sympathetic with Malthusian propositions, and he is acutely aware — as he reminds the reader in the very next sentence — of how slippery a concept ‘overpopulation’ is.² Yet even a man whose predilections would induce extreme caution in offering such a judgment singles out the Netherlands not merely from the rest of Western Europe but from the whole world, to denote it the one country on the verge of saturation.

In another sense, Sauvy’s dictum is no more than one expression of an international consensus. For the past generation or more, the Netherlands has usually been cited as at least a partial exception to any generalization that one can make about the population of Western Europe. Among all comparable countries, this is the country with the highest birth rate, the lowest (or close to the lowest) death rate, the highest growth rate, and the densest population. Whatever explanations various analysts offered to explain (or sometimes explain away) the anomaly, they agreed that there was an anomaly to be explained. But in a recent article Hofstee described this consensus as ‘something of an overpopulation psychosis,’³ and the article in which he made this assertion started — not surprisingly — an extended and sometimes acrimonious debate, especially but not exclusively with van Heek. Professors F. van Heek of the University of Leiden and E. W. Hofstee of the Agricultural University of Wageningen are among the most
distinguished of Dutch demographers. Working independently from
different premises, each has built up an impressive corpus that would
have to be an important element of any attempted synthesis of the
history and prospects of the country's population. It suggests how
difficult it is to analyze Dutch population trends in a historical context
that the interpretations of these two eminent scholars disagree so
fundamentally. Among students of the specific subject of their vigorous
exchange, it has aroused much interest, and at least some of the issues
have a much broader significance.

In retrospect, the all but universal failure of demographers to foresee
the postwar rise in Western fertility, even as a possibility, can be seen
to have been based in part on a self-induced blindness. No matter
what it was called, the theory that had been developed to explain the
decline in fertility was not ordinarily treated as a hypothesis, subject
to continual refinement. That the fall in the birth rate observed in the
past would continue in the future had, in many demographic works
of the interwar period, something of the nature of a dogma. Thus, cases
at one end of the continuum — whether nations like France or social
groups like the urban professional with his one-child family — were
analyzed in the greatest detail; for these were taken to be advance
indications of what would soon be the general state. Instances of
fertility higher than the average, on the other hand, were typically
interpreted as temporary lags, rather than as deviant cases. While
no population analyst could fail to have been struck by that recurrent
phrase, 'except for the Netherlands' (it was, for example, the one
country of Northwest Europe whose net reproduction rate never went
below unity during the 1930's), it was not given the attention it
therefore seemed to warrant. If it had been viewed as truly a deviation
from the assumed trend, those studying the underlying causes of the
secular decline in Western fertility might well have undertaken a com­
parative analysis focused on the Netherlands, a nation situated in the
demographical center of Northwest Europe and sharing its history and
culture. But most of the works on Dutch fertility (such as those by
Methorst and Sanders) were restricted to Dutch data, and the few
with international comparisons (such as Meerdink's monograph) did
not attempt to relate Holland's higher fertility with other elements of
her culture.4

Consider the case of Dr. Kuczynski, an astute and thorough scholar
with a broad Continental background to his life's work in England.

4 H. W. Methorst. 'Differential Fertility in the Netherlands,' Population (Lon­
don), Vol. I, Special Memoir (April, 1935); J. Sanders, The Declining Birth Rate
in Rotterdam: A Statistical Analysis of the Drop in the Number of Children in
24,644 Rotterdam Families During the Last 50 Years (The Hague: Nijhoff,
1931); Johan Meerdink, De achteruitgang der geboorten (Utrecht: Kemink, 1937).
For a considerable period, before he began his demographic survey of the British empire, his attention was focused on the causes of the decline in fertility, and his several books on the subject constitute a major contribution to the clarification of the issue. One might have expected such a man to have probed the significance of the Dutch birth rate, that aberration from the West European norm. Actually, he discounted the importance of the anomaly on the ground that Holland is a relatively small country. In *The Balance of Births and Deaths*, thus, the comment on his incidental discussion of the higher fertility in the Netherlands was that —

Not much stress should be laid on the births in small countries. The usual comparison of small with large countries is indeed rather misleading.... If the large countries were subdivided so as to admit adequate comparison with the small countries, the position of the smaller countries would no longer appear extreme.\(^5\)

This *ad hoc* analysis was not applied, for instance, to Ireland, Denmark, Sweden, or Finland, whose population growth was analyzed in the same volume. More fundamentally, Kuczynski did not discuss the implications of this rather cavalier dismissal of national boundaries, which not only inhibit the movement of persons and goods (and thus affect population growth in a very direct way) but mark the approximate limit of national cultures and so of their effect on fertility and mortality rates. Kuczynski emphasized his point by comparing Holland with the four eastern provinces of Germany, because these had a total population of the same order and a higher birth rate; but the choice was unfortunate in a work on Western Europe, for the fertility of eastern Germany was certainly very much increased by the steady large immigration from Poland.

Particularly in contrast to these earlier works, van Heek's analysis of the fertility of Dutch Catholics\(^6\) stands out as a first-rate contribution. Its thesis, briefly summarized, is that the principal reason for Holland's anomalously high birth rate is the fertility of Dutch Catholics. If over the period 1905—1947 Catholics had had the same fertility as non-Catholics, the population of the Netherlands at the

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\(^5\) R. R. Kuczynski, *The Balance of Births and Deaths, I: Western and Northern Europe* (New York: Macmillan, 1928), 14—15. His tendency to pass over the deviant case of Holland is also to be seen in *The Measure of Population Growth* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1935), which omits it from the table giving gross reproduction rates for various European countries and British dominions (pp. 126—127) and from that listing the net reproduction rates (p. 215).

latter date would have been smaller by at least 875,000 persons. The fertility of Dutch Catholics, moreover, is not based merely on Roman Catholic moral principles as such, for it is higher than that of the contiguous Catholic areas of Belgium and Germany. While today Dutch Catholics constitute the country’s largest and most powerful religious-political group, they retain from their victorious fight for equal civil rights the spirit of the old battle front. They are an emancipated minority, in van Heek’s words, still fighting for symbolic ‘emancipation.’

Even more succinctly than in van Heek’s book, the special character of Dutch Catholicism is delineated in an article commenting on its main thesis. In 1949, as part of a rectification of the Dutch-German border, the bailiwick of Tudderen was transferred to Netherlands sovereignty. Of the 6,300 inhabitants, only 1,100 were Dutch; almost the whole of the population was Catholic, and ecclesiastically they remained under the German administration of the Bishop of Aachen. After that date, however, the people of Tudderen were attended by a cross-section of the Dutch Catholic social organizations — among others, the trade-union federation and its women’s auxiliary, the Limburg Green Cross (the Catholic version of the neutral Green Cross), and social workers of various types, who concerned themselves with medical-ethical instruction on parenthood and child-rearing. The birth rate of the transferred territory rose from 19.5 in 1949 to 25.0 in 1959, while in the adjoining German territory it fell over the same period from 16.3 to 12.9. The author’s argument that the activities of the Catholic social organizations were responsible for this difference I find to be wholly convincing. It is almost a laboratory demonstration of van Heek’s thesis.

In Hofstee’s exposition, the decline in fertility in the Netherlands, as elsewhere in the West, was the consequence fundamentally of the transition from a ‘traditional’ to a ‘modern-dynamic’ culture system. The essential difference between the two lies in the fact that the attitude toward change is negative in traditional cultures, positive in modern-dynamic ones. Seemingly this is simply a paraphrase of what is now a commonplace in sociological analysis: in the past, in Max Weber’s words, there was a ‘belief in the everyday routine as an inviolable norm of conduct,’ while in today’s ‘modern-dynamic’ societies social change is, on the contrary, often valued for its own sake. What does Hofstee intend to convey by this polarity more than the increasing tendency of Western persons — in the words of Alva

8 Hofstee, ‘De groei’. op. cit.
Myrdal, as quoted by van Heek — ‘to weigh rationally the motives and actions in one’s life’?9 ‘My hypothesis,’ he tells us, ‘is broader and less one-sided than the rationalization theory,’ first, because it informs us where the ‘disposition to weigh motives and actions’ comes from (it first appears ‘when one in principle no longer excludes change’); second, because it includes more than is usually understood by ‘rational,’ though what precisely is not specified.10 Notwithstanding these protestations, I do not find this pair of terms essentially different in meaning from a dozen alternatives that Hofstee might have taken from the literature. This portion of his argument, that is to say, is a repetition of the conventional theories of all historical demographers, with no adaptation to the specifics of the Dutch case.

