

## Project: Changing Identities and the shift to assimilationism in the Netherlands

### Synopsis

This project aims to analyse why seemingly progressive European immigrant societies, such as the Netherlands and the UK have shifted away from so-called 'liberal' and 'tolerant' attitudes towards immigrants, in favour of what appears the other extreme, demanding conformity, compulsion and seemingly undemocratic sanctions.

### Background

In recent years and in numerous European countries, there has been a widespread moral panic about immigrants and ethnic diversity. A backlash has occurred in policy and in public discourse, with migrants being blamed for not meeting their responsibility to integrate and for practicing 'backward religions'. Why is it that some immigrant countries that had, until recently, reasonably progressive settlement policies for immigrants are now shifting to coercive and assimilationist policy and public discourse? In other words, how can such 'liberal' and 'tolerant' societies go to the other extreme and demand conformity, compulsion and seemingly undemocratic sanctions towards immigrants?

The **aim** of this analysis is to understand why and how a country, such as the Netherlands, which has institutionalised the acceptance of difference and has a reputation for its high levels of 'tolerance', can shift to what is perceived as a coercive and assimilationist policy and public discourse? Furthermore, what factors are leading to migrants being blamed for lack of responsibility in the integration process and for practicing a 'backward religion'? Similar issues are being raised in many countries of immigration world wide, and in many respects, the same analysis could be applied. The Netherlands however is an interesting starting point simply because the shift in policy and the popular backlash appears more extreme than in many other places.

The **relevance and significance** of this analytical project is threefold. First, it begins to grapple with key conceptual issues that form the basis of the COMPAS Programme on Integration and Social Cohesion and other projects within this programme. Second, it calls into question conceptual and policy issues about immigrant inclusion, such as: diversity, identity, multiculturalism and integration. Finally, it lays the foundations for further work analysing directly social cohesion, diversity, identity, multiculturalism as universal themes within Europe.

The ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford conducts high quality research in order to develop theory and knowledge, inform public opinion and contribute to policy debates on migration.

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## Preliminary Conclusions

To put the assimilation/multiculturalism debate into context, there is considerable evidence to show that exclusionary practices and structures within Dutch society make it difficult for many immigrants to integrate. In general terms, substantial evidence reveals that high levels of unemployment, poor educational achievements and housing segregation have very likely impeded immigrants from integrating. This project begins to argue that the persistence of such processes of marginalisation is best explained through an analysis of racist processes and structures within Dutch society, an idea largely ignored in dominant Dutch discourses.

Rather than arguing that immigrants are too different, there is a case to argue that the 'native Dutch' have become more culturally homogenous and uniform, leading to the idea that 'we' are more enlightened than 'them', thus sharing few norms and values with ethnic minorities. This calls into question the ability of dominant ethnic groups to cope with diversity and cultural difference. The inability of the 'native population' to accommodate cultural difference might also call into question the level of openness of Dutch institutions to migrants. Thus, the turn to assimilation in the Netherlands by the 'native' majority might be best understood as being based on the idea that they have become more culturally homogenous which in turn acts as an obstacle to immigrant integration.

## Work in Progress

Work has begun on a second paper which will develop the same themes of social cohesion, diversity, identity, multiculturalism in a more universal way – *why is there a new fear of diversity and multiculturalism in many European countries of immigration?*. Research and analysis on these themes will substantively concentrate on the UK, offering an interesting comparison to the previous work on the Netherlands and other European countries.

Refereed journal articles are also in production, the first of which has been sent to a journal for review. This paper has been presented at a COMPAS seminar; at seminars in the Netherlands and Australia; and as a lecture at METU in Ankara, Turkey.

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