

camunico

Paul Schnabel

“cultural life has always been more dependent on the people who create it than the ones who enjoy it”



Camunico in conversation with Paul Schnabel,
director of the Netherlands Institute for Social
Research, on the democratisation of culture.

Culture is going through difficult times in The Netherlands. Recently the government announced considerable cultural budget cuts, causing a fierce public debate about the need of subsidized art. As a social scientist, director Paul Schnabel of the Netherlands Institute for Social Research, knows the arts have always gone through ups and downs. "Culture is about distinguishing yourself from others. And creators of art have always been the ones who need to keep this fire burning." And if this leads to a more 'democratic' cultural climate, so be it, says Paul Schnabel. Camunico spoke to him about bakeries and baroque, 'sociolects' and the modern European, who is torn between regional and global cultural interests.

We meet Paul Schnabel on a Friday afternoon in a quiet government building in The Hague. Very few civil servants are working, as this is the day when many Dutch have a free afternoon – even more so when the early spring weather is pleasant. The 'Latin' life of having an afternoon drink on a café terrace has become a part of Dutch working culture. In his office, decorated with Asian art, we talk with Paul Schnabel about the cultural status quo in Western Europe. For the last 14 years, Schnabel (63) has been director of the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, SCP), a government agency that conducts research into the social aspects of all public policies.

As SCP-director, he has seen several ministers and secretaries of culture come and go. "All governments leave their mark. The strange thing about cultural budget cuts is that they don't involve a huge amount of money if you look at the total budget. But they do have a very high 'public visibility'. And compared to earlier governments, the cuts in the budget were fierce and the administration used quite strong wording to justify its policies."

The cuts on cultural spending by the centre-right Dutch government of Mark Rutte in 2011 caused a huge public discussion. Where the arts a 'left wing hobby', as some right wing MP's stated? Or do they need more government support to keep our society open and 'civilised', as others say?

As for himself, Paul Schnabel, a very active person in public cultural life, is very much a lover of culture. At the same time, the social scientist Schnabel is a man of facts. So in this age where the arts are under pressure, he is torn between sadness on the hand and realism on the other. "I don't like cuts, but something needed to happen".

The Dutch and their neighbours

“We are quite different in our cultural attitude than for example the Flemish in Belgium. Dutch cultural policies usually focus on the maintenance of cultural heritage and social welfare. While for the Flemish, culture is essential for developing their identity vis-à-vis the Walloons. Which means they are currently not cutting in the cultural budget as much as we do.

In Germany it's another situation. Here, the federal Länder decide on cultural budgets. The German arts are very much focused on representation, which is why you see a lot of classical music and opera. It's less experimental in performance art. For this, the Germans look at Holland. One example is the Dutch theatre director Johan Simons, who is very successful in Bavaria with the Münchner Kammerspiele. In France, on the other hand, art is very much centralized. It is concentrated in Paris, Paris and Paris - the centre of the Grands Travaux, the big cultural projects of the presidents, such as the Centre Pompidou and the Grande Arche de la Defense of Mitterrand.”

It's clear we are currently going through a European impasse. In this age we witness the reaffirmation of national identity, sometimes in quite an emotional way. The former Dutch minister of economic affairs, Laurens Jan Brinkhorst, talked about 'being part of Europe'. But the question is: who or what belongs to Europe? For instance: is Cyprus part of Europe? And what about Switzerland and Norway, which aren't EU members - aren't they European too? There is no clear picture here.

And besides national feelings, we see the resurgence of regional identities: for instance in the use of local languages or dialects. In France this was suppressed for two centuries by the central government in Paris. Now the slogan in Europe seems to have become: let the people hear where you come from. In Spain for instance, Catalan is here to stay. In the north of The Netherlands, quite a number of people speak Frisian. Regionalism is everywhere. We see sociolects developing too: ways of speaking, which are connected to your age, gender or education level. So people aren't ashamed anymore for speaking their own dialect. That is an important development.”

Regional retail

“In the United States you see an uprising of regional retail. They sell ‘local’, ‘green’ products such as toys, fashion and food, but it’s a city phenomenon meant for the elite. Most food in America is still sold through retail chains, and much of this food is notoriously unhealthy. I’ve been to small towns in North America where there was really nothing decent to eat, and the coffee tasted like dishwater.

