

# Figurations

## Newsletter of the Norbert Elias Foundation

SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT

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### HER MAJESTY'S BICYCLE: ON NATIONAL HABITUS AND SOCIOLOGICAL COMPARISON

'The following day, no one died.'  
Thus reads the first line of *Death with Interruptions*, a novel by Portuguese Nobel laureate José Saramago. In an unspecified country, from the stroke of midnight 1 January, no one dies. At first, euphoria ensues: all over the country, the national flag is hoisted. But soon problems arise. The church loses much of its sway. Funeral parlours stand empty. Hospitals and nursing homes are bursting at the seams. Everywhere in the country, people who under normal circumstances would have died – the mortally ill, the elderly, the wounded – remain alive.

Soon a new, clandestine form of border traffic emerges in the country where no one dies. The constant upsurge of people in a condition between life and death leads to distress about the terrible fate of these 'undying'. More and more people take their loved ones and family

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Photos: Remco Schrijver.

members across the border. On passing the border, these people promptly die. Because across the border, death still exists.

The premise of this novel – a temporary interruption of death – is implausible enough. But what struck me most was that death stops at the national border: a line across the earth’s surface existing only in people’s minds – starting at a moment that is equally arbitrary, and meaningful to humans only. Even in Saramago’s fantastic universe, this seems exceedingly implausible. Man-made borders determine many things. But certainly not death, the inevitable, biological fate we share with all living creatures.

In our increasingly man-made world many things end at national borders. Language. Road signs. Retail chains. The colours of trains. Bicycle paths. The uniforms of the policeman, the soldier, the postman, and the judge. Academic rituals. Television channels. Phone networks. All these things are embedded in institutions such as the government, the educational system, cable companies or retail conglomerates – national institutions the regime of which stops at the border.

Table 1: Per cent of trips by travel mode

	Bicycle	Walk	Transit
Netherlands	25	22	5
Denmark	15	16	8
Germany	9	23	8
Sweden	9	23	11
Belgium	8	16	6
Switzerland	5	12	45
Austria	4	21	17
France	3	19	8
UK	2	24	9
Ireland	2	13	11
Canada	1	7	11
Australia	1	5	7
USA	1	9	2
Spain	0	35	12

Source: Bassett et al. 2008: 799

But some things stop at the border without intervention of governments or businesses. Everywhere in the Netherlands, for instance at every Dutch railway station, one can see endless rows and piles of bicycles, often in deplorable condition. Immediately after crossing the border, in Antwerp, Münster, or Aachen, the bikes are gone. This is not a regime enforced by governments or companies. The bicycle, as a means of everyday transportation, not just for students or the ecologically minded, but also for men in suits, professionals, officials, and even the Queen, ends at the Dutch border.

This is what this lecture is about: why things are different on the other side of national borders. How can this be explained sociologically? And what does it mean to compare countries?

What, exactly, do we compare? And how durable are such national patterns?

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Although Saramago’s story is implausible, many things really are different, on the other side of the border – even now that border crossings often no longer have barriers, barbed wire, and uniformed officers.

First, the bicycle. Statistics on cycling are scarce, but this we know: in the Netherlands a much larger share of movements is undertaken by bicycle than in neighbouring countries. So, for those who doubted this: those bicycles at railway stations are indeed physical evidence of actual behaviour.

A classical sociological example has taught us that even death is somewhat



Figure 1: Suicides per 100,000 inhabitants



Figure 2: Happiness



Figure 3: Percentage of population with obesity

affected by national boundaries: suicide. Ever since Durkheim (1951 [1897]), sociologists have known that even the most individual and solitary choice a human being can make varies across social circumstances. As Map 1 shows, national differences in Europe and North America are quite striking, especially given the similarities in income levels, political systems and lifestyles. Even countries that are close and quite similar sometimes show notable differences in suicide rates. In Denmark, for instance, they cycle almost as much as the Dutch. But they are more suicidal.

Happiness, too, follows national patterns, as Ruut Veenhoven's (1999; 2006) research shows. These statistics are averages, of course. All countries have their ecstatically happy, and miserably unhappy people. But the differences are such that we must conclude that on the other side of the border, people may be significantly happier, or unhappier. Both in Belgium and Germany, direct neighbours of the Netherlands, people are on average less happy. The Danes, on the other hand, are significantly happier than the Dutch.

My last example shows that nationality even impinges upon our bodies: the percentage of the population that is overweight. As Map 3 shows, this too varies greatly. The low incidence of obesity in the Netherlands, incidentally, is often explained from our fondness of bicycles (Bassett *et al.*, 2008). Our

body seems more nature than culture. The shape it assumes – as everyone knows who has ever been on a diet, or went to a gym – often defies conscious control. So deeply does national background affect our being: to the level of our bodies.

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Such statistics are appealing. You can ponder them at length, and pleasantly speculate about them. It helps to be Dutch here, because the Netherlands cut a good figure: we are happy, thin, un suicidal, and we cycle a lot. Such statistics immediately set off a process of identification: how are 'we' doing? Feelings of superiority certainly come into play here. Look, 'we' are doing better than the Belgians, the Germans. Look at those obese Americans with their cars. And look how much the Brits are like the Americans – they never really were European to begin with.

But such statistics also bring about a certain unease. The notion of 'national character' is not entirely pleasant (Wilterdink, 1994). Nationalism came to be regarded with suspicion after the Second World War. All expressions of superiority, national or otherwise, seem somewhat dubious nowadays. Moreover, the idea of national character clashes with our individualist ethos: we are our own individual selves, unique and autonomous, rather than the product of a nation.

