

WHAT IS TYPICALLY DUTCH?

Sociologists in the 1930s and 1940s on the Dutch National Character*

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Reading older sociological works is very likely to give one the strange feeling of being confronted with a mixture of ideas, some that seem rather familiar, and even quite modern, and others that make an outdated and sometimes even bizarre impression. During the past few years, I have conducted research into studies done by Dutch sociologists prior to the Second World War. I came across early forms of ideas that were to be developed in the following decades amid a large number of theories that now seem passé and quite wide of the mark. I was particularly surprised to read what Dutchmen, who, like me, called themselves sociologists, wrote about the significance of racial features and heredity, and to read their arguments in favour of eugenic measures. These writings are relatively recent; they were written by men who had taught the finer points of sociology to some of my own professors. In conventional descriptions of the history of sociology, most attention is usually devoted to ideas that later proved to be important, and not to those that were refuted or virtually ignored by the next generation. The wisdom of hindsight sometimes makes us a little myopic. In this article, I deal with a theme that does not often receive much attention.

Initially I found the Dutch term 'volkskarakter'** - a term which in those

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This article is a byproduct of a study I am conducting into the life and work of the Dutch sociologist and criminologist, W.A. Bongers. In this connection, I would be grateful for any documents or other information on Bongers.

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**The Dutch word *volk* means either 'people' or 'nation', so that 'volkskarakter' can be translated as 'people's character' or 'national character'; the former was accurate but stilted, so that the latter seemed preferable. A problem arose, however, when a 'people' was not a 'nation'; in those cases where a smaller group of people was involved, I used the term 'regional character'. Translator's note.

days was mainly used to refer to the character traits of the people of a specific nation — quite as repellent as the terms 'race' and 'heredity', but the more I read about it, the more it began to intrigue me, and my antipathy dwindled. It soon struck me that various sociologists and historians who were not disposed to pay the slightest attention to biological interpretations of social phenomena were sympathetic towards the idea of a national character. Moreover, I was aware of the recent revival of interest in the question of the 'Dutch identity' and had noted that recent writings on the topic were generally qualitatively inferior to those of pre-war sociologists.

In this article, I shall try to make it clear just exactly what Dutch sociologists and historians had to say about the Dutch national character in the 1930s and 1940s. I selected this period because more was written then about this topic than ever before or since, and because the quality of these writings was high. Nonetheless, I have made a number of references to earlier and later publications. I have concentrated on the authors who wrote extensively and explicitly about the Dutch national character and have ignored numerous writings in which comments on the subject may have been made in passing. However, the fact that a limited number of publications are referenced again and again should not be taken to mean that the concept was not widely discussed and extremely popular in Dutch sociology at the time.

In this article, I draw few comparisons with what has been written on the subject in other countries or in other fields of study. Linton and Kardiner's work comes to mind in this respect. They developed the idea of a 'basic personality type' in the United States at the same time. It is significant that Linton noted that the concept had been "in the wind" for some time when he and Kardiner published "the first concrete statement of the concept" in 1939 (Kardiner, 1945). Social anthropologists interested in relations between culture and personality devoted attention to a closely related range of problems. In addition to anthropologists, sociologists, historians and folklore experts, after the Second World War it was mainly social psychologists who conducted important studies in this field (Duijker and Frijda, 1960). The similarities and differences between the writings of Dutch sociologists in the 1930s and 1940s and those of men and women in allied fields in other countries is certainly a matter worth further study. In this article, however, I make few comparisons of this type.

COMMONLY CITED CHARACTER TRAITS

In 1930, S.R. Steinmetz, who was a professor of political geography and ethnography (particularly the geography and ethnography of the Dutch East Indies) at the University of Amsterdam, published a book about the Netherlands in the 'Weltpolitische Bucherie' under the simple title *Die Niederlande*.

Five of the eighty-three pages of the book comprised his chapter on the 'National Character'. Steinmetz headed his list of Dutch character traits with the love of freedom. He went on to mention individualism, an aversion to personality cults and other forms of 'Pathos', a critical attitude and a penchant for irony, a lack of emotionalism, negligible traces of vanity and very little vindictiveness, sensuality or sensitivity. According to Steinmetz, the Dutch rarely showed any signs of joy, and were rarely cheerful. They were not too enthusiastic about new inventions. Art in the Netherlands was not monumental. People were not extravagant; on the contrary, they were economical and thrifty. They were not adventurous, nor were they generally romantic. Very few people were filled with any kind of real passion for the opposite sex. The Dutch kitchen was not very sophisticated. The Dutch were not cruel to animals, nor were they cruel to each other. They took life very seriously and tended to drink away their problems. They had plenty of energy, but excelled more in their perseverance than in their enterprising spirit. With the exception of a small number of incidents, Dutch history was not marked by much violence. The Dutch had a secondary behaviour pattern; they did not tend to change their minds easily, nor did they react quickly, and they were not inspiring orators. But they were faithful, persevering, reserved, reticent, industrious, peaceful and scrupulous. (Steinmetz adopted the distinction between primary and secondary behaviour patterns from the typology of temperaments drawn up by the psychologist G. Heymans, who I shall refer to at greater length later in this article). The only field where the Dutch were more emotional was religion: here very heated feelings were sometimes rampant, and there was evidence of great love for religious leaders. The Dutch were very home-oriented; the family was important and family life was concentrated in the home (Steinmetz, 1930a, pp. 36-41).

Most of the Dutch character traits Steinmetz listed were also mentioned in the works of the other authors writing about the topic at the time, although the inability to show signs of joy was one trait I found nowhere else. Many of the traits Steinmetz mentioned were also referred to in 1871 in an article by the historian Robert Fruin entitled "The Character of the Dutch People". Fruin proceeded from the proposition that the Dutch were phlegmatic. He suggested using the Dutch word *bedaard*

... which has no real equivalent, in its full significance, in any other language. It merges into other terms: circumspect in deliberations, slow to act, cool when things go well, patient when things go poorly, persevering in the face of opposition, cool and collected in the face of unhappiness, not boisterous in the face of enjoyment. These character traits, when they cross the border to become faults and shortcomings, easily degenerate into sluggishness, dullness, awkwardness and stiffness (Fruin, p. 8).