But in The Netherlands regional, traditional products have always remained very visible. We have had the warme bakkers (traditional bakeries) everywhere in the country for half a century now. In Holland the bread is much better and nutritious now than it was in the Sixties. And although the traditional butcher is disappearing, we can buy luxury meat products such as pâté everywhere. There is a real market for local quality food and not only for the more affluent.”

European integration has always been a project of the elite. Moreover, the political cooperation in Western Europe was meant to deter the communist threat after World War 2. But after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 this threat disappeared. So that’s why you see people think now: what do we need Europe for?

The answer is: well yes, the economy of course. And free travel. But the national governments seldom promoted Europe actively. In 2005, the referendum on the European constitution was supposed to confirm Dutch ‘support’ for Europe, but the contrary happened. It was a mistake. You can’t always expect that people remain thankful about being part of Europe. We have researched this issue in The Netherlands: 90 per cent of the people aren’t interested in foreign news. The only exception is when you have really dramatic news stories, such as the tsunami or natural disasters. But for the most part, people only want to know about local or national news.”

Cultures and nations

“We just aren’t ready yet for a European identity at the moment. Don’t forget that the language barriers are still very important. Some time ago I took part in a cultural heritage meeting in Kortrijk. It took place right on the language border between Flanders and Wallonia. The Flemish told me Wallonia seems more foreign to them than France. In Kortrijk there is no traffic or social exchange between the two Belgian regions.

Belgium has in fact become a federal state. The Flemish cultural identity is much stronger than the Belgian national identity. Brussels, the Belgian capital, lies within Flanders. But the Flemish don't consider Brussels as their city any longer, because the majority of the people there speak French. These are the decisive moments for a community: when there is a tension between culture and language on the one hand, and the nation on the other. You see this process in several countries. Look at the western part of Poland, which used to be German. It has become completely Polish. The same goes for the German parts of the Czech Republic, and for Croatia and Serbia. These are no mixed areas anymore. At the same time we see that the Dutch idiom of the Flemish has become more like the Dutch we speak in The Netherlands. However, I don't see it happening that - if Belgium would ever split in the future - Holland and Flanders would merge. We are too different."

Well, it is the same story of the elite. Thirty or forty years ago the pro-European message came from a small, highly educated Dutch elite. Since that time the number of highly educated Dutchmen has grown considerably. And many are less concerned about foreign issues. They are very much interested in foreign music or fashion, for instance. But these are niches. The Netherlands has now predominantly become an Anglo-Saxon country. The interest in French and German has gone down a lot. The Bildungsbürger, the intellectual 'man of the world' who could speak his languages and could recite French and German literature, is now something of the past. In this Internet age, the Dutch look at the English cultural world. But music, for example, is and will always be a very international scene. The Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra just visited South Korea where masses of youngsters came to listen to classical music concerts. In Holland young people rather hear pop music from America.

The status of music

In Korea classical music has a much higher status as it is connected to western values. In The Netherlands the status of classical music has gone down. Or maybe many people feel this music is for the elite. A century ago, the SDAP, the predecessor of the current social democrat PvdA, said "We aren't rich, but we can play the flute instead of the piano". On the other hand, we see new social developments in music as well. Right now singing contests on television like The Voice of Holland are popular.

Popular music is becoming a new way to climb the social ladder, like football used to be. And what is even more interesting is that dancing is cool again among boys, thanks to house and hip-hop. A boy is not considered a pansy any longer when he decides to be a dancer.

At the same time, we see in Holland that our own popular musical traditions remain strong. Like the local concert bands, which still are popular in the catholic south of the country. And choir singing, which still is huge in Holland. There are choirs everywhere: in the cities and in the countryside.”

Classical music has become a part of social life for the elite. They listen to Bach’s Matthew Passion at Easter and that is as much a social as a cultural event. I really don’t think however that culture was ‘better’ in the old days. Did we have such interesting conversations back then? We didn’t. It was very superficial and depressing at times. Read the Dutch literature of the first part of the 20th century: it’s all about being miserable and feeling bored.