Now 'character' may not be the right word. It implies that national traits are primarily expressed in the domain of personality characteristics. A better term is 'national habitus'. The notion of habitus has gained prominence in the social sciences through the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1979), but had already been used earlier by Norbert Elias (1996; 2000).

'Habitus' – derived from 'habit' – refers to learned practices and standards that have become so much part of ourselves that they feel self-evident and natural. Habitus is our culturally and socially shaped 'second nature'. What we learn as members of a society, in a specific social position, is literally incorporated – absorbed into our bodies – and becomes our *self*. This is evident in humour. What we find funny is very much socially shaped (Kuipers, 2006a). However, sense of humour feels very close to 'self', and is expressed in a direct, physical, almost mechanical response: laughter. A similar incorporation we see in the ease with which Dutch cyclists move through busy traffic. You only realise that this is not self-evident when you see another person lacking this ease, like the tourists on their rental bikes in the busy Amsterdam traffic. Habitus is congealed history, absorbed into our bodies – our personal history, which in turn has been shaped by the history of the society of which we are part. This larger history determines the ground-tone of our individual history. Thus our 'self', our self-evident, automatic, yet learned, behaviour, is partly determined by the country where we have grown up.

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Until recently, most social scientific research ended at the national border as well. Researchers limited their data collection to one, usually their own, country. Today, comparative research is the standard.<sup>1</sup> But that underlines that the nation state is self-evident – 'comparative' automatically implies cross-national comparison. All research compares. 'Country' apparently is a special category, eclipsing others – the framework in which everything else takes shape.

National comparison is also one of the pillars of process sociology – along with the study of long term social processes to which the Elias Chair is primarily devoted (Elias 1996; 2000; Mennell 2007; de Swaan 1988; 2002; Wouters 2007). Modern Western nations are alike, and in many respects have undergone the same processes. Yet they all differ slightly. Comparison allows us to isolate and highlight the dynamics of these social processes and mechanisms.

National differences are the result of relations between social groups and fields. Hence, they are constantly in flux. Comparative research is often not very attuned to the process character of national differences: it is often static and atomistic. ‘Country’ is a column in a table, a ‘factor’ affecting individuals – although of course these individuals together make up a country.<sup>2</sup> Or ‘country’ is conceptualised rather simplistically as policy context or institutional setting. By ‘country’ researchers then really mean ‘state’.<sup>3</sup> But national background is an assemblage of factors and processes that all influence each other, and that are related in various ways.

Moreover, much comparative research uses nation as a unit of analysis rather unreflexively, without asking if this is justified. Take the figures above. It is quite possible that the greater unhappiness and higher suicide rates of Belgians and Germans are not at all the result of Germany or Belgium *as countries*. Maybe, instead, it is the average of differences between Flemish and Walloons, ‘Ossis’ and ‘Wessis’. Making the nation the level of analysis often produces national effects – but that does not necessarily prove that ‘country’ is the determining variable.<sup>4</sup>

The insufficient conceptualisation of ‘country’ or ‘national background’ in comparative research is problematic, but quite understandable. In recent years I have been involved with many comparative research projects: I studied humour in the Netherlands and the United States (Kuipers, 2006a); and television in the Netherlands, Poland, Italy, and France (Kuipers, 2008; forthcoming). My Rotterdam colleagues

and I looked at arts journalism in the Netherlands, the US, France and Germany (Janssen *et al.*, 2008). With Jeroen de Kloet I participated in an international research project about *The Lord of the Rings* (de Kloet and Kuipers 2007; Kuipers and de Kloet 2009). And soon, with a new team, we will be studying standards of beauty in France, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Turkey, and the UK.

In these studies, ‘countries’ were not just tables in databases and columns in tables. We worked with interviews, archival data, annual reports, ethnographic observations, all collected in several countries. This made the question what it actually is that is being compared even more acute. Cross-national comparison is rather like a constant *Gestalt* switch: The same image seems to depict something different each time, and somehow one never manages to see the different images – the duck and the rabbit, the vase and the faces, the pretty young girl and the old woman with the crooked nose – simultaneously. Yes – all the French have something in common. Or no – it’s really all about age. Or class! Or no – it is all so individual that one cannot really generalise much about anything. Or it is all about the structure of a particular field, rather than the nation as a whole. Then again, all Europeans seem so similar, and so very European, when compared with the Americans.

Partly, this constantly shifting perspective is inherent in doing research. By continuously contrasting, looking for similarities and differences, patterns can be found and generalisations be made. But above all it is a conceptual problem. There are few theoretical frameworks to help us understand what national difference is. Either ‘country’ comes to mean ‘state’. Or countries create individual ‘value orientations’ remarkably like psychological profiles – an approach that is certainly revealing and evocative, but a classification rather than a theory.<sup>5</sup> Or, and this is remarkably common, conscientious scholars lapse into colossal clichés when interpreting national differences: The Dutch struggle against the sea. England the island nation.

The American pioneer mentality. Calvinism. Slavic fatalism. Three thousand years of Confucianism.<sup>6</sup>

Intimated in the idea of country comparison is the notion that ‘something’ about countries causes their inhabitants to have something in common, even at the individual level. But what this ‘something’ is; where this ‘something’ comes from; and whether this ‘something’ works the same in different countries – all that remains opaque.



Process sociology has taught me that, before asking *what* something is, one always can, even must ask first *how* something has come into being. From this perspective, the question about national habitus requires rephrasing. Not what is national habitus? Nor what is the national habitus of country A, B, or C? But through which processes do people in a country become alike? Under what conditions does such a national ground-tone in behaviour, institutions and standards emerge? After all, country comparisons only make sense if one assumes that people within a country, on average, have more in common with each other than with inhabitants of other countries.