Fruin also mentioned the thriftiness, the lack of enthusiasm for new in-

ventions, the negligible spirit of enterprise, the love of freedom, the alcoholism, the domesticity, the particularism and provincialism (comparable with Steinmetz's individualism) and the perseverance. There was one more trait Fruin mentioned that Steinmetz had not been very clear about, but one that was hardly ever overlooked in the writings of other authors: the Dutch cleanliness. Fruin viewed the eulogies on this national virtue as quite uncalled for; after all, in this humid climate cleanliness was simply a necessity. The generosity, the 'natural goodness typical of our nation' and the kindness towards the needy were the only traits no longer in evidence in the works of later authors, who lived in times when charity had become less important.

The love of freedom was perhaps the trait on which there was the greatest unanimity of opinion. Jan Romein's article *Oorsprong, voortgang en toekomst van de Nederlandse geest* (Origins, Evolution and Future of the Dutch State of Mind) focused attention on this trait. But that was a lecture given in 1941, and in 1946 the author referred to it as a lecture written especially for the occasion, "which might never have been given if it had not been for the German occupation" (Romein, 1946, p. 7). The love of freedom is a difficult trait to write about completely objectively. It has a patriotic undertone, just as 'people' or 'country' have. It is of particular political significance that it was precisely in the years 1930–1950 that such laudatory praise was bestowed upon the Dutch nation's love of freedom ("Tacitus had already noted the Teutonic love of freedom").

Individualism and particularism were also frequently mentioned. The sociologist J.P. Kruijt also noted "a more egotistical, or perhaps a better word would be a more egocentric type of individualism or particularism, solely in pursuit of one's own interests or the interests of one's own group. This trait sometimes turns into *obstinacy* and a *stubborn refusal to follow rules*" (Kruijt, 1934, p. 44). In 1946, in *Inleiding tot de sociologie* (Introduction to Sociology), D.C. Van der Poel backed this idea with a number of illustrations: the wild, disorderly youngsters on the streets (who also rated a footnote from Steinmetz), the black market, tax evasion, draft dodgers who were proud of their resistance, the anarchy of Dutch traffic (Van der Poel, p. 60).

The widespread idea that in their struggle against the water, the Dutch had been compelled to abandon their individualism and to co-operate with each other was refuted by Kruijt, whose conclusions were backed by descriptions of the Haarlemmermeer in H.N. ter Veen's Ph.D. thesis:

The early organization of the drainage districts does certainly indicate that the struggle against the water did make people join forces, but they did so in numerous extremely small groups – and instead of solidarity among these groups, there was petty squabbling, sometimes even *within* the group (Kruijt, 1934, p. 60).

The trait Fruin called 'bedaard', the Dutch reticence or reserve, was referred to time and time again. In an article dating back to 1904, Kern had noted "the proverbial phlegm of the Dutch", even though he did have his doubts about it (Kern, p. 362). Romein also used the untranslatable word 'bedaard' (Romein, 1941b, p. 188). Kruijt, who used Heymans' typology, just as Steinmetz did, noted the predominantly secondary behaviour of the Dutch. He explained that, according to Heymans, people who react in a secondary manner are characterized by

... prudence, circumspection regarding decisions, perseverance in carrying out their plans, an even temper, reliability, independent thinking, placidness, honesty in revealing their true intentions, a tendency to avoid any deviation from their ideas and habits, punctuality, sensibleness, reticence, self-containment, thrift, domesticity, compassion and helpfulness, self-criticism, truthfulness (Kruijt, p. 49).

Kruijt went on to note that all these secondary traits were also evident in the descriptions given by Dutchmen as well as foreigners of what was typically Dutch.

Perhaps alcoholism seems a surprising thing to be called typically Dutch. Romein stressed the fact that it had been noted as such throughout history. A Spanish commander at the time of the Eighty Years' War, the English ambassador in seventeenth-century The Hague, Denis Diderot visiting the Netherlands, a German author who recorded his impressions of the Dutch in 1833, all of them criticized the Dutch for their habitual intoxication. Romein made an important comment on this point.

Nevertheless, we are all aware that nowadays this seemingly typically Dutch trait has, we can safely say, completely disappeared. In twenty years, the rise of the workers' movement put an end to what seemed to be a vice of twenty centuries, an outgrowth of the humid climate, or so the most sympathetic critics said, but in reality from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries was most probably a result of the miserable working conditions (Romein, 1941a, p. 152).

This comment was enough to distinguish Romein from such authors as Steinmetz and Kruijt. But the most eccentric position of all, among authors in the field, was held by Johan Huizinga. In the first fifteen pages of his lecture *Nederlands Geestesmerk* (The Dutch Brand of Thinking), he cited their bourgeois nature as being the very essence of the Dutch:

Whether we like it or not, all we Dutch are bourgeois, from the notary public to the poet and from the baron to the common labourer. Our national culture is bourgeois in every sense of the word. The bourgeois conception of what life is all about has been adopted by all the segments or classes of our nation, whether rural or urban, the rich and the poor . . . Our very spirit has sprouted forth from bourgeois seeds, not a military spirit but a commercial one. The bourgeois quality of our society accounts for the negligible rebelliousness of the lower classes, and in general the tranquility of

the nation's life, which only ripples slightly under the wind of great spiritual turmoils. It is there for all to see: I leave the term some of its negative connotations. Our most objectionable national shortcomings are also rooted in this bourgeois nature: the inability to keep wanton conduct adequately under control, the dearth of public refinement and the frequently lamented stinginess (Huizinga, pp. 154–155).

