

BOOK REVIEW

Marc Resch: *Only in Holland, Only the Dutch*. An in-depth look into the culture of Holland and its people.

Amsterdam: Rozenberg Publishers. 2004.
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Intended as a guide for visitors spending time in The Netherlands by someone who has gone before them, this book sets out to “offer an insider’s perspective on the many intricacies and fascinating facets of the Dutch culture”. It aims to introduce the reader to “oddities that transpire within the Dutch borders” and “sheds light on the mysteriousness that pervades throughout the country”. Author Marc Resch, a graduate of West Point who also holds an MBA and an MSc, is President of his own Consulting Group which specializes in “intercultural affairs, project leadership and business consulting”. He has spent time in the Netherlands doing consulting work for Dutch companies.

Despite its author’s impressive paper credentