Are All Dutch Racists?

A Country’s Struggle with a Black-Face Tradition

By Jan Willem Duyvendak

Each year, on December 5th, Santa Claus—called *Sinterklaas* in Dutch—gives presents to all Dutch children who are well-behaved. Since there are many children, *Sint* has difficulty giving each child a present. He is therefore helped by servants, who are referred to as *Zwarte Pieten*, which means “Black Petes.” Indeed, these Pete figures are black; indeed they are black-faced white citizens, with racially stereotypical traits (big red lips, earrings and rather infantile behavior). For many people in the Netherlands, this is the most important national tradition they have. They don't see why this tradition should be altered—because they don't consider this tradition to be racist.

During the past few weeks I have lectured in various cities across the United States, where I have shared pictures of *Sinterklaas* and his “Black Pete” servants. Almost everyone in the various audiences was in shock and disbelief: how could people in the Netherlands, a country considered progressive and diverse, be so insensitive towards the adverse impact of whites in blackface on the black population in the Netherlands, mostly consisting of the postcolonial migrants from Surinam?

This huge difference in reaction to the images of “Black Pete” between persons in America and the Netherlands is food for thought for various reasons. First of all, it shows that “color sensitivity” is far more developed in the United States than in the Netherlands and, for that matter, many other European countries. Of course, this is mostly due to the success of the civil rights movement in the United States, an experience Western Europe lacks. In the United States, people who use racial slurs in public are corrected and often forced to apologize. Practices such as black-facing are taboo (as some Halloween cases recently proved again). It is no wonder, then, that Dutch communities within the United States—such as the one in Ann Arbor, Michigan—have abolished Black Pete, while in the Netherlands a recent campaign in favor of Black Pete received 2 million “likes” on Facebook in one week’s time (out of a population of 16 million inhabitants). In the United States, the question is not so much whether a practice such as Black Pete is meant to be racist (or not), as much as how people experience this tradition: it is not the intent but the impact that makes it racist. The Dutch, on the contrary, are focused on intent: they dig deep in history to show that Black Pete is not skin-color black but became black from chimney soot, as he brought presents into peoples’ homes. The Dutch plead not guilty of racism
since their intentions are not racist. Even though I think that most of them indeed have no racist intentions with Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet, their insensitivity toward the impact of this “festive” tradition on black Dutch citizens is surprising, to say the least.

That is the second conclusion we can draw: the Dutch are perhaps not intentional racists, but they are not very “color sensitive,” nor are they democratic. The voice of Dutch-Surinamese citizens in this debate is barely heard, since many white “natives” claim that the exclusive right to decide on Dutch traditions belongs to them, not to “immigrants” such as the Dutch Surinamese (Surinam has been part of the Dutch Kingdom for centuries, and many people from Surinam came to the Netherlands in the 1970s). This is a very disturbing argument, precisely because the Surinamese protest against the traditional, stereotypical role of blacks as Black Pete’s, as this practice reminds them of servile, or even slavery practices. Black Dutch citizens are thus excluded from a discussion about a tradition they were and are part of against their will. The way many native white Dutch define “Surinamese” citizens as non-Dutch would be impossible in the United States regarding African-Americans. Even though the African-American population is still heavily disadvantaged here, this is not because they are considered “non-American.”

That brings us to a third observation. The Dutch can learn a lot from the “color sensitivity” of Americans (and they would immediately abolish Black Pete). But sensitivity in public morality doesn’t necessarily say very much about daily-life relations between various ethnic groups and races. In the United States, the sensitivity about racism doesn't necessarily translate itself into mixing and mingling of blacks and whites in neighborhoods, schools, friendships or marriages. In Western Europe, we see the reverse: the percentage of mixed (black-white) marriages is far higher than in the United States, while in the public sphere, a practice such as Zwarte Piet is still tolerated, even though it is experienced by minority groups as racist. I don't imply any causality—it is just a puzzling observation. In other words: Americans can do far better in daily life, while the Dutch should reconsider their public traditions.

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