Basing his line of reasoning on this bourgeois quality, Huizinga went on to discuss a number of national virtues. "At the risk of offending my heroically-minded fellow Dutchmen even more than probably I have already", the first virtue he mentioned was Dutch cleanliness. In Dutch, the word *schoon* not only means 'clean', it also means 'beautiful'. The other national virtues Huizinga mentioned were honesty, little gift of rhetoric, no predisposition to political extremism, the lack of a political feeling of inferiority, a relatively insignificant tendency towards national self-glorification accompanied by a penchant for national self-criticism, and a positive attitude toward the value of anything imported (Huizinga, pp. 156–161). Huizinga dwelt in great detail upon many traits like these, barely mentioned by others, and skimmed over certain other traits — like the love of freedom — to which other authors devoted extensive passages.

Kruijt believed that Huizinga, like others before him, had made the error of viewing the Netherlands as being identical to the province of Holland. Otherwise he would not have characterized the entire population of the Netherlands as being bourgeois (Kruijt, 1939, p. 30).

Nonetheless, there was a considerable consensus of opinion among the authors aggregating the elements of the Dutch national character, sometimes attributable to their copying parts of each other's lists. Steinmetz's article, for example, contained entire passages taken word for word from Fruin. But a wide range of sources (a psychological questionnaire, a study of the writings of foreigners who had visited the Netherlands in the course of the centuries, a survey of Dutch proverbs) sometimes led the authors to draw identical conclusions. The character traits I came across repeatedly included: the love of freedom, individualism (particularism) with its counterpart of licentiousness (indiscipline), unemotionalism (not very romantic or imaginative), sobriety, domesticity (a great amount of interest in family life, very little interest in public social activities), reserve ('secondary functioning', phlegmatic), commercial spirit, bourgeois mentality, tendency to maintain a show of respectability, an aversion to violence (peace-loving, not cruel to animals), awkwardness (stiffness), seriousness, honesty, a critical attitude, tolerance, thriftiness (economical, stingy), cleanliness (but, as was often noted, not with respect to personal hygiene), interest in religious questions.

The first thing that struck me about this list was that it was so jumbled. Try as one might to make it more systematic, and Kruijt did his utmost,

efforts in this direction were essentially pointless since it was little more than a disconnected collection of qualifications that were used from time to time to describe 'the Dutch'.

Nowadays, many of these traits are still viewed as being 'typically Dutch'. I think many people would accept this list as a reasonable description of 'the Dutch', and very few would favour a list of the opposite traits (The Dutch are collectivist-minded, imaginative, not domestic, excitable, intolerant, extravagant and so forth). But the question remains as to whether this means that this is what the Dutch are really like, or simply that the stereotypes about them are stable and widespread.

This short survey also makes it clear that authors describing the Dutch national character usually did their best to be fair, and stress the positive traits alongside the negative ones. When referring to such favourable traits as the love of freedom and individualism, they also mentioned the unfavourable kinds of behaviour that could result from them, such as refractory conduct towards policemen. Steinmetz noted that one element of the Dutch national character was illustrated by this very list itself: the Dutch lack of vanity.

DIFFERENT WAYS OF ACCOUNTING FOR THE NATIONAL CHARACTER

"Each people has its own character. This commonplace truth need only be expressed and it immediately meets with general assent rather than objections or doubts". Fruin wrote these words in 1871 (p. 6), and in 1930 people were still of exactly the same opinion. In 1934, Kruijt, who was a social-democrat, wrote:

Even the internationally-minded and democracy-oriented socialist cannot deny that there are not only psychological differences between the members of a group, but also between various groups of people (races, sub-races, nations, etc.). The profound differences of opinion do not pertain to *acknowledging* these differences but to *accounting* for them. How can these differences between various groups of people have come about? (Kruijt, 1934, p. 23).

The literature I consulted did not contain any well-founded answers to the question of whether national character did indeed exist. It was taken so completely for granted that one would have to be a fanatical sceptic to have even the slightest doubt about it. The discussions concentrated on how to account for the various differences, and not on whether they actually existed or not.

Sociologists usually assumed that a large part of the national character was hereditary. To back this view, they could cite *Der erbliche Rassen- und Vokscharacter* (Hereditary Racial and National Character), a classic article at the time, published by Steinmetz in 1920 and reprinted in 1930 in the second volume of his collected essays (Steinmetz, 1930b).

After making every effort to establish that races differed from each other both in physical and mental hereditary traits, he asks whether 'peoples' also differed from each other in their mental traits. Steinmetz thought they did. In essence, he viewed peoples as races *in statu nascendi*. If people of different races live together within certain national boundaries, then all kinds of selection processes take place, making certain hereditary traits increasingly dominant and others increasingly recessive. The mixing of different races, the immigration of certain groups of foreigners (for example the Huguenots migrating to the Netherlands), political policies (for example in the Spanish Inquisition leading to the execution of independently-minded people), religious customs (such as those preventing the most pious and altruistic Catholics from having children), the physical environment (with conditions sometimes so harsh that only the strongest could survive and procreate), the nature of the economy (wherever shipping played an important role, the energetic *Homo Europaeus* could flourish) — these were all factors that affected the development of the genetic 'raw materials' and thus contributed to the emergence of a people that also distinguished itself from other peoples by means of its heritable mental traits (Steinmetz, 1930b, pp. 181–186).

Of all Steinmetz's students, Kruijt had greatest reservations about eugenic and racial theories, but in his 1934 and 1939 publications he also accepted Steinmetz's statements. Like Steinmetz, Kruijt believed that it was impossible to account for all the various aspects of the national character on the grounds of genetic traits, but he did believe that certain aspects of that character remained unaccountable if one refused to take biological factors into consideration (Kruijt, 1934, pp. 24–33 and Kruijt, 1939, pp. 28–29).