Moreover, Hofstee argues repeatedly that ‘in no sense did the development of this modern mentality generally come late in the Netherlands,’11 and thus that ‘the fall in the Dutch birth rate did not at all begin so late, except for certain parts of the Netherlands which in this respect constitute a lag.’12 The reason for the ‘lag’ is the relative ‘isolation’ of these areas from ‘modern-dynamic’ ideas. In some contexts, this ‘isolation’ seems to designate simply an ecological phenomenon, the geographical separation of certain inhabitants of this very small country, with an excellent transportation system dating from the 17th century and a present population density of some 350 persons per square kilometer. In contrast with some communities of France or Sweden (to choose West European countries with a long record of low fertility), no portion of the Netherlands is in this sense nearly so cut off from modern influences. And among communities within the Netherlands, those not dominated by Catholic or Orthodox Calvinist (an approximate translation of the several sects collectively termed ‘gereformeerd’) sectors, even if with as little contact with the urban center as portions of the province of Drente, for example, do not have the country’s highest fertility.13 Apart from some exceptions (like the Catholics of the province of Zeeland, who constitute only about two percent of the total Catholic population), it is the relative ‘isolation’ of Catholic communities that results in a persistent tendency toward exceptionally large families.

Consider again the test case of Tudderen. Its rise in fertility Hofstee explains not by its isolation but, on the contrary, by the apparent fact that it came ‘under the influence’ of the neighboring Catholic area of Dutch Limburg. ‘In principle,’ Hofstee writes, ‘the modern culture system makes it possible for each group to choose its own incidence of births, even if sometimes a higher one than previously.’ In short, when Hofstee’s general thesis is negated, he is able to adjust its formulation to the new facts without changing its essence — that the modern-dynamic culture system results in a decline in fertility. In some other contexts, however, Hofstee seems rather to mean social isolation — that is, a social system in which groups in close physical proximity maintain their differences through the successful inculcation of group norms. If this is what he means, then in effect Hofstee is repeating in general terms what van Heek had stated in concrete detail about the particular group most relevant to Dutch fertility. Or, to change the metaphor, if we accept Hofstee’s negative terms (‘isolation,’ ‘lag’) as a first approximation of the truth and demand a positive specification, then van Heek has indicated not only where to look but a good portion of what we will find.

With the growth of democratic states in the modern West, a recurrent demand of the newly enfranchised classes was that the established church typical of the old order should be deprived of its exclusive rights. One means of disestablishment was the separation of church and state, which was most fully realized, perhaps, in France and the United States, but was approximated in most other Western countries. Following this pattern, in 1848 Holland’s Liberal premier Thorbecke promulgated a new constitution that began the transformation of that country into a modern democracy, with disestablishment as one prime feature. In the 1880’s, however, a coalition of the Catholic and the Calvinist parties took over the government, and this Christian partnership ruled, with minor interruptions, until the 1930’s. After the Second World War, it was replaced as the typical government by a Catholic-Labor coalition. Under either of these auspices the Netherlands has adopted a completely different means of disestablishment, namely, the gradual extension of the once exclusive rights of the established church to other churches and quasi-churches and, one after another, to church-affiliated institutions. According to the usual symbol, the Netherlands now rests on four pillars, each wholly separate yet all together

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15 The 1848 constitution finally gave Catholics equal suffrage, so that with it, according to a self-consciously Catholic appraisal, ‘the fight for full religious freedom was brought to a glorious end’. W. G. Versluis, Geschiedenis van de emancipatie der Katholieken in Nederland van 1795—heden (Utrecht: Dekker & Van de Vegt, 1948), p. 74. This is an implicit commentary on the subsequent struggle for Catholic ‘emancipation’.
holding up the nation: the liberal Protestant pillar (which includes the still formally established Netherlands Reformed Church together with other denominations), the Orthodox Calvinist (a combination of small, quarreling sects which in combination represent the conscience of the nominally Calvinist population), the Roman Catholic, and the 'humanist' (or 'neutral' or 'general'). From the word for 'pillar' (zuil), the Dutch name for this social system is the essentially untranslatable verzuitling, which is sometimes rendered as 'pillarization.'