This dynamic approach also opens up the way for the acknowledgment that national similarity is not an eternal, unchanging fact. There are periods of more and of less national habitus, periods during which other processes have more impact. After a long period of increasing similarity within nations, many countries now appear to be undergoing a movement towards ‘less national habitus’.

Which, then, are the processes contributing to the formation of national habitus? In this lecture I distinguish four processes that, certainly in Europe and North America, have been central to the shaping of national habitus.

The *first* process is increasing interdependence (Elias 1996; 2000). From the Middle Ages onwards, people have become part of increasingly larger social units – from village, to region,

to nation-state. With this growing interdependence, people became more aware of others, identified more with them, and increasingly adapted to them. Through mutual adaptation and identification people become more similar, as do people from different classes and status groups within a country.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time – and this is the *second* process – the density of this network increased: people were connected with more people, *and* in more ways. This process manifested itself most visibly in the proliferation of nationwide institutions. The advent of national states led to ever more institutions that directly influenced people's lives – all of which stopped at the national border. First came institutions directly connected with the monopolies of violence and taxation: the army, law and justice (Tilly 1992; M. Weber 1978 [1920]; E. Weber, 1977; Steinmetz, 1999). But the scope of these state institutions expanded: education, care, social security, media (Hoogenboom, 2004; de Swaan, 1989; Te Velde 1992). Organisations that were not bound to the state increasingly kept to the same geographic demarcations: manufacturers, retailers, newspapers. That was partly out of practical considerations: because it was efficient, because government regulations also stopped at national borders. But ultimately it was because national borders had come to be self-evident, the logical and natural delimitation of any enterprise (Knippenberg and de Pater, 2002).

Institutions simultaneously connect and shape people. This becomes apparent in one of the most powerful national institutions: education. People's willingness to hand over their children, at a very young age, to this state institution underlines the self-evidence of the nation state. Education entails the systematic transfer of standards and practices, within a national framework. Thus it is central to the formation of national habitus. Not only does it produce social difference, as generations of sociologists have shown – education also produces social similarity.

This institutional level often provides the explanatory framework for

large-scale comparative research. Countries, in this perspective, are essentially aggregates of institutions. But institutions do not emerge out of thin air. They emerge and change in interaction with each other, and with national traditions, habits, and conventions (see Lamont 1992; Lamont and Thevenot, 2000).

A *third* process occurs both within, and outside institutions: the vertical diffusion of standards, tastes, and practices. Cultural phenomena often manifest themselves first in the upper social strata, and from there 'trickle down' (Elias, 2000; Fallers, 1954; Simmel, 1905). The driving force behind this process is emulation of the habits of high status people. Partly this is the result of upward aspirations: people hope to move on in life by imitating prestigious styles and behaviour – it is what Merton (1968: 319–22) called 'anticipatory socialisation'. It is also caused by status anxiety and shame. People adapt to their superiors so as not to offend them (Elias, 2000; Mennell, 2007). Deviant behaviour or the wrong tastes are painful, and may lead to exclusion and sanctions.

Such vertical adaptation does not always occur spontaneously. Institutions, such as schools, are vehicles for vertical diffusion. History has witnessed 'civilising offensives' during which the education of the lower classes, the underprivileged, strangers, colonised, and other uncivilised groups was undertaken in a rather more forceful way (Mitzman, 1987).

Most standards for good behaviour – from eating with knife and fork to the appreciation of impressionist art – have spread in this way: from the top to the bottom. A simple example: flooring. Wooden floors used to be a sign of poverty, while carpets were for the well off. Carpets became accessible to more people, and attractive because of the aura of luxury and status. These days, yuppies all have bare hardwood floors; while carpets have become common or even 'dirty'.

Through such processes of adaptation and imitation people living in the same country become more and more alike.

In every country, national elites set the standard. National habitus therefore reflects the dominant group. The Dutch national habitus still bears the mark of a bourgeois top layer: merchants and *Regenten* without noble titles or elaborate courtly rituals (Goudsblom, 1967; 1988; Kennedy, 1995; Wouters, 2007). Even the Dutch court adapted to the bourgeois mores, instead of the other way around – and is still characterised by an informal, bourgeois, and rather unglamorous style.

The *fourth* and last process leading to national similarity is the development of national 'we-feelings'. As a rule, people who are similar tend to identify with each other, and people emulate those with whom they identify. But this relationship is not completely straightforward. People who are alike do not automatically identify with each other – to the chagrin of Marxists, feminists, and other emancipatory movements. And national feelings sometimes have sprouted from minimal 'objective' similarities. The United States is a notable example: a diverse nation, with a rather unobtrusive state – except in regard to symbols and rituals directly connected with national sentiments, like naturalisation ceremonies and the saluting of the flag (Mennell, 2007). Processes of national identification are set in motion in several ways. Often, they coincide with increasing integration. Nationalism has also been implemented top-down, via 'civilising offensives', for instance to discourage other, regional or religious, identifications (Tilly, 1994; Te Velde, 1992; Weber, 1977). In some instances, love for the nation was incited by a newly emerging dominant class – thus Elias explains the rise of German nationalism in the early twentieth century (Elias, 1996). Benedict Anderson (1995) pointed to the importance of the media for the formation of 'imagined communities'. National sentiment unites large groups of people who can never all know each other personally. Mass media provide the symbols, stories, and rituals to bind them. Nationalism reached its pinnacle with the advent of mass media, from newspapers to television.



So: how do we explain the Dutch fondness of the bicycle – and its ending at the national border?

The wide adoption of the bicycle in the Netherlands can be understood from the country's homogeneity and high level of integration; the traditional dominance of the upper middle classes;

and the small power distance between classes. This led to little ostentatious display of status, even a certain status competition through 'conspicuous non-consumption'. The elite could not afford too much pomp and circumstance because of the small power distance. This dislike of ostentation was adopted by lower status groups.