Kruijt repeatedly stressed the distinction, which Steinmetz had drawn for the first time in an article in 1902, between *elementary* and *distributive* traits. Elementary traits are traits that all the people of a nation have in common, and that all the people of other nations do not have. Distributive traits are traits which are evident in the people of different nations, but to a different degree in each nation. Steinmetz and his students focused all their attention on distributive traits, and there is even some doubt as to whether they actually believed in the existence of elementary traits. After all, Kruijt did define national character as "the sum of the psychological traits which, as a result of their high frequency among the individual members of the nation in question, leave their mark on the nation as a whole" (Kruijt, 1934, p. 28).

Jan Romein had a great aversion to theories linking national character to heredity. His comment about the decrease in alcoholism accompanying social and economic changes already pointed in this direction. He defined national character in such a way that biological and physiological factors were of no significance, "because I have no idea what delayed bowel movements, hormones and internal secretions could possibly have to do with our national

character" (Romein, 1941b, p. 177). Romein believed that in order to track down our national character

. . . we have to examine the *history* of the Dutch people, starting from when it all began to interconnect. It is certainly there and there alone we should be able to find its roots and its branches. (In this way we can) refrain from devoting any further attention in this connection to the entire touchy and, in my opinion, unsolvable racial question, interesting though it might be in itself, with all the recognizable or unrecognizable racial traits it entails . . . (Romein 1941b, p. 183).

It is interesting to note that Romein preceded this passage with a quotation from Kruijt who, as he said himself, had provided him with "more solid ground under his feet". Kruijt did devote a great deal of attention, in fact the majority of his attention, to factors other than biological ones. Romein was solely interested in those other factors, and the same held true for Huizinga. These historians were mainly interested in the social environment that people create together which 'brands' them in such a way that other people can recognize them by their 'brand of thinking'. In addition, these authors were also interested in the influence of the natural environment.

The struggle against the water has already been mentioned, as has the influence of the humid climate on Dutch cleanliness. A link has also often been made between the Dutch domesticity, the quietitude of their street life and the frequent rains and often chilly weather in the area. The sociologist Bierens de Haan took this type of explanation the furthest:

The awareness of the danger that is always impending for the people at the water's edge, the familiarity with the violence of the unpredictable elements of storm and water, in addition to the necessity for vigilance and hard-headed joint planning, must have kept alive the feeling of insecurity in this life, of dependence on a higher being, which promotes the predisposition to a religious conviction. Moreover, the vast Dutch skies with their compact formations of clouds, the delicate misty vistas, the infinite stretches of water and land that constituted the world in which our seventeenth century art flourished (what a great role water played in these landscapes!) must also have influenced the national character and made it more open to personal piety: Calvinism and mysticism both took root in the hearts and minds of this people and affected the national character, which also has a strong element of humanism. Thus a people belongs to and is shaped by the lay of its land, with water playing an important role in the process (Bierens de Haan, p. 191).

But most of the authors in question attributed greater significance to a number of social phenomena. Religion was the most prominent of these phenomena, and this is where Kruijt was at his best, for religion was his speciality. He noted two influences, a formal and exacting one embodied in pious orthodoxy, and a more informal, flexible one embodied in humanist liberal-mindedness (Kruijt, 1939, p. 35). According to him, these two tendencies were in evidence long before the growth of Calvinism; they had been in effect for centuries, and still were, and had given rise to a wide range

of traits referred to as being 'typically Dutch' (See also Kruijt, 1943). Other traits were related to the importance of the role played by commerce and shipping in the Netherlands, and to the concurrent influence of the large cities, and sometimes of the organization of rural life as well. (Explanations like this can already be found in the work of Fruin). Kruijt also referred to the fact that feudalism had disappeared centuries earlier in large parts of the country and that in some regions it had never existed at all (Kruijt, 1934, p. 60).

As has been noted before, Huizinga believed that all the various aspects of the Dutch character were derived from their essentially bourgeois nature. This bourgeois nature was related to the history of the Republic of the Netherlands in the seventeenth century. Even at its peak, Dutch life was 'unheroic', according to Huizinga, and he went on as follows:

It was inevitable. A nation consisting of the prosperous citizens of medium-sized towns and of rather contented farming communities is not the breeding ground for what one might call an heroic frame of mind (Huizinga, p. 151).

Bierens de Haan noted the influence of the common language:

Because a language is more than a means of social communication. It is also a means of shaping and expressing thoughts; every language has its own way of doing this, its special unique qualities. So that unity of language also implies a certain unity in manners and ways of thinking (Bierens de Haan, p. 192).

I came across comments like this about the 'shaping' powers of a language only in the writings of Bierens de Haan. None of the authors made any reference to the fact that the Netherlands had not had a national court, as France had, and that this fact might have influenced certain typically Dutch traits, such as their bourgeois nature. Huizinga's lecture did imply something along these lines.

A NUMBER OF STEINMETZIAN INFLUENCES

In the previous section, it was made clear that historians like Romein and Huizinga had refuted or completely ignored biological interpretations of the Dutch national character, whereas sociologists had taken these interpretations quite seriously. This influenced the way the various authors defined national character. As is clear from the passages cited above, Huizinga made every effort to define national character in such a way that any role possibly played by hereditary traits was hardly relevant. If one reads what Steinmetz and Huizinga wrote about the Dutch national character, one gets the impression that, although they did sometimes refer to the same traits, they were not writing about the same things.

There is something paradoxical about the fact that contemporary readers are apt to detect a more sociological approach in the writings of the historians Huizinga and Romein than in those of the sociologist Steinmetz. His interest was more of an anthropo-biological nature. Steinmetz has the reputation of being 'the father of Dutch sociology'. And this he was, in the sense that it was he who trained the majority of the earlier generation of sociologists who played such an important role in post-war academic sociology in the Netherlands. Romein was active in the Dutch Sociological Association, but he did not play any significant role in the history of Dutch sociology.

