
Decoloniality in the Netherlands

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In the Netherlands, the Dutch colonial past is still visible in a number of statues and street names. Increasingly, however, this past has come under critical scrutiny. The benefits of Dutch colonial rule now seem to pale in view of the various crimes against humanity committed during the colonial era, such as slavery, the violence used to suppress rebellions, and – more recently – the Dutch war crimes in Indonesia during the war of independence.

A new ideology is haunting historical scholarship: decoloniality. This new *Weltanschauung* is not a means to reject the scientific, medical, social and ethical progress of the modern era *tout court*. It is, rather, a way to explore colonization, settler-colonialism, racial capitalism, modernity, and, most recently, neoliberalism and the ways in which these phenomena have displaced an array of modes of living, thinking and being in our natural world (Decolonizing Humanities Project 2018). This new outlook on the past has also found a number of followers in the Netherlands.

One of the first public victims of the decoloniality ideology was ‘*Black Peter*’, the assistant of Bishop Saint Nicholas, a central figure in the popular and widespread Dutch tradition of giving presents on the night before the feast day of Saint Nicholas, on 5 December, rather than on Christmas day. Every year, the country finds itself immobilized while Saint Nicholas distributes, in person or *in absentia*, small and large gifts to children and adults, sometimes accompanied by a poem on the subject of the usefulness of the gift and on the peculiarities of the person who is about to receive it. It all seems pretty harmless. Yet the recent criticism of this folkloric event is not aimed at Saint Nicholas himself, but at his acolytes. Most of these are white men, painted and dressed as blacks, called ‘*zwarte Pieten*’ in Dutch. They are supposed to throw candy around, help Saint Nicholas get on and off his white horse, distribute small gifts by placing them in children’s shoes near the chimney during the weeks leading up to his feast day, and by consoling children

who are afraid that their behaviour during the past year will be punished and that they will be forced to accompany Saint Nicholas back to Spain, where he is supposed to live for the rest of the year. These black helpers speak a kind of pidgin Dutch and make funny faces. According to critics, the fact that they are black, servile and not to be taken seriously, is seen as racist and detrimental to the emancipation of blacks in Dutch society.

As a result, some communities have abandoned the festive arrival of Saint Nicholas altogether; some continue this tradition but only with assistants painted in a variety of skin colours; while other communities stubbornly refuse to change anything, allowing '*Black Peter*' to remain black. And every year there are discussions in the various city and community councils as well on television as to how and in which way the arrival of Saint Nicholas will be celebrated. That Saint Nicholas is surrounded by black helpers is a tradition dating back to the nineteenth century, but the celebration of his feast day might well have its roots in earlier centuries, when it was customary in southern Europe to depict important persons in the company of one or more of their personal black slaves. It is exactly this tradition that places blacks in a subaltern position according to the activists of '*Kick out Zwarte Piet*' (Sabel and de Vries 2013; Cessou 2013).

The decoloniality ideologues not only accuse this popular historical tradition of being one of the pillars of modern racism, but also criticize paintings, statues and street names of public figures who can be accused of racism during the past centuries. One of the main culprits in this respect is Jan Pieterszoon Coen (1587–1629), immortalized by a statue in the city of Hoorn. As he was a native of that city, the city council decided in 1893 to place his statue in one of the city squares in honour of the fact that he had been an able governor of the first Dutch settlements on the island of Java, the beginnings of the later colony of the Dutch East Indies. Yet it was well known at the time that, during his term of office, Coen almost annihilated the population of the neighbouring island of Banda in retaliation for the Bandanese selling spices to the English East India Company, in spite of the fact that they had entered into an exclusive contract with the Dutch East India Company. In 1621, Coen sent a punitive force to Banda killing about 4000 inhabitants. In spite of the fact that this massacre already had been criticized by the directors of the Dutch East India Company, and that the town council must have been aware of Coen's policies, it still decided at the time to honour Coen with a statue. At present, however, Coen's statue has become a bone of controversy and, from time-to-time, anonymous activists have smeared it with red paint. In order to avoid escalation, suggestions have been made to remove the statue from public space and put it out of sight in the nearby museum, accompanied by an elaborate information panel. In addition, an elementary school in Amsterdam called after Coen changed its name into '*East Indian Neighbourhood school*' (Kieft 2018; Hulspas 2015).