The point about democratizing culture or music doesn’t automatically means it’s getting worse. The musical repertoire available to the consumer is immensely bigger now than it used to be. Take baroque. In the Fifties, there was just one music shop in The Hague where you could find a lp with harpsichord music. Now you can find it everywhere. On the web you can find any kind of music you’re interested in. But in shops too. There are great recordings available of many baroque pieces, but also of medieval music or whatever kind of music you like best.”

Cultural mobility

“Back in the old days, visiting a concert was one of the few options to hear classical music. Nowadays, with every kind of music easily available through CD’s and the internet, people can consume classical music anytime and anywhere. This has changed the demand on concert visits and one could question the need to have an orchestra in every separate Dutch province like we used to have. Especially as our mobility has increased drastically. It’s not all that difficult anymore to travel from The Hague to, say, Rotterdam to enjoy a concert? And from Utrecht, where I live, Amsterdam is not that far and it’s always a real treat to go to the Concertgebouw. It seems to me that the arts are increasingly becoming social tools, which help you to distinguish yourself from others. So rather than having a pure regional focus, they (should) become more ‘community’ focussed.

The Concertgebouw in Amsterdam has the image of being a meeting place for the rich and successful in Dutch society. This, I'm sure, attracts people from far outside of Amsterdam. Others could do the same and attract different audiences for different reasons.

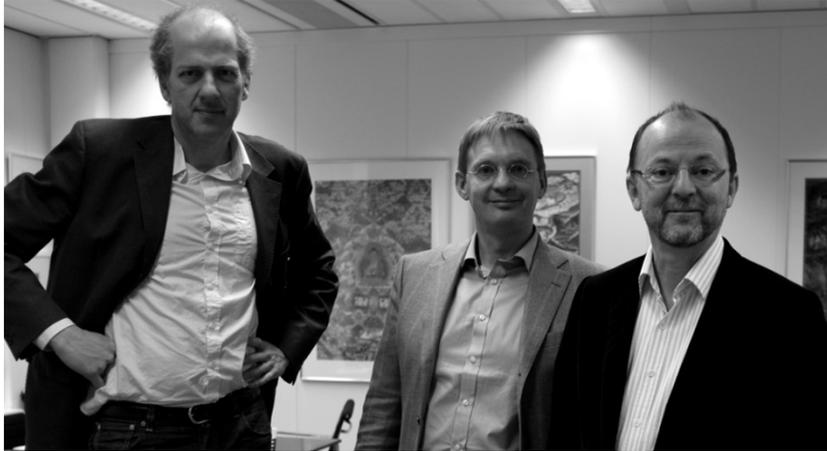
On the one hand I do find it painful these cultural cuts are taking place. I love classical music. If you cut in the number of orchestras, you cut in the breeding ground for young musicians to develop their talents and reach the international top. But culture is always changing. Less government subsidies means that cultural institutions have to go up market.

For the coming years, there will definitely be a cultural shake out. And something needed to happen. If you compare what's on offer culturally in The Netherlands to other countries, we have a lot. And it's available all over the country. If you go to America, there are whole regions which have virtually no cultural events on offer. Even a big American city like Los Angeles, with ten million inhabitants, has comparatively little to offer, culturally speaking. In The Netherlands, we have five hundred museums, one hundred theatres and ten major orchestras.

So, something was bound to happen. Recently I was in the Muziektheater in Amsterdam for Handel's opera Deidamia. One third of the seats remained empty. Of course, this opera is too expensive and too long: four hours. Maybe too little known. Wagner's Parsifal takes five hours and the house was filled to the brim. But many Dutch theatres have trouble to find an audience for certain plays and performances, that want to offer you more than just an evening of fun."

The future: creative willpower

"That's hard to say. The thing is: cultural life has always been more dependent on the people who create it than on the ones who watch it. The drive of the performer to show what he does, is stronger than the consumer to watch his efforts. Last summer, I went to a performance of the opera Orfeo ed Euridice on the grounds of Paleis Soestdijk, where our former Queen Juliana used to live. It was a huge success: 45.000 people saw the show. I spoke to the intendant of the palace and he said he had a deep respect for the soloists and the other performers in the opera. He was impressed how hard they had been working for such a small pay. And this is the key: art mostly depends on the sheer will of the creators of art. So it is up to them." ❖



*Paul Schnabel was talking to Robert Slagt and
Ron Soonieus of Camunico*