Steinmetz's influence on the sociologists who studied the Dutch national character added a number of special features to this research. In the first place, none of his students could avoid the issue of the genetic determination of various elements of the national character. Some of them completely accepted Steinmetz's ideas about selection and counter-selection (one need only think of H.N. ter Veen's Ph.D. thesis) while others could afford a more sceptical stance (e.g. J.P. Kruijt's Ph.D. thesis), but none of them had any doubts that it was a highly important issue which one could not attempt to bypass, as Romein did. The only sociologist who, in 1939, vehemently refused to accept the idea that 'common descent' or race were of any importance to the national character was J. Bierens de Haan, but he was not one of Steinmetz's students (Bierens de Haan, 1939, p. 194-200).

Steinmetz's own description of sociography served to arouse interest in the subject of national character. In his words, sociography was "the study of peoples and their various segments and how they differ" (Steinmetz, 1931, p. 35). So it was always a 'people' or a 'segment' of a people (the residents of a city, region or village) who were the research object, always designated in terms of *geographical* borders. (Kruijt's Ph.D. thesis about secularity in the Netherlands was an exception to this rule). One of the standard questions posed by a sociographer when studying 'his people' was 'what is the basic character of this people?' In actual fact, the very selection of a country, city or village as the object of sociographic research implied that the residents of the research unit had a character of their own which was to be duly discovered and described. This is why A. Blonk's book *Fabrieken en mensen* (Factories and People) contained a chapter about the character of the residents of Enschede and *Het Oldambt* (The Oldambt is a region in the province of Groningen on the coast of the Dollard, translator's note) by E.W. Hofstee contained a chapter about the character of the residents of the Oldambt and debated whether this character was hereditary or not.

On the other hand, Steinmetz did see to it that his students devoted no attention to Durkheim's brand of 'collective consciousness', or to the 'national soul' expounded by Lucien Levi-Bruhl who was Steinmetz's very blackest *bête noire*. Expressions like collective thought and collective feeling were mere imagery, Steinmetz taught his students,

... and extremely dangerous and useless imagery at that, because it does not clarify anything and can be theoretically pernicious, since it leads to empty and facile figures of speech, and extremely dangerous in a practical sense since it contains untruth (Steinmetz, 1931, p. 151).

And indeed, none of Steinmetz's students exhibited any evidence of this line of thinking and this in itself says quite a lot about the intellectual influence he must have had on them. Comments along these lines were, however, not hard to find in the work of a sociologist-historian who was not of the Steinmetz 'school', P.J. Bouman. In *Sociologie: Begrippen en problemen* (Sociology: Concepts and Problems), which was published for the first time in 1940, Bouman wrote about the "national soul", about a "collective psyche, which seems to be rooted in the depths of a collective subconscious" and about "the superindividual psychological-biological reality" (Bouman, 1940, p. 74).

Steinmetz had a great admiration for the work of the psychologist G. Heymans (1857–1930). Heymans was mainly known for his typology of temperaments constructed from three polar distinctions: between emotional and nonemotional people, between active and nonactive people; and between people who function in a primary way and those who function in a secondary way. These enabled Heymans to distinguish eight types of people: the passionate type, the choleric type, the sentimental type, the nervous type, the phlegmatic type, the sanguine type, the apathetic type and the amorphous type. These eight types of people were graphically depicted as the corners of what was referred to as 'Heymans' cube'. (For an illustration, see: Duijker, Pallandt and Vuyk, p. 281). Heymans tried to test out his typology in various ways. He made a study of more than a hundred biographies. In 1905, in conjunction with Wiersma, he held a 'heredity survey', and in 1908 these two men joined forces again to conduct a 'puberty survey'. Steinmetz, who was a personal friend of Heymans', convinced his students of the great importance of these surveys. In his book about the Dutch national character, Kruijt mentioned Heymans in the same breath as Bergson, Freud and Adler (in that order) and called him "one of the greatest psychologists of our times" (Kruijt, 1934, p. 20). Hofstee called Heymans' typology "— as far as we can tell — one of the best, if not *the* best (system) we know of" (Hofstee, p. 57). Heymans' typology of temperaments and the two surveys mentioned above both influenced the way Kruijt and Hofstee wrote about the topic of national character. They made use of Heymans' typology when specifying and classifying the various traits. In the opinion of Steinmetz and his students, the surveys conducted by Heymans and Wiersma were a first attempt, though not yet a very successful one, to determine the precise quantitative distribution of the traits constituting the Dutch national character (Kruijt, 1943, pp. 35–36 and pp. 52–55).

HOW CAN THE NATIONAL CHARACTER BE DETERMINED?

Heymans and Wiersma drew up an extensive questionnaire and presented it to a random sample of the Dutch population which provided their collection of 2500 'psychograms'. Kruijt did have his doubts about whether the results of this study were representative for the entire Dutch population, but neither he nor Steinmetz's other students had any doubts about whether it was possible, in principle, to determine the exact distribution of the 'distributive traits' of the national character in this manner (See also "Der Erwerbung Vollständiger Psychogramme durch eine Fragesammlung", in: Steinmetz, 1935, p. 477 ff.).

In *Het Oldambt* (The Oldambt), E.W. Hofstee made every effort to study the character of the people living in the region as closely as possible. He approached all the headmasters, physicians and preachers in the area as follows: "If you come from another part of the country, or if for other reasons you are in a position to draw a comparison, I should like to know your opinion about the character of the people of the Oldambt compared with that of another segment of the population or of the Dutch population in general" (Hofstee, p. 45 n). The last part of his question makes it clear that Hofstee assumed a certain degree of knowledge about the character of the Dutch population in general on the part of the members of this local elite. Although this was a study of regional character and not of the Dutch national character, Hofstee's method did give an idea of how the Dutch national character could be studied: one could pose this kind of question to well-informed foreigners living in the Netherlands and to Dutchmen who had lived abroad for a lengthy period of time.