The key principle of verzuitling is that the police power of the state is used to collect taxes, and that these public monies are then distributed, in accordance with the size of the various groups, to public-private institutions operating according to religious or quasi-religious norms. The range of institutions wholly or partly organized on this basis is virtually total: schools from kindergarten through college; newspapers, books and bookstores, radio programs, and other mass media; political parties and their affiliated organizations, including research institutes; trade unions and employers' associations; youth groups and women's organizations; sport and recreation clubs, including cooperatives, Esperanto leagues, and others with a cosmopolitan ideology. A listing of Catholic social organizations — thus omitting all directly related with the church in its ecclesiastical function — is a book of almost a thousand pages.15

In the years immediately after the Second World War, several socialist and liberal political groupings combined into a new Labor Party, which declared its intention of breaking through this religious structure op political life. The concept of doorbraak (or 'break-through') was attractive to many, partly because it offered something different to each. For democratic socialists it promised an escape from the sectarian frustrations of a 19th-century 'proletarian' program. For liberal Protestants it meant, following the reaction to Nazism of such men as Karl Barth, a redefinition of the Christian's civic responsibility.17 For a very few Catholics18 and even fewer Orthodox Calvinists, it afforded a means of separating religious practice from secular politics.

The postwar years, thus, have been marked by a competition between two structural systems, verzuitling and doorbraak. Which of the two is winning over the other is a question too complex to warrant any simple

16 Adresboek van Katholiek Nederland (Amsterdam: De Tijd, published periodically).
18 The precise number of Catholic members of the Labor Party is not a figure easy to come by. When I was last in the Netherlands, in 1959, one person told me that it was about 600; another, who at first thought this estimate was ridiculously low, checked among knowledgeable participants and came up with 800.
answer. For each class of organizations, Kruijt and Goddijn gave a so-called Completion Index, or the percentage of persons that belong to pillarized organizations, calculated on a base of all who by their religious affiliation and special activity might have joined; and from this they concluded that the long-term secularization of the country has resulted in some ‘depolarization.’ I would hold, on the contrary, that *verzuiling* is now even more firmly established than before the war, for principled secularists have in one important sense abandoned their opposition to it. In the Labor Party, for example, there used to be Catholic, Protestant and humanist ‘working communities,’ which means that the very mechanism established to break through the religious structure of political life has reconstituted itself into a pillarized organization.

*Verzuiling*, the basis of the ‘isolation’ that Hofstee noted, underlies the comparatively high fertility both of Dutch Catholics and of the Netherlands as a whole. While every device for impeding the intrusion of alien ideas, whether a pillarized university or a pillarized newspaper or a pillarized bridge club, is relevant to understanding how the norms of familybuilding are established and maintained, these have probably been shaped most directly by the pillarized organizations operating in the several fields of social work. In any case, these constitute a good example with which to discuss Holland’s social system in greater depth.

According to the Catholic concept of man, anything that affects one of the three elements of his nature — body, mind, and soul — inevitably affects the other two as well. Thus, a physician, a teacher, and a priest deal with parts of an indivisible unity; and social work, similarly, must include pastoral care to be effective. Before the war this perspective applied only to confessional social workers, whose small and professionally inadequate organizations were of relatively little importance. A postwar minister of social work — a Catholic himself who was assisted by several Catholic subordinates — restructured the system, so that today the government-subsidized confessional federations of social work are by far the most important. While secularists have been unhappy about the trend, both the Labor-Catholic coalition and the way Laborites interpret the *doorbraak* impeded any protest strong enough to be effective.

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20 The following discussion is based mainly on an interview with Dr. J. F. Beekman, secretary of the National Council of Social Work, The Hague.