Procession from left to right Johan Goudsblom, Stephen Mennell and Giselinde Kuipers

The bicycle is a cheap, sober, simple means of transportation, requiring its rider to do all the work himself. Cycling, moreover, is quite incompatible with bodily status ornamentations, such as stylish clothing. The bicycle became the preferred means of transportation not just for the worker or the petty bourgeois who could not afford better, but also for the professional classes and the ruling bourgeois elites. What is more: more comfortable alternatives, like the motorbike or scooter, are considered *déclassé*. The bicycle gives distinction through simplicity. The cycling Dutch royals, an image well known in the Netherlands as well as abroad, aptly reflect Dutch status politics. The images of the 'informal' queens, princes, and princesses on their bikes have also acquired strong symbolic significance. The bicycle became a potent Dutch national symbol. Commercial companies, too, have often used bicycles to appeal to Dutch we-feelings.

Of course there were facilitating conditions: compact cities, flat land, suitable climate. But more importantly: over the years more and more conditions supporting cycling came into existence. An increasingly dense network of institutions and conventions developed around the bicycle, from city planning regulations and cycling legislation to a nightlife organised around bikeable distances. Moreover, the bicycle influenced other developments. For instance: low obesity rates. And I would venture to say that, if it weren't for the bicycle, Amsterdam would have had a real metro, like all decent cities.

What is most important in habitus formation, however, is that for Dutch cyclists, all these associations and backgrounds are largely irrelevant. All Dutch are embedded in a network of conventions, habits, and practices to do with cycling that are felt to be self-evident. If you want to go somewhere, you just take the bike. Everybody cycles. You wouldn't know any better. In Dutch cities the unit of distance is the cycling minute, even in real estate brochures. The history has been forgotten – because cycling has become a second nature.

To sum up: I distinguish four mechanisms in the formation of national habitus: increasing interdependence; intensification of interdependencies and proliferation of national institutions; vertical diffusion of standards and practices; and growing national identifications. Thus, inhabitants of the same country grew more and more alike, while contrasts with people in neighbouring countries intensified. These processes in the direction of ‘more national habitus’ appear to have reached their cumulative apex in the second half of the twentieth century. Since then, Western nations have undergone parallel processes towards ‘less national habitus’. This makes cross-national comparative research increasingly complex and problematic.

The process of increasing interdependence has continued. While previously, this led to national integration – from town to region to nation – this now leads to more connections and dependencies beyond the borders of the nation state. Globalisation entails growing interdependence on a transnational level, as well as growing awareness of, and mutual adaptation to, people across the border (Guillén, 2001; de Swaan, 1995). Increasing globalisation also diminishes national dependencies. Institutions become less bound to national boundaries: they are incorporated into international networks, and are competing more and more with transnational institutions. As a result, the impact of connectedness and dependencies on the national level becomes less pronounced – and thus the second process, the intensification of national dependencies, decreases (Wilterdink, 1993; 2000).

However, even with growing transnational integration, national institutions remain central hubs, gatekeepers, and orientation points for international connections (Guillén, 2001; Sassen, 2007). I saw this in my research on American television in France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Poland (Kuipers, 2008; forthcoming). American television is the symbol of globalisation *par excellence*. The face of Bart Simpson adorns T-shirts worldwide.

Around the globe, adolescents model themselves on the protagonists of *Friends*. But in each country, this ‘global’ culture has a distinct national colouring.

In the course of the twentieth century, television replaced the newspaper as the main creator of national imagined communities. At first, the scope of overwhelmingly state-led television broadcasters matched the borders of the state. Thus, the entire nation watched the same broadcasts. But, through this intensely national medium, the world entered people’s living rooms. Everywhere, even in Communist Poland, American programmes were embedded in the national, state-led television programming. As a result, Americanisation of television acquired a distinct national slant.

National differences in the media and cultural fields, state system and national habitus were reflected in television programming. The French protectionism, centralism and Europeanism contrasts sharply – even today – with the Dutch cultural openness and strong orientation towards the USA. But this French protectionism is nothing like the tight Polish regime that until 1989 tried to keep out ‘the West’ entirely, and still is highly nationally oriented. The regulated openness of the Netherlands is very different again from Italy’s unmoderated open-door policy, which paved the way for Berlusconi’s usurpation of the media field. Globalisation, a process that is often equated with homogenisation, has unfolded differently in each country.

But in all countries the gaze was increasingly directed outwards, beyond the borders; and national media were increasingly embedded in transnational fields and institutions. Yet they remained national institutions, with a distinct national colouring. The Dutch commercial channels still strongly differ from the French, Polish, and Italian commercial broadcasters, although they all air *Crime Scene Investigation* – in strongly varying translations. But a next step is ahead. DVDs and Internet television do not even need national institutions as gatekeepers.

The nation state is not dead. Often, national institutions are the ones bringing in, managing and shaping globalisation, making ‘the global’ something quite different in every country. However, more and more things, practices, ideas, people, standards enter the nation from outside. Thus, the national becomes less and less central to processes of habitus formation.

This brings me to the third process: vertical diffusion of standards and practices. It unfolds via trickle down, as a result of upward aspirations and adaptation to the standards of social superiors, and via institutional transfer of ‘how things are done’ and ‘what is of value’.

Here something interesting is happening: in the past decades, in many countries this process has faltered or slowed down. Traditional vertical diffusion now competes with many other modes, media, and directions of transfer. Both at the top and the bottom of the social hierarchy, people resist the notion that some standards and practices are better or ‘higher’ than others. The idea of vertical transfer of standards by orchestrated interventions and civilising offensives has become discredited, in the Netherlands maybe even more than in other countries.