Romein suggested, as a method for determining the national character, studying what Dutchmen and foreigners living in the Netherlands had written in the course of time about what typifies the Dutch. In addition, historical accounts could also be viewed as a source of information, particularly regarding the history of the church, of literature, art, architecture, the economy and so forth. The national character could also be approached by studying the behaviour of Dutch people abroad (e.g., emigrants). Research into the Dutch language could also be conducted. Which things did the language have special words for, and how had these developed? Which things were only denoted by barbarisms? How much freedom did the grammatical rules allow? Which words and which expressions were untranslatable? Which figures of speech were popular? (Romein, 1941b, pp. 196-197). Romein had a much less positive attitude towards folk lore research as a means of determining the traits constituting the national character. He believed that this type of research set too much store by the idea that the more isolated a region was, the better the national character was preserved there. In Romein's

view, the idea that a character 'degenerated' as soon as it left this isolation bore witness to a reactionary mentality (Romein, 1941b, p. 198). Romein did not seem to have been aware that folk lore research did not necessarily have to pertain to isolated regions, and that the folk lore of industrialized society also existed and could be studied. Lastly, he mentioned the methods based in one way or another on psychology. He admitted he was not fond of the method based on experimental psychology "but I must admit this might be due to the fact that I am unimpressed by the entire psychological nomenclature employed by Heymans and Wiersma" (Romein, 1941b, p. 198). Perhaps depth psychology could be an aid in the search for the national character:

Is our tendency towards orderliness, frugality and obstinacy derived from, partially a substitute for, partially a reaction to the anal erotic phase distinguished by Freud? In times that are less inhibited in this respect, is the repeatedly noted penchant for scatological rather than for sexual jokes also related to this? When people eat and drink a lot, is there reason to speak of an 'oral fixation'? And if people are optimistic, is there reason to speak of the sublimation of oral eroticism? It is all too easy to pose questions like these. But what I know of the application of this kind of psychology to historical persons makes me shudder (Romein, 1941b, p. 199).

A number of the methods mentioned by Romein — studying what Dutchmen and foreigners have written about our national character, studying the behaviour of Dutch people abroad, and using the method based on experimental psychology — were applied by Kruijt in his book about the Dutch national character and socialism (Kruijt, 1934, chapter III). Strangely enough, no one mentioned observation as a research method. There were no recommendations for comparative research into how people act in different countries in certain situations. The same researchers who refused to accept the biological explanations also failed to recommend research into the question of how and why various aspects of the Dutch character have remained so strikingly stable. Research into how children are brought up in different countries, such an important aspect of the national character studies and culture and personality studies conducted elsewhere, was never recommended by these authors as a method of seeking explanations for the most constant traits in the national character. Bierens de Haan was the only one to mention the importance of upbringing and education (Bierens de Haan, pp. 195–196).

A NUMBER OF PROBLEMS

The authors discussed here approached their subject with great caution. They were aware of the scope of the problems the issue of national character involved and knew how easily one could fall into traps scattered throughout

the field. I have already noted Steinmetz's distinction between elementary and distributive traits, a distinction designed to combat a frequent error in reasoning. I also noted Steinmetz's tirade against the belief in a collective consciousness or a collective subconsciousness. Kruijt drew attention to a different problem: once it had been determined which traits constituted the national character, it still had to be determined how strong each trait was, how widely distributed it was in the population. It was precisely with regard to this point that questionnaires like those of Heymans and Wiersma could play an important role (Kruijt, 1934, p. 52).

Ontwerp tot een algemeene characterkunde (Draft for a General Study of Characters), a book by W.A. Ockerse published as far back as 1797, cautioned that the traits cited of the Dutchman had to characterize *him and him alone*, and Romein seconded these words of caution. According to Romein, this meant that a trait could only be referred to as being typically Dutch if one had succeeded in

... drawing a link between its roots and the specific nature of Dutch history, for only then could one be certain that the particular trait was not evidence in other peoples, or at least not to the same degree (Romein, 1941a, p. 149).

Romein also cautioned against lines of reasoning that viewed the national character as being something static. It was in this connection that he made his comment about the decline in alcoholism. It is only logical that Steinmetz should have put less emphasis on the plasticity of the Dutch national character, since he believed that it was partially determined by a biological basis. Nonetheless, he did allow for changes: races could change, for example due to factors influencing natural selection. But *all* the authors writing about the Dutch national character did agree that if and when it changed, it did so very gradually. Romein, who found evidence of the Dutch love of freedom in the writings of various authors throughout the centuries, also made it clear that what he was interested in were traits that had been noted throughout the course of history, be it to differing degrees or in different forms.

Another difficulty was that it often meant little if a certain people exhibited certain traits, because these same traits could lead to completely different patterns of behaviour. Individualism could lead to a tolerant attitude towards people who held nonconformist views, but it could also lead to sabotaging of any kind of cooperation and the hampering of authorities in the exercise of their duties. Just exactly how a trait manifested itself depended on factors that were not necessarily in any way related to the national character. Romein was of the opinion

... that abstract traits could not play any role in determining the Dutch spirit and did not have any significance until they became concrete, i.e., until they came to bear a relation to the constantly changing historical situation (Romein, 1941a, p. 153).

