Social cohesion, solidarity and diversity

Dies lecture by

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Madam Rector and distinguished audience,

I grew up in De Kruiskamp in Den Bosch, a neighbourhood that some now call a problem area because of litter, crime, deprivation and youths hanging out on street corners. Others say that label does not apply to the entire neighbourhood, that there are also good parts and '175 active residents' who can be approached if something is happening. The district council president 'thinks the neighbourhood is doing well' or at least better than he reads in the newspaper.[1] And there are worse neighbourhoods in the city.

My speech today is about diversity and social cohesion. The planners of that new post-war housing estate in the 1960s sought to create social cohesion, although they did not use that term. The 12,000 newcomers were supposed to form a community separate from the old city centre, a community with its own facilities like a library, church and shopping centre. We did not think it was a disadvantaged neighbourhood when we were growing up there. We knew exactly where the anti-social elements lived in Den Bosch, and it was not in our neighbourhood. Even so, there were already complaints about vandalism in De Kruiskamp in 1975: bicycles and mopeds being thrown from high-rise flats and garage doors being kicked in.[2]

Was there social cohesion? I have no idea. I was a child and everyone who lived in the new housing estate was part of a family with children. That created a bond, but not a strong one. When my mother fell ill, there was no helpful neighbour to step in; instead, a professional carer did.

My speech is related to my NWA project, Dilemmas of Doing Diversity. The NWA (Dutch Research Agenda) is based on hundreds of questions posed by citizens, many of which are about social cohesion.[3] That is where my project originates. According to the NWA, one of our most important contemporary questions is how we can achieve a society that is cohesive and inclusive. Diversity policies – which are at the core of my NWA project – are meant to strengthen social cohesion, but in practice they do not work as intended. That is a problem because the idea that policies fail undermines trust in government and democracy.

[1] https://www.bd.nl/s-hertogenbosch/kruiskamp-pauperwijk-of-valt-het-wel-mee~a5adb413/
[2] *Trouw*, 17-07-1975
[3] https://vragen.wetenschapsagenda.nl/cluster/hoe-kan-sociale-cohesie-in-een-cultureel-en-religieus-diverse-samenleving-bevorderd-worden

In my project, I am working with 37 partners: these include umbrella organisations made up of residents and care organisations, anti-discrimination platforms, municipal authorities, HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht, Leyden Academy, three ministries and the Netherlands Institute for Social Research. That collaboration is valuable for us and, I hope, for our social partners. In the run-up to my project, I held endless meetings with staff from organisations. 'What can we do for you' was my question. One answer was: 'review and evaluate'. Of course, organisations do this themselves, but often there is little time to examine how policies have worked out in practice and why there is a difference between policy and practice. A second answer was: 'predict the future'. This is also what the journalists and policymakers I speak to as part of my migration research always want. How many refugees can we expect? Policies rely on predictions, but historians know one thing for sure: predictions rarely, if ever, turn out to be correct. Amid a flurry of predictions, one might be broadly correct in hindsight, but we don't know which in advance.

However, we can learn from the past. For decades, migration historians (including me) said that it was unwise to repeatedly reduce and increase the size of asylum reception facilities, which was the practice for decades. Now, a calculation by the Court of Auditors has shown this was also quite expensive.

Along with my bachelor's and master's students, I am often looking at parallels between past and present, for example, when it comes to refugee migration and reception. In the successful interdisciplinary master's degree programme Governance of Migration and Diversity – a collaboration between Leiden University, Delft University of Technology and Erasmus University Rotterdam that I helped set up – we look at those parallels and how to use them. We teach students that how a society deals with one form of diversity – for example, ethnicity – is related to how that society deals with other forms of diversity, such as gender, sexuality, religion or class. We see that this approach in research and education is also appreciated outside academia: our graduates are in demand by ministries, municipal councils and organisations.

The term *social cohesion*, which is at the heart of my project and linked in many ways to my research on migration and integration, is widely used in journalism, politics and policy. But it is rarely sharply defined,[4] although it is given a meaning. People believe that cohesion is in decline, but it is unclear how this can be measured. There is a lot of emphasis on physical

[4] Paul Schnabel, Rob Bijl, and Joep de Hart (Eds), *Relative involvement: Studies in social cohesion. Social and Cultural Report 2008.* (Social and Cultural Planning Office, The Hague, 2008).

meeting places: the neighbourhood barbecue or splash pad. There is also fear of change (especially in the neighbourhood) and fear of the 'other'. The media are blamed for reducing cohesion by fuelling distrust in politics and society and distrust of other people. In policy, there is sometimes what I call an 'inclusion marathon', attempts to include everyone while assuming that 'everyone' should, can or wants to participate.