In the 1960s and 1970s many countries witnessed a process of strong upward mobility. This caused a broadening and democratisation of tastes and styles (Coulangeon and Lemel, 2007; Van Eijk and Bargerman, 2004; Janssen, 2005; Warde, Wright and Gayo-Cal, 2007; Wouters, 2007). Things the elite previously avoided, even tried to abolish and eradicate, became *bon ton*. Blue jeans, football, accented speech, popular culture, women wearing trousers – suddenly everything was possible.

These new styles and standards spread through all layers of society at a surprisingly high rate. Possibly, this quick absorption was made possible by the unusually high national integration at this time – the apex of national

habitus. The standards of the upper strata have remained more inclusive, informal, and open ever since. In cultural sociology, much has been written about the rise of the cultural omnivores who distinguish themselves not by refined, exclusive, highbrow tastes, but by a broad eclectic taste that can accommodate high and – specific forms of – popular culture.<sup>8</sup> Simultaneously, a process occurred that Cas Wouters (2007) has dubbed ‘informalisation’. This development is related to the spread of egalitarianism and individualisation: more space to shape one’s life without pressure from communities and institutions. This informal and egalitarian ethos spread, at a very high rate, top down, through all western societies, but with a distinct national colouring (Aupers *et al.*, 2003; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Halman *et al.*, 2005; Houtman, 2008; Wouters, 2007). This new habitus has often been characterised in paradoxical terms: ‘Being yourself’ as a norm. Spontaneity as commandment. Social pressure to be ‘loose’. Individual authenticity as collective ideal. The obligation to be free. Self actualisation as imperative.

With this new ethos comes a strong sensitivity to power difference and feelings of superiority. If all people are ‘equal’ and ‘themselves’, then nobody is better than any one else. Placing your own styles, tastes, standards, behaviour or preferences above those of others is not done. Telling others what to do, or what is right, is even more awkward. Such display of power evokes discomfort and resistance.

Consequently, trickle down is faltering. An informal, egalitarian, complaisant elite is hard to imitate. For the uninitiated, attributes of status may be near impossible to identify – moreover, when prompted, status will be downplayed and adamantly denied. Seen from below, there is no necessity or pressure to adapt to the upper strata. The discomfort about status differences makes conscious passing on of standards – educating and civilising people, teaching them norms and values – a complicated affair. After all: what can one base one’s authority on in these informal times?

What does this mean for the formation of national habitus? Previously, the structure of national societies was rather like a clearly stratified grid with sharply defined outer boundaries. Nowadays, it is more like a pile of clumsily stacked plates. Vertical relations are somewhat disorderly, outer boundaries are porous, and the relation between the layers is sometimes precarious.<sup>9</sup> This dissolution of the traditional, vertical, patriarchal nation state comes with a risk: growing distance between social strata.

Egalitarianism is not the same as equality.<sup>10</sup> The informal, egalitarian ethos has not ended inequality but rather obfuscated it. As a consequence of this veiled status politics, one of the main engines of national habitus formation falters: trickle down. Hence, similarities between social groups are diminishing, resulting in a *growing* distance between higher and lower social strata.

This may sound unexpected. Wasn’t the decline of hierarchical relations supposed to be a liberation of the constraining patriarchal bonds of the old-fashioned nation state? More space for everyone to set, and live by, their own standards? But informal, egalitarian codes lead to subtle forms of exclusion. Even when, in principle, all tastes are of equal worth and everyone is informal not all informalities are equal. The informality of a party of academics, even when it is getting late, there has been too much wine, and someone – stiffly, of course, a little awkwardly – does a little dance, still isn’t quite the same as the informality of a party of construction workers or cocktail waitresses.

From below, for the non-initiated, this difference may be hard to read. In lower social strata, too, people have embraced the adage that no taste, standard, practice is better than the other. At first glance there seems no need for adaptation to the standards and styles of the better off: the power distance seems small, the norm is ‘being yourself’. Hence, there is little ground for shame or discomfort about one’s own practices and preferences.

This became clear to me during my doctoral research on jokes (2006a; 2006b). I found strong class differences in sense of humour. But among the less educated, I did not encounter status anxiety or insecurity about their own taste. They pitied, rather than envied, those stiff, boring, and – in their view – quite humourless college graduates. At first I thought this had to do with humour: a domain far removed from official guidelines and institutions. But now, several studies later, I believe this is a more general phenomenon, within the Netherlands as well as beyond: the need for upward adaptation is often hardly felt. People are content with, even proud of, their own standards, styles, and tastes.<sup>11</sup>

This does not mean that status differences have disappeared. Today, status is marked in subtle, almost misleading ways. Take the omnivorous taste. If the professor, the politician, and the priest all love football matches, detective novels, and popular music, it may seem as if everything is allowed. But there are subtle differences: you can love the right, or the just slightly wrong pop culture, in a right, or just slightly wrong way. Thus, social boundaries stay intact.

At the high end of the social hierarchy, people often have a better view of these dynamics. But the unease about status differences and feelings of superiority make class and status differences increasingly uncomfortable. As Joop Goudsblom (1998: 108) wrote: ‘Being the inferior has always been painful; now being the superior has become painful, too.’ The consequence of the unease is social avoidance.

The nation state, with all its paternalism and hierarchy, brought about mutual adaptation between social strata. Identification increased, because people tend to like whom they are like. Thus the nation state promoted social solidarity, responsibility, and emancipatory endeavours.<sup>12</sup> Inversely, growing difference leads to growing distance. My own research, as well as other recent studies, confirm this: an increasing distance between people of higher and lower social strata.<sup>13</sup>



Globalisation reinforces this process. Some groups, especially the wealthier and more educated, are increasingly international; while most less educated or less well off are nationally and locally oriented.<sup>14</sup> Thus a cosmopolitan upper stratum emerges, looking to and emulating the standards and practices of the transnational field. Here the trickle down mechanism still plays a role, and increasingly so. From top to bottom at a global level often means: from the centre to the periphery (Kuipers and de Kloet, 2009).