Lastly, I should like to cite the problem of the subgroups. Surely the character of the people of a nation is frequently composed of a number of group characters. Are not these group characters sometimes much more homogeneous than the national character? Romein spoke of class characters. Kruijt referred to regional characters. In this connection, the distinction was often drawn between the various races living in the Netherlands: the Nordic race, the Alpine, the Mediterranean and the Baltic race. Literature on the subject often distinguished between three Germanic tribes: the Frisians, the Franks and the Saxons. Kruijt also viewed these three tribes as being "bound by a common historical fate". He noted that the Oude IJssel, a river constituting part of the old border line between the Franks and the Saxons, not only separated people who could clearly be distinguished from each other by certain physical traits, but was also the border line between two dialects and between a Protestant and a Catholic region. And this implied a certain 'difference in nature' (Kruijt, 1939, p. 32).

If it were true that the lie of the land really had a decisive influence on the nature of the people living there, then people coming from different regions would have a different mentality and various authors were convinced of it.

Contemporary researchers would no longer be so apt to think in terms of the influence of the lie of the land or of the race or tribe involved, but they definitely would think in terms of the differences between the members of various religious groups. Generalizations about the lighthearted Catholics of Brabant and the straightlaced Calvinists of the Veluwe are still very much intact. In 1943, Kruijt devoted extensive attention to these differences in his article *Mentaliteitsverschillen in ons volk in verband met godsdienstige verschillen* (Differences in Mentality Among the People of Our Country in Connection with Religious Differences).

The character of the people living in certain regions, cities and villages has been documented in the series of sociographic studies which was published in the 1930s and 1940s under the supervision of Steinmetz and his successor, H.N. ter Veen, as well as in books by 'laymen' describing various regions (preachers, teachers, sometimes a physician) or by folk lore researchers. Consequently, much more, and much more detailed, information is available about this type of regional or local character than about the character of 'the Dutch'.

If one pays special attention to the differences in mentality between the members of various social or religious groups, between people who live in different provinces, or between the residents of urban areas and those of rural areas, then one increasingly begins to wonder whether there *is* such a thing as a Dutch national character.

THE GERMAN OCCUPATION AND THEORIES ABOUT THE DUTCH NATIONAL CHARACTER

It is no coincidence that it was precisely in the 1930s and 1940s that a great deal of attention was devoted to the subject of the Dutch national character. The Second World War had a lot to do with it.

It would be logical to assume that after 1945, theories on national character would have fallen into disrepute because of their association with Nazi theories about *Blut* and *Boden*, but there is no evidence of this having happened. The interpretation of national character in terms of heredity (*Blut*) and the lie of the land (*Boden*) was indeed no longer acceptable. However, the notion of a typically Dutch national character was revived between 1940 and 1945, and had a special attraction for Dutch people who abhorred the German occupation. Jan Romein gave a very clear account of how the war influenced the attitude towards this topic. He noted that he had never really been able to believe in the existence of a national character, but in his 1941 lecture he said that

... all that was necessary in order to remove any shadow of a doubt in my mind about the existence of a national character was the crisis we have been in ever since May of last year, in other words, experience is still the best teacher (Romein, 1941b, p. 180).

Romein went on to show that every time Dutch unity was threatened, there was an increase in the number of publications on the Dutch national character:

This might very well mean that the crises of approximately 1600, 1672, 1787, 1795, 1813, 1830, 1870 and 1914 gave rise to the *illusion* that there was unity based on one and the same character, without this character really having existed, but it might just as well mean that there is definitely one national character but that it only clearly expresses itself in times of crisis, and on the basis of my experiences in the past few months I tend to favour the latter idea (Romein, 1941b, p. 181).

The literature dealt with in this article confirms Romein's opinion. The two articles he wrote in 1941, the article Kruijt wrote in 1939, the study by Bierens de Haan, and Huizinga's lecture can all be viewed as contributions to the struggle against National Socialism. The book Kruijt wrote in 1934 did have a somewhat different perspective, but it is quite probable that the main tenet behind the book was that the type of democratic socialism propagated by Vorrink harmonized well with the Dutch national character, and that National Socialism, paradoxically enough, was antinational in the sense that it was "devoid of our truly national traits" (Kruijt, 1934, p. 79). In all these writings, it was repeatedly stated that on the grounds of their character traits

the Dutch people, unlike the German people could not be led into mass sympathy for totalitarian political systems, whether communist or fascist.

I should like to stress here that when Kruijt and Huizinga made statements to this effect in 1934, there was a great deal of evidence to the contrary. This was the time of the rise of the Dutch National Socialist Movement (De Jong, p. 270, ff.). It looked as if the hitherto generally accepted view of the Dutch as being tolerant and peaceable was to prove to have been overly optimistic. The results of the provincial elections of 1934 were very favourable for the Dutch National Socialists. It was not until the parliamentary elections of 1937, when the percentage of votes for the Dutch National Socialists fell from 7.91% to 4.21% (De Jong, p. 342) that Huizinga's and Kruijt's assessment proved to have been accurate.

Of course there was a political aspect to Romein's 'discovery' of the Dutch national character in the first few months of the Second World War. In the face of theories legitimizing the German occupation of the Netherlands on the grounds of the racial, linguistic, geographical and historical ties between the Netherlands and Germany, the famous author of *De lage landen aan de zee* (The Low Countries on the Sea) was called upon for a retort and he made the very most of the uniqueness of the Dutch character.

The question as to what the Dutch have in common, what it is that makes them Dutch, becomes an all too relevant question if and when the country is invaded and occupied. In the past three decades, the chance of a war involving the Netherlands might not have decreased, but according to many people the chance of a conventional occupation has. This might partly account for the declining interest in theories about the Dutch national character in the fields of sociology and history. Romein's comment that as soon as the country's sovereignty is at stake, the national character manifests itself in all its dimensions is certainly plausible. It is only at moments like this that people feel the need to ponder the questions: What do we have in common? What are all of us like? Perhaps the reverse also holds true: the fact that no one showed much interest in the question of the Dutch national character in the past few decades might mean that people did not feel there was much danger of the Netherlands being occupied by foreign troops.