A similar solution was found for the so-called '*Golden Carriage*'. This carriage was a present to the former queen of the Netherlands, Wilhelmina, on the occasion of her accession to the throne in 1898, and financed by public subscription among the citizens of Amsterdam. The outside of the left-hand door shows a picture of grateful

colonial subjects, who all bow to a white woman representing the Dutch nation. In the picture on the door, the colonial subjects offer their products to the Dutch nation in exchange for Western culture, symbolized by a white man holding a booklet in his hand. For decades, the Golden Carriage has been used by the Dutch royal family as a means of transportation when opening the yearly session of parliament on the third Tuesday in September, and, until a few years ago, without any protests. However, recently, some black activists started to criticize the 'slave panel' and demanded that the king and queen no longer use the carriage. Alternatively, it was suggested that the controversial panel should be removed. In the end, a solution was found by temporarily taking the carriage out of circulation, first in order to have it restored to its former splendour and then to place it in a museum (König 2014; Oostindie 2009).

Changing the names of streets and squares is not only more controversial, but also more costly than removing statues and pictures from public space. A case in point are the names of streets called after South African politicians and military leaders during the Boer War. At the time of that war, the Dutch public opinion wholeheartedly supported the Boer republics. The South African Boers were then seen as a lost Dutch tribe since they spoke Afrikaans, a language considered to be a variety of Dutch. In addition, the South African protestant churches resembled those in the Netherlands and many of their vicars were Dutch and had been educated in the various protestant Departments of Theology of Dutch universities. Like the Dutch in the past, the Boers were seen as defending their freedom and way of life against the oppressive policies of the British, such as the concentration camps, where the women and children of the Boers were forcibly interned in order to stop their husbands and fathers from fighting. In opposing British imperialism, the small Boer republics were considered as allies in the fight for freedom, like the Dutch during the Anglo-Dutch wars of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Bossenbroek 2012).

At the end of the nineteenth century, many Dutch cities were expanding rapidly, and it was no wonder that the various city councils were prone to call their new streets and squares after Boer heroes. When the Boers were close to defeat, the president of the Transvaal Republic, Paul Kruger, was saved from British retaliation by boarding a Dutch cruiser sent to South Africa by Queen Wilhelmina. After 'uncle' Paul had arrived safely in The Netherlands, Kruger received a hero's welcome from a huge crowd gathered under the balcony of his hotel in The Hague.

After the Boer republics had lost their independence, the Dutch remained staunch allies of South Africa in spite of the fact that, after the Second World War, racial segregation, called *Apartheid*, had become the country's official policy. It was not until the middle of the 1960s that a Dutch anti-apartheid lobby managed to turn Dutch public opinion around, and slowly the Dutch government also adopted a more critical attitude towards South Africa. Over time, the Dutch even became the most outspoken critics of Apartheid, and a boycott of everything South African was widely supported in the Netherlands. Yet, many Dutch cities still had a 'South African' neighbourhood, but only the city of Amsterdam changed the name of one square, called after the Boer leader Pretorius, to that of Steve Biko, a well-known black victim of Apartheid (*Ensie Encyclopedie* 2018).

It was also in Amsterdam where, in 1956, the City Council renamed 'Stalin Avenue' as 'Freedom Avenue' following the harsh suppression by the Soviet army of the massive protests in Hungary against the communist regime. In 1945, the avenue had been called after Stalin, honouring the important contribution of the Soviet Union in defeating Nazi Germany. Stalin's popularity clearly showed in the polls as the Dutch Communist Party gained about 30% of the vote (!) in the first post-War elections for the City Council in Amsterdam and about 10% in the elections for the national parliament (*Historiek* 2019).

The decoloniality ideology has also induced several Dutch museums to change the wording of some captions describing their artefacts. The largest museum in the Netherlands, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, still uses the term 'Golden Century' for the 'heyday of Dutch painting and art', but has replaced 'offensive' descriptions such as 'Hottentots' and 'Bushmen' by 'Khoi' and 'San' in describing the original inhabitants of the Cape colony (Peverelli 2018). The Amsterdam Municipal Museum adopted, for its part, a more radical policy by banning the expression 'Golden Century' altogether, and in future will only use the term 'seventeenth century'. The Amsterdam Museum explained the change by pointing out that the label 'gold' could hardly be an adequate description of the living conditions at the time because there existed extensive poverty both in the Netherlands as well as in its overseas possessions, not to mention the widespread racial discrimination, the extensive violence and the depletion of colonial resources.

The seventeenth century had been 'golden' only for a small section of society, while the living and working conditions for the majority of the Dutch had been miserable. According to the standards of today, that negative description seems to be closer to historical reality than the label 'golden', because the distribution of income and wealth in the Netherlands had been extremely unequal at the time, while according to present-day standards working hours had been long, and wages low, the housing for the lower incomes unsanitary, cramped, and fire-hazardous. Using the term 'Golden century' seemed a deliberate attempt to obliterate the widespread misery among the majority of the Dutch population at the time.

Differences in income and wealth, however, like racism and exploitation, the lack of human rights, the use of violence, wars and their misery, poor health, the inequality between men and women as well as the lack of democracy, were not typical of the seventeenth century nor of the Netherlands alone. Yet, in other aspects, the Dutch Golden Age was indeed an exceptional period when measured by the standards of the time. The explosive increase in the number of painters was unique and was based on the growing demand for art from the bourgeoisie and not, as elsewhere, from the nobility or the Church. When confronted with the decision of his colleagues from the Amsterdam Municipal Museum to ban the term 'Golden century' the director of the Rijksmuseum indicated that the remarkable Dutch art production alone justified the continued use of the label 'golden' (Donker 2019).

The market for paintings in the seventeenth-century Netherlands was only one of the unique aspects of the Dutch seventeenth-century and could be supplemented by other supportive evidence for the use of the adjective 'golden' such as religious

tolerance, republicanism, and social and geographic mobility. Along with England, the seventeenth-century Netherlands had one of the least restricted labour markets in Europe. There were hardly any feudal remnants left, and there existed no restrictions for the labouring classes to move around or to work outside agriculture. Unmarried women had the legal right to conduct business, which was unheard of in the surrounding countries. In the Netherlands, private wealth was usually more important than noble origins or land ownership. In the Netherlands, an estimated 3000 men participated in some way or another in state affairs. This number does not make the Netherlands a modern democracy, but important decisions were based on the vote of many more people than in other countries, where only a tiny elite decided about public affairs (Israel 1995).

True, not everything was golden in the seventeenth-century Netherlands, but similar restrictions apply when using labels such as ‘The New Iron Age’ or ‘The Age of Extremes’. Nobody has ever criticized these. Scholars and laymen alike seem to realize that during the nineteenth century some parts of Europe industrialized rapidly and that more iron was used than ever before in the construction of ships, trains and public and private buildings (such as the Paris Eiffel Tower). Nevertheless, most ideas, products, and buildings during the ‘New Iron Age’ had nothing to do with iron. Similar restrictions apply to the label ‘Age of Extremes’ for the twentieth century, because the vast majority of Europeans rejected fascism, national-socialism and communism. Yet, these labels do make sense, because they represent a small, but characteristic aspect of a period.

In sum, the decoloniality movement wants to erase the remnants of colonialism and Western superiority in linguistics, history, and the social sciences. Some think it possible to decolonize mathematics. In some ways, the demands of the movement resemble those of the ‘ban tobacco’ lobby in causing politically correct TV stations in the US to erase all traces of cigarettes, cigars and pipes in old black and white movies. As a consequence, these movies show actors making strange movements with their right arms that make no sense to the viewer. A similar alienation is liable to occur in our understanding of history, by erasing all traces of colonialism, racism and male dominance. These phenomena were part of our history, whether we like it or not, and the past is a foreign country, where things did happen differently.

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