Take language politics, traditionally a uniquely national affair. Today, everywhere in Europe, even more in the Netherlands than in most other European countries, English is becoming the language of academia, even in teaching (see De Swaan, 2002). This is an adaptation to transnational standards by upward-gazing national elites. Internally, however, this enlarges social distances. Imagine that had given my inaugural lecture in English – undoubtedly common Dutch practice ten years from now. Certainly this would have been very cosmopolitan (and it would have saved me the trouble of having to translate it afterwards). But it also would have been a strong signal towards native Dutch without command of English: older, or less educated people. And especially towards migrants and their descendants, who are now under great pressure to learn a language the elite is increasingly writing off.



Finally, the fourth process: formation of national habitus by production of national we-feelings. Because of the growing diversity and social distance, the symbols, stories and rituals binding the nations threaten to lose their self-evidence. As I argue here, this is not exclusively caused by migration and globalisation, but also the result of internal national developments. Throughout Europe, concerns about the loss of national identity have led to heated debates.

National identification often is a side effect of national integration. However, objective similarity and identification do not co-occur automatically. I have

already mentioned the USA, a diverse nation because of its migration history, but also because there never was one national elite capable of setting the national standard (Mennell, 2007). Instead, strong national stories, rituals, symbols – often regarded somewhat mockingly by Europeans – have encouraged the formation of national identity. The heated European debates, despite their shrillness, also point to renewal: a quest for new symbols, rituals, and stories, now that self-evident orientation points at the top of national societies have vanished.

The informal, egalitarian ethos comes with new, complicated, requirements for national symbolism. The notion itself of nationalism – an expression of group superiority, after all – is sensitive, and the cosmopolitan classes often prefer to deny or ignore it. Informalisation sets a difficult and contradictory task for the carriers of national symbolism and the narrators of the national story: simultaneous personification of individual status and group superiority, in a manner that is authentic, informal, and egalitarian. Thus, after three generations of cycling queens, the Dutch found themselves with a prince-consort conscientiously objecting to wearing a tie (which he demonstrated by publicly cutting it off with scissors); an heir to the throne who loves sports, ice skating, and beer; a prime minister professing his love for race cars; a vice prime minister blogging enthusiastically about 1980s kitsch band *Spandau Ballet*; and a European president who writes haikus and supports Anderlecht.<sup>15</sup>

Cultural democratisation also offers new possibilities for national cohesion. Liesbet van Zoonen (2005) convincingly showed that popular culture, now that it is enjoyed and consumed in all layers of society, functions as a vehicle for citizenship. Now that sports have become respectable, football too can serve as national beacon and binding force, uniting the educated *and* the less educated, men *and* women. Resemblance is not the only source of identification; ancient shared heritage not the only route to recognition. As, obviously, people in immigration societies knew that all along.



The processes leading to greater resemblance among inhabitants of a country have not disappeared. But they have weakened, and increasingly compete with other social processes. The result is growing diversity within nations. With the loosening of the orderly hierarchical grid of the nation state social variations increase. At the same time, people in different countries often come to resemble each other more. Thus, fewer things really end at the national border, like the Dutch bicycle.

This brings me back to the question I began with: what do we compare when we compare countries? I have argued here that, firstly, this question is not asked enough in comparative social science research. Secondly, comparing countries is becoming increasingly complex and problematic because inhabitants of the same country are becoming less and less alike. The issue of emergence and persistence of national habitus is a methodological as well as a conceptual and theoretical problem. Moreover, it is a political and moral issue. The nation state, with all its paternalism, hierarchy, and fixed frontiers, also brings about social coherence and exchange, solidarity and emancipation.

First, the methodological and conceptual problem: how are we to do research? The country can no longer be the automatic and self-evident unit of analysis – neither in studies in one country, nor in comparative studies. The role of the national has become an empirical question, depending on what is studied, and where. Some countries are more ‘national’, more inwardly oriented, homogeneous and integrated, than others.

In addition to nationally bounded and cross-national comparative research we also need more, and better, research on the transnational: the phenomena and processes that occur in several countries at once. Especially in anthropology and media studies important work has been done in this area in the past decades.<sup>16</sup> Such transnational research starts with a field, a group, a phenomenon, an issue – and traces it through various countries and institutional settings.

My research on American television programmes in Europe was inspired by this approach. My new project, on standards of beauty in the transnational modelling industry, has been set up in a similar fashion.<sup>17</sup> The projects have a distinctly processual design. To track and capture the transnational I trace changes and interdependencies across fields and nations. Research of this type cannot be static or atomistic: the transnational is about interconnection, change, and mutual adaptation.

The growing diversity, the faltering of downward diffusion, and the loosening of the nation-state's grid raises a second question: how does social and cultural diffusion and transfer happen these days? Whom do people look to for inspiration? Whom do they rebel against? From where *do* people get their tastes, styles and standards? Not, as the egalitarian ethos has it, from 'ourselves'. Variations are larger than before, but our frames of reference still spring from our social surroundings.

The simple but powerful mechanism of vertical diffusion now competes

with various other forms of transfer – in various directions, in various ways, and through various media. The media are increasingly central to the passing on of standards and practices, tastes and styles. From newspaper and television to games and the Internet, the media have become an important source of expression and identification, cohesion and exclusion, orientation and deception. The established social sciences have relegated the study of the media to new, specialised studies. Somewhat relieved, it seemed, that they didn't have to deal with this issue. But the media are much too important to leave to media studies and communication science. They have established themselves at the heart of all the processes and phenomena studied by social scientists. Therefore, they deserve a central place in social science research and teaching.