CONCLUSION

In the course of time, there have been great fluctuations in the intensity of interest shown in the issue referred to here as 'national character', and it has been subject to the influence of a wide range of social developments. In this article, for instance, it was suggested that the threat to the Dutch nation as an independent political unit acted as a stimulus for research into the Dutch national character. Ethnic or regional minorities who feel threatened in their

relative autonomy and whose aim is to attain a certain degree of autonomy often exhibit a growing amount of interest in the qualities that make their own group 'unique'.

It is my impression that in recent years there has been a growing interest on the part of the Dutch and of Dutch sociologists in their own characteristic traits. This initially became clear to me from the numerous reactions to the first version of this article, which was published in the Netherlands. That the Netherlands is now rapidly developing into a multiracial society might assist in this revival of interest. In recent years, many immigrants from the former Dutch colonies of Indonesia and Suriname, and many migrant labourers from Italy, Turkey and North Africa have come to the Netherlands. The changing composition of the Dutch population has often been the underlying factor in recent discussions about the Dutch national character.

De Nederlandse natie (The Dutch Nation), a book published in 1981, is a good example of this (Couwenberg, 1981). On the cover, the publisher introduced this new anthology of articles with the following words: "What is still keeping the Dutch nation together? The present-day development towards a multiracial society calls for a new look at our national identity". The anthology, containing articles by prominent Dutch social scientists, includes such statements as: "Hardly any attention has yet been devoted to the question, such a logical question for a nation that has built up an identity of its own in the course of the centuries, of what bearing will the growing multiracial dimension of our society have upon our identity, and how is it to continue to develop within this multiracial framework?" (Couwenberg, p. 12). This question posed by the editor S.W. Couwenberg, a professor in constitutional and administrative law, was answered rather optimistically by the sociologist, Prof. P. Thoenes, in his article as follows: "The multiracial aspect, in its present dimensions, is more of a valuable counterpoint than a threat to the national character" (Couwenberg, p. 132).

In another article in this anthology, however, the emeritus psychology professor, A. Chorus, appeared to have a completely different opinion:

In view of their small numbers, the Spaniards and Italians will not present any great problems. You do sometimes hear about a Dutch wife divorcing her Italian husband for wanting wine with his supper every day, since she thinks beer will do. Special wine subsidies are the answer to this kind of problem! . . . The Moslems, meaning the Moroccans, the Algerians and especially the Turks, are going to present the greatest and most insurmountable problem. The number of children they have is one very touchy point for the average Dutchman in the habit of practising family planning (Couwenberg, p. 42).

If one compares what was written by professors in the social sciences about the Dutch national character in the thirties and forties with what their

colleagues have to say about the subject today, then it does not seem as if any progress was made in the interim. On the contrary, I have the impression that many contemporary publications on this subject are on a level of sophistication that would never have passed muster with the sociologists of the thirties.

The questions discussed at such great length in the thirties and forties are still extremely interesting. For instance, the idea that Italy, Germany and France provide more fertile ground for totalitarian ideologies than the Netherlands or the Scandinavian countries is certainly deserving of further research. Anyone studying pre-War sociological literature about the Dutch national character soon begins to wonder whether, in more recent years, any attempts were made to refute the very existence of typically Dutch character traits and disprove the entire theory of a Dutch national character.

I presume the same kind of thing happened to these theories as to so many other theories: the protagonists passed away, other issues came up, and their successors were more interested in other subjects. Even though many sociologists view this as a very normal course of events, it still leaves me with an unsatisfied feeling. How can one be sure that the ideas that have sunk into oblivion did not deserve a better fate? Literature exists in which theories about the eugenic improvement of the human race are criticized, but as far as I know no literature exists in which theories about national character are seriously disputed.

Pondering the differences between the Dutch and people in other countries is a very popular pastime among sociologists and non-sociologists alike, especially immediately after a vacation abroad. If the more academic studies of this subject were banned from the realm of 'serious' sociology, this would sever a potential link between sociologists and 'laymen'. The question remains as to whether this would be all that inadvisable, for it is a well-known fact that different people have very differing ideas about how much 'everyday life' knowledge and academic knowledge should have to do with each other. However, research into the sociological literature of the thirties and forties makes it clear that relatively recently, the ideas of 'laymen' were still very closely related to those of 'professionals'.

Links to 'lay sociology' may be important and so may those to 'pre-sociology'. The forerunners of this branch of sociology included the men who explored distant unknown regions. If and when they returned home safe and sound, their fellow countrymen marveled at their stories about the way of life in these far-off regions. It is common knowledge that these stories made people view their own customs and way of life as things that could no longer be taken for granted as completely as before, thus contributing towards a

climate in which the social sciences could flourish. What is not so well known is how long the accounts of these travelers continued to play a role in the social sciences. The cultural anthropological works of Steinmetz and his students were largely based on this kind of source: accounts of the travels of ship's captains, missionaries, explorers, adventurers and so forth. Their curiosity and their marvel at the differences between the way people lived in different parts of the world were always the motivation behind their interest in sociological questions.

These forerunners of modern sociology can bring to mind certain interesting questions that have been half-forgotten or poorly answered by contemporary sociologists. On the other hand, their work also shows us the inadequacy of the terminology they had at their disposal. Terms like 'national character' or 'regional character' give rise to misunderstandings. In combination with terms like national or regional, the term 'character' — a term taken from the field of psychology, where it is often disputed and rarely clearly defined — can easily lead to erroneous lines of thought (reification, psychologizing, staticization). However, for a short period of time these concepts can serve a function as 'sensitizing concepts'. Once it has become clear what they refer to, it might be best to forget them and look for better terms.

One thing we can learn from the sociologists of the thirties and the forties is that the subject area they called 'national character' is worth further research but that the terminology they have left us is inadequate. An important condition for research in this field is the development of a more accurate, more reality-oriented and less misleading way of writing about the question: What is typically Dutch?

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