21 As one example, over a full century the proportion of charity (armenzorg) paid for by church and private (that is, non-government) organizations fell from
A similar development can be noted in the field of mental hygiene. According to Catholic precepts, the care of Catholic mental patients is not possible in a 'neutral' environment: 'Catholic mental hygiene' must rest on the philosophical tenets of Catholicism. It was for this reason that some years ago a Catholic Association for Mental Health was founded, and the clinics run by a sister organization are administered jointly by psychiatrists and priests, who in what are interpreted as the best cases cooperate to the benefit of both. Psychiatrists recognize the importance of the priests' long experience in pastoral care, and in a number of cities throughout the country priests have attended a course in the elements of modern psychology. The Dutch word *geestelijk*, after all, means both 'mental' and 'spiritual.'

The Catholics isolated in their *zuil*, with every aspect of their life reinforced by every other one, obviously tended to absorb to the full the Church's teachings on sex and fertility. Nor was the inculcation on so important a matter left to chance. A generation ago it was usual for a priest to 'come to read the meter,' as it is put in Dutch Catholic circles; that is, he would visit a family that had not had a child for two or three years and pointedly ask why not. While this practice still continues, I was told by a number of knowledgeable observers, it has much abated, especially in the cities and outside of the predominantly Catholic South. Young priests, moreover, tend to see their function differently: far less likely to intrude into the personal lives of their parishioners, they rather restrict themselves to pronouncing general moral principles and, when asked, to helping people who are facing a moral dilemma.

The diminishing differentiation between Catholic and non-Catholic fertility, which both Hofstee and several other analysts have noted, may well be the basis of a correct prognosis. This does not imply, however, that Kruijt and Goddijn are correct in their statement that 'depillarization' is under way. Since both Catholic doctrine in general and Dutch Catholicism especially are undergoing fairly rapid change,
full adherence to the Catholic *zuil* may come to connote markedly different behavior patterns. On the one hand, the present reluctance of Catholics to use the most effective contraceptives may be mitigated or even, with respect to the pills, disappear. On the other hand, if Dutch Catholics were to abandon their tradition of marrying at an appreciably higher age than the national average,\(^{26}\) then this could mean a rise in fertility. All such prognoses, however, can be suggested only against the perspective of what Professor Rogier, the most distinguished of Dutch Catholic historians, calls that group’s ‘cultural inertia.’ \(^{27}\)

In the years following 1945, most analysts were inclined to a rather pessimistic forecast of the Dutch economy.\(^{28}\) Much of the capital stock had been destroyed during the war and the Nazi occupation; the Netherlands had lost its wealthiest colony, the Dutch East Indies, which before the war had contributed about one-sixth of the total annual income; and the revival of export trade, the key to Holland’s economy, depended on an improbable revival in West Europe. But pessimism, however well based it seemed to be, proved to be a false guide. The country’s postwar economy has been buoyant. In the 1950—60 decade the real growth of the gross national product averaged 5 percent annually, or higher than in almost any other West European country; and during the same period the average unemployment was only 1.9 percent of the labor force.\(^{29}\)

Hofstee is certainly correct when he challenges the allegation that so prosperous a country is suffering from ‘overpopulation,’ if we interpret that word in its most simplistic sense. The question still remains, however, whether on balance the continuing increase in Holland’s acceptance of the present prohibitions, at least in the United States. I was struck by the fact that the stand of Dutch delegates to the Second Vatican Council was outstandingly reformist on some theological questions (particularly, of course, the dogma on transubstantiation), and I would expect some of the same spirit to be expressed in norms related to family-building.

\(^{26}\) A. C. de Voorns, ‘De regionale verscheidenheid in de geboortefrequentie in de tweede helft der 19e eeuw’, *Tijdschrift van het Koninklijk Nederlandsch Aardrijkskundig Genootschap*, 81 : 2 (April, 1964), 220—232. This important article, which challenges Hofstee’s conclusions on a completely different basis than Van Heek’s work, might have been included in this discussion, but to do so adequately would have extended this article well beyond its present length.


population is beneficial to the nation’s economy and welfare, or whether, on the contrary, it represents a burden that has been temporarily hidden from view by favorable factors but will one day reassert itself. The latter represents my view.