A link to volunteering is often made here. The willingness to volunteer is said to be declining alongside social cohesion. But many people volunteer. When refugee migration increased in 2015, some places had more volunteers than refugees. However, the protests against refugees' arrival received more media attention than the volunteers' efforts. We also hear complaints about how few people with non-western migration backgrounds volunteer. But 38% of that group volunteer their time, versus 40% of the general population. The difference is slight and could easily be a consequence of under-registration in the informal domain. It also could be an effect of class (volunteering is highly class-specific) or age distribution (volunteering is age-specific). This minor difference is exaggerated in the public debate.[5]

Overall, the percentage of people (aged 15 and over) who volunteer has fallen over the past decade, from 50% in 2012 to 40% today. That decline coincides with a sharp increase in employment among people aged 50–64: it rose from just over 40% in 1994 to almost 80% today.[6] My mother was a volunteer in a hospital for 30 years, and I am standing here. Volunteerism is not a good measure of cohesion.

There is an implicit assumption that social cohesion is good, although cohesion is also used to bully people into leaving a neighbourhood. The result of inclusion should be stability and resilience, and shared norms and values. People want to be heard or to feel heard, to be respected and to give others space, the partners in my project said. In that project, I look at the varying interpretations given to the concept of social cohesion and try to explain shifts, and by extension I try to learn who or what is seen as a problem for social cohesion.

The term *social cohesion* was rarely used before the 1980s. Émile Durkheim wrote about social cohesion in the late 19th century, but the term disappeared thereafter and only reappeared a century later.[7] This does not mean no one thought about social cohesion during that time. It was considered by people like the planners of post-war new housing estates, who tried to create unity in places where everyone was a newcomer.

[5] https://www.movisie.nl/artikel/cijfers-over-vrijwillige-inzet
[6] https://cvster.nl/blog/onderzoek-arbeidsparticipatie
[7] Anneke Brock, Maarten Kwakernaak, Freek de Meere, and Hans Boutellier, *Literatuurstudie Sociale Cohesie Ten behoeve van de ontwikkeling van de Maatschappelijke Impact Analyseren (MIA)* [A literature study of social cohesion for the purpose of developing the Social Impact Analysis (MIA)], (Utrecht, 2019).

In the years directly after World War II, some of the Dutch population wanted to hold on to the unity of the Resistance. Others disagreed with this so-called breakthrough idea, leading to controversy. There were no shared norms and values in the early post-war years, any more than there are now. Opposition to the authorities and disobedience were thought to be right during the war and wrong thereafter. Moral Re-Armament, a movement that drifted over from the US, spread copious propaganda to try to align the beliefs of people in the Netherlands. But the failure of that effort became apparent in 1963, when Moral Re-Armament took out ads in major newspapers to speak out against homosexuality. Many then turned against the movement that had so valued cohesion. In short, many organisations were pushing for more cohesion, but not necessarily the same kind of cohesion.

In the 1950s, researchers and politicians said the problem was that too many people did not participate in society: they were labelled unneighbourly or antisocial. The consensus was that in the socially engineered society, the government was tasked with getting everyone to participate. Voluntary work, for example in hospitals, was widely promoted and tightly organised by the government. Policymakers claimed that a healthy society was like a healthy body, and a healthy body expelled more pollutants than a sick one. Antisocial people should not be 'cut out' because that would disfigure society; instead, the damaged parts had to be given the chance to heal.

Sermons and admonitions would only push antisocial elements further into despair because they were not treated as equals. If 'we' were in the same circumstances as 'they', we too would be antisocial, wrote a newspaper in 1955.[8] A 'sick family' could not be cured in a slum. Thus improving conditions was paramount.[9] The newly formed Ministry of Social Work, led by Marga Klompé, distributed large grants, including for family carers. The ministry also spent large sums on scientific research. Sociologists wrote many sociographic studies on unsociability, which reinforced the idea that there was a major problem with cohesion that needed to be tackled forcefully.

Starting in the 1980s, the term *social cohesion* came into wide use. Its introduction coincided with the economic crisis, high unemployment and austerity. *Social cohesion* became a key term in the jargon of government officials. However, the government assigned itself a role much smaller than it had in the 1950s. Neighbours now had to provide the support that the government no longer did. Social control by citizen patrols replaced the vanished

8 *Nieuwsblad van het Zuiden,* 10-11-1955.
9 *Het Parool,* 27-03-1954.

neighbourhood policeman, and neighbourhood watch groups were supposed to reduce crime and the perception that areas were unsafe.[10] Social cohesion assumed a remarkable double role: more social cohesion should lead to changes in society, and the outcome of those changes should be more social cohesion. Cohesion was both a means and an end.