The media are an important orientation point for many people in the shaping of styles, tastes, and standards. They fuel upward aspirations and imitation; downward feelings of superiority; resistance and distinction. My own

research on transnational media – television, internet, film, the modelling industry – concerns itself primarily with processes of taste formation and diffusion in the transnational field. How are standards for 'funny' and 'beautiful' made and spread through the media? How does this work in different nations and settings? Stowed away in transnational popular culture are standards for taste and style, as well as notions of right and wrong. How to behave. What makes a good person. What is of value.

But there are important differences between diffusion through media and traditional forms of transfer. Media transfer is more virtual, and (still) overwhelmingly a one-way street. The media provide resources and prototypes for imitation, distinction, rebellion – but without the concomitant process of mutual adaptation that is part and parcel of ordinary, unmediated interaction. A second difference is the fragmentation of media (Ang, 1996). The enormous range of media products presents people with a wide variety of standards, in which they have to find their own way – and where they



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can find many ‘tops’ to look up to, and ‘bottoms’ to look down upon.

Moreover, the media logic is primarily audience-oriented: give the people what they want. Hence, transfer via media involves a complicated loop. Often, one sees people doing not what they think is good, or beautiful, or right – but doing what they believe others think is good, or beautiful, or right. This also happens in everyday life – certainly in commercial and business interactions – but it is less common, and harder to consistently keep up. People working in the media often draw a sharp boundary between their audiences’ standards and their own. But yet they too convey standards through their work.

This brings me to the third and last question this analysis evokes: how are these new patterns of cultural and social transfer related to social inequality? Distances between social classes increase in many western countries. More diverse patterns of transfer, more informal and egalitarian norms, and diminishing influence of the nation-state create new sources of power, and new forms of inequality.

Inequality, to me, is the most important sociological prism. All social phenomena become more understandable via the question how they are related to unequal access to resources. Social inequality not only means conflict, exclusion, or ‘symbolic violence’. We have seen here that inequality can be productive: a source of social dynamics and innovation. Inequality can even – though this sounds quite impossible in our egalitarian times – a source of cohesion, emancipation, and responsibility. These are paternalistic virtues that today seem superannuated.

The social processes I have sketched here lead to new forms of inequality. A new social divide is emerging, which is directly related to the idea of the nation state. The growing distance between social strata marks a boundary between nationally oriented ‘locals’ and internationally oriented ‘cosmopolitans’ (Hannerz, 1990). The latter group has most strongly incorporated the informal and egalitarian ethos; and often looks

down upon the national. This is the group that is becoming most similar across countries, and that has become furthest removed from the ‘national habitus’.

And to attract this new, cosmopolitan ‘creative class’, more and more cities are building extensive networks of bicycle paths. From Paris to Toronto, from Rome to Krakow, and from Boston to Beijing ‘bicycle sharing’ programs are implemented – the twenty-first-century version of the Dutch white bicycle plan, first proposed by Amsterdam *Provos* in 1965.

Because the international symbol – the shared hobby, and an important political and social project – of this cosmopolitan, green, egalitarian, and thoroughly informalised class is the symbol of status without ostentation, power refusing to acknowledge its power, that the Dutch have known for a long time. The bicycle.

## Notes

1. Especially in the Netherlands and other smaller European countries, comparative research has become the standard in social science research. This is not exclusively the result of purely scientific considerations. Increased internationalisation has made it essential to publish ‘internationally’ – that is, in English language peer-reviewed journals. These journals typically are not eager to publish articles dealing only with the Netherlands. Comparison with other countries is practically the only way to make Dutch data publishable. The increased availability of good international datasets also has been a major factor in the growing prominence of comparative research. It is probably no coincidence that Dutch researchers are often centrally involved with the creation and management of those datasets.
2. Especially in statistical (regression) models ‘country’ generally is conceptualised as a ‘factor’ affecting other variables, because these models require a clear separation of dependent and independent variables, which often assumes (at least implicitly) causality. However, the multilevel statistical techniques that have become more widely used of late have made possible more subtle operationalisation and analysis of national context.
3. This practice is, rather unexpectedly, most common in fields where policy has a strong influence, such as the study of welfare states, sociology of education, migration studies, or research on women’s labour market participation. In these fields, institutional explanations often have great explanatory strength. However, this obscures other possible explanations, such as cultural factors. Moreover, the origins and background of these institutional arrangements are often left unexplored.
4. This is often referred to as ‘methodological nationalism’; see Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002; Beck and Sznaider, 2010.