When Hofstee wrote the article that started this dispute, data were available only up to the year 1960. From that year to the average of 1961—63, the birth rate increased from 20.8 to 21.0, the fertility rate from 101.9 to 102.0, and the net reproduction rate from 1.46 to 1.51. There is no indication here of the trend toward a gradual decline that Hofstee speaks of. This continuing increase means, according to various forecasts, a population of some 20 million by the year 2000. Moreover, the population structure at that date (and, unless efforts are made to reverse the trend, the country’s normative structure) will favor a still continuing rapid growth. The welfare of the Dutch people has been improving not because of but in spite of its population growth; this contradiction cannot be maintained indefinitely. At some point in the next decades, the planners’ adeptness in accommodating the economy to this larger and larger number of people will fail, and before that time one can already speak of ‘overpopulation’ with respect to such matters as recreational needs.

One should take seriously Van Heek’s suggestion that we try to judge Hofstee’s articles with the eyes of a 21st-century reader.

Summary: The generally accepted thesis that the Netherlands is a demographic anomaly is well based. Among all comparable European countries, it has generally had the highest fertility, the lowest mortality, the most rapid population growth, and the greatest population density. However, this general opinion was challenged in a recent article of Professor E. W. Hofstee, which led to a protracted scholarly dispute with, among others, Professor F. van Heek.

Van Heek’s main point, as expressed in an earlier book, is that Holland’s relatively high fertility is based on the ‘front mentality’ of Dutch Roman Catholics. At one time an oppressed minority with few civil rights, Catholics have long since become the country’s largest and most powerful religious-political group, but they retain from this past struggle a feeling of solidarity and truculence.

30 That is the view of F. de Roos, Bevolking en welvaart (1960), cited in Hofstee, ‘De groei’, op. cit., p. 31. Professor De Roos is a member of the faculty of The Free University in Amsterdam, whose curriculum is based on Orthodox Calvinist principles. For a commentary on his analysis, see J. Pen, ‘Is groei der bevolking economisch gunstig?’, Nieuwe Rotterdamer Courant (July 19, 1960).
Hofstee is less concerned with explaining Holland’s relatively high fertility than with analyzing its long-term decline. This took place, in his view, as the ‘traditional’ culture system was supplanted by a ‘modern-dynamic’ one, in which social change was more readily accepted. Among social groups in relative ‘isolation,’ however, there is a temporary ‘lag’ in this decline in population. This ‘isolation’ is in fact an expression of Holland’s unique social system, termed verzuiling. The disestablishment of the Netherlands Reformed Church was carried out not by withdrawing its unique privileges but by extending them on a prorated basis to all other churches and churchlike organizations. Thus, tax money is expended in order to maintain in separate zuilen, or pillars, the country’s several distinct religious or quasi-religious groupings, and thus to protect them against the contaminating influences of a cosmopolitan environment.

It is reasonably anticipated that the Netherlands will have a population of some 20 million by the year 2000. If ‘overpopulation’ today is a more or less ambiguous concept as applied to this country, its meaning will become ever more precise with the passing of the coming years.

COMMENTAAR OP COMMENTAAR

Naschrift bij het commentaar van Petersen

Als de bijdrage van Petersen bedoeld is als een soort nabeschouwing over de discussie tussen Van Heek en mij, dan is zij rondweg teleurstellend. Het is wel duidelijk, dat na hetgeen hijzelf over het bevolkingsvraagstuk in Nederland heeft geschreven, mijn artikel in Drift en Koers en mijn bijdragen in de discussie met Van Heek bij hem in eerste instantie weerstand zouden moeten opwekken. Dat het hem zo moeilijk zou vallen zich de betekenis van door een ander naar voren gebrachte feiten te realiseren en zich in zijn betoog in te denken, had ik echter niet verwacht.

Slechts enkele opmerkingen. Dat anderen — en bepaald niet alleen Max Weber — begrippen hebben gebruikt die een zekere verwantschap vertonen met het door mij gebruikte begrippenpaar ‘modern-dynamisch’ en ‘traditioneel cultuurpatroon’ is mij natuurlijk bekend; het staat uitdrukkelijk op blz. 44 in Drift en Koers. Merkwaardig is dat Petersen de indruk wekt te geloven, dat het feit dat anderen verwante gedachten hebben, de waarde van een theorie zou verminderen. Het omgekeerde lijkt mij eerder waar. Anderzijds geloof ik bepaald wel een nieuw element te hebben gebracht in de hypothese, zoals ik die