An increase in the use of the term *social cohesion* came with a longing for a world that was felt to be lost: a society in which cohesion existed. Such nostalgia had consequences: something or someone had to be held responsible for the loss of that world.[11] People became obsessed with the idea of a carefree time when the sun always shone and we could skate every winter. In the 1960s, governments tried to enforce social cohesion in the diverse new housing estates with playground associations and club and community centre work. But parents did not always support these initiatives by any means: some were barely involved and never went to meetings.[12] Social cohesion was a goal, not a reality, which calls into question the idea of a lost world.

In the 1990s, the realisation dawned that the austerity measures of the 1980s had had consequences for social cohesion. And social cohesion was now promoted as a prerequisite for economic recovery. The popularity of this vague term increased at an astonishing rate. In Dutch parliamentary debates, the term *sociale cohesie* (*social cohesion*) has been used about 5,000 times since 1994: dozens of times in the 1990s and hundreds of times in the last two years.

This reflects a crucial underlying shift. In the first post-war decades, there was a situational approach to unsociability: the belief that rising prosperity would reduce unsociability. In the 1990s, policymakers and academics shifted to a cultural approach: a switch from what to whom. A culture of maladjustment was assumed to be static and passed down over generations. And, beginning in the late 1990s, that culture was linked to ethnic differences. That was the important shift: lack of social cohesion was increasingly related to ethnic diversity.

In 2007, US sociologist Robert Putnam argued that where there is significant ethnic diversity, there is a decline in mutual trust and thus social cohesion. That idea caught on surprisingly quickly and was echoed in many publications and policy papers in the Netherlands.

[10] *Trouw*, 15-05-1985
[11] Schnabel et al., *Betrekkelijke betrokkenheid Studies.*
[12] *Winschoter Courant*, 12-07-1957

Later sociological studies refuted Putnam's assumptions, but those refutations had little effect.[13] Poor social cohesion was ethnised as a problem.

There is something striking about the assumption of a link between cohesion and diversity. Workplaces promote diversity and the idea that it strengthens a team. But at the neighbourhood level, diversity often is identified as a problem (though only in disadvantaged neighbourhoods). In trendy neighbourhoods, diversity is touted as an asset.[14]

Discussions about social cohesion put a striking emphasis on the neighbourhood level. Public authorities and organisations can play a role there: in housing and primary health care, and by building parks and playgrounds or creating community facilities such as swimming pools and libraries. These are precisely the areas that have seen major cuts in recent decades.[15] In other words, in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, diversity is identified as a problem and a case is made for strengthening social cohesion, but at the same time the tools for this, which were so heavily relied on in the first post-war decades, have been taken away.

So, on the whole, is there more or less social cohesion now than in the past? I have no idea. There have been protests and demonstrations for and against all sorts of things in recent decades. People who disagree with this talk about excessive individualism and an erosion of public morality. Concerns about polarisation are not new.[16] And concerns about increasing polarisation – I refer to the recent SCP study – are an extension of concerns about declining social cohesion. However, differences of opinion are not necessarily wrong; they are the drivers of social change.

Now, I will draw some conclusions. There is considerable debate about the decline in social cohesion, which is neither defined nor measurable. The idea that increased ethnic diversity weakens cohesion has been refuted, but it is still repeated. The mantra of ever-diminishing social cohesion, combined with nostalgia for a society that never existed, has consequences: it creates a perception of failure. The idea of a failing government is not good for cohesion in the community. And labelling certain groups as subverters of social cohesion is also not good for cohesion in society.

In the 1950s, we sought solutions by improving conditions rather than preaching and talking. That vanished in the 1980s. Too much emphasis was placed on willingness to

[13] https://www.buurtwijs.nl/content/over-robert-putnam; https://www.binnenlandsbestuur.nl/sociaal/hoe-groter-de-etnische-diversiteit-amsterdamse-buurten-hoe-kleiner-het-vertrouwen-van;
https://www.socialevraagstukken.nl/wat-zegt-het-wrr-rapport-nu-echt-over-sociale-cohesie-in-diverse-buurten/
https://www.socialevraagstukken.nl/wat-zegt-het-wrr-rapport-nu-echt-over-sociale-cohesie-in-diverse-buurten/
[15]https://www.uu.nl/sites/default/files/summary_living_with_diversity_in_rotterdam.pdf
[16] *Trouw,* 28-10-1995

participate and too little on creating opportunities to do so. Perhaps we should yearn for a time when improvements took priority over preaching and talking.