5. I am referring here specifically to the widely cited work of Hofstede (2001). See also McSweeney (2002).
6. Whereas previous pitfalls are more typical for quantitative and hypothesis-testing studies, resorting to essentialist cultural explanations is more common in interpretative and qualitative studies, theoretical sociology, and in general more in grand theory. However, humanities scholars often are even less scrupulous about using such sweeping culturalist explanations.
7. This process of increasing interdependence on regional and national levels went hand in hand with the limitation and erosion of other interdependencies and identifications. The elites of the early Middle Ages often maintained strong bonds, over long distances, with elites in other regions. These ties become looser as the nobility become more involved with local bonds (Elias, 2000). Increasing national integration also led to decreasing interdependencies in border regions. For instance, local dialects, which in border regions often were very similar, disappeared with the increasing dominance of standardised national languages. Nowadays, inhabitants of villages close to the border, who in previous centuries could easily communicate, often cannot understand each other.
8. This term was launched by Richard Peterson (Peterson and Kern, 1996). There is an extensive literature devoted to the existence, meaning, implications of, and national variation in omnivorism; see for instance Coulangeon and Lemel, 2007; Van Eijck, 2000; Van Eijck and Bargerman, 2004; Van Eijk and Knulst, 2005; Warde, Wright and Gayo-Cal, 2007; 2008.
9. This is not to suggest that there is no exchange or relationship at all between social strata these days – not a pile of plates, but rather a shelf with a cup here, a plate there, all differently decorated. This model of society seems to underlie Maffesoli's (1996) work about the 'tribalisation' of society; and also seems to be implied in marketing research reporting clearly separated 'life style groups' with strongly varying 'value orientations'.
10. This growing distance between social strata, in the sense of decreasing similarity, may not directly lead to growing inequality in the sense of unequal access to resources. Social distance, expressed in lifestyle and cultural differences, and limited mutual exchange and adaptation, is not the same as difference in social and economic chances – and one may not automatically lead to the other. The question of in what circumstances social difference is transformed into power difference (and vice versa) is an important issue, requiring more sociological study and analysis, especially in the light of recent developments.
- It is quite possible (but not the central question of this lecture) that the growing social distance described here goes hand in hand with an increase in economic and social inequalities. Social inequality is increasing in many Western societies, after a long period of decrease, more or less in the same period I am describing here (Goesling, 2001). Increasing globalisation is often seen as the cause of this growing polarisation (see Brune and Garret, 2005; Dollar, 2005; Harjes, 2007). This also is a fundamental question for figuration sociology, since Elias, in *The Civilizing Process*, stipulated that increasing interdependence and integration lead to growing equality. Nico Wilterdink (1993; 2000) has suggested that increasing integration on a transnational level may lead to a decrease in integration at the national level, which in turn explains growing inequalities within country. Stephen Mennell (2007: 265) recently suggested that 'it was perhaps only within competing national states – the subject of Elias's study – that it [the lengthening of interdependencies] led to a diminution of power differences – a tendency that is now undermined by globalisation.'
11. See also Van den Haak (2009).
12. This egalitarian and individualist ethos has obvious 'elective affinity' with the idea of meritocracy. Michael Young, the inventor of this term, noted how meritocracy, despite the implication of emancipation and equal opportunity, would increase social distance. Moreover, this ideology legitimates this distance (Young, 1994 [1958]).
13. See for instance the research of Peter Achterberg, Dick Houtman and colleagues (Achterberg, 2008; Houtman, 2008; Houtman, Achterberg and Derks, 2008). The results of the Dutch parliamentary election on 9 June 2010, two days before this lecture, which meant a fragmentation of the political landscape along with a landslide victory for the populist anti-immigrant party, also have been widely interpreted as a sign of a growing distance between more locally and nationally oriented, and more cosmopolitan voters. While this divide is related to education and income, these categories do not completely overlap.
14. 'Cosmopolitanism' has been in vogue of late, both among academics and policy makers (Florida, 2002; Vertovec and Cohen, 2002; Yeoh, 2004). Much of the (academic) discussion is concerned with cosmopolitanism as a normative/ethical category, for instance in debates about new forms of citizenship under conditions of increasing globalisation, or a new post-national sociology (see Beck and Sznaider, 2010). Another, more promising line of research uses this notion in a more neutral, descriptive sense. The distinction between 'locals' and 'cosmopolitans' then refers to people whose main relations and dependencies are on the local level, versus people whose dependencies stretch across longer, even transnational, geographic distances (see Hannerz, 1990; Calhoun, 2002; Kuipers and de Kloet, 2009; Woodward *et al.*, 2008). Worldwide, the size and importance of the latter group has grown in the past decades. Cosmopolitanism, in this view, also is a new form of capital, or resource, which expresses itself

in transnational connections, but also in mastery of different cultural styles and languages (see Weenink, 2007; 2008). This conceptualisation of cosmopolitans as a form of capital is quite compatible with the literature on cultural omnivores (Lizardo, 2005). Omnivorous taste patterns imply a broad, eclectic, tolerant style, along with the capacity to appreciate diverse cultural forms from different origins (see Bryson 1996).

15. For the tie-less prince-consort, see: [http://nos.nl/archief/2002/prins\\_claus//index\\_2.html?paginas/biografie/stropdas.html~output](http://nos.nl/archief/2002/prins_claus//index_2.html?paginas/biografie/stropdas.html~output). For his son Willem Alexander's hobbies, see: <http://nos.nl/video/5245-wille-malexander-rijdt-de-elfsteden-tocht-1986.html>; and <http://www.elsevier.nl/web/Biografieen/Het-Koninklijk-Huis/255121/Prins-WillemAlexander.htm> For the car-loving prime minister Balkenende, see <http://www.elsevier.nl/web/10231298/Nieuws/Wetenschap/Rutte-Dienstauto-Balkenende-moet-elektrisch-zijn.htm> For blogging (ex) vice prime minister Wouter Bos, see <http://www.pvda.nl/politici/politici/wouterbos/BosBlog/2009/Zondag+1+november.html> For Van Rompuy's pastimes, see: <http://www.elsevier.nl/web/Nieuws/Europese-Unie/251377/Herman-Van-Rompuy-1.htm> All sites visited on 10 August, 2010.
16. See for instance Appadurai (1996); Hannerz (1996; 2003); Lash and Lury (2007); Marcus (1995); Wimmer and Glick-Schiller (2002). For a more extensive discussion see Kuipers and de Kloet (2009).
17. See [http://www.giselinde.nl/erc\\_abstract.pdf](http://www.giselinde.nl/erc_abstract.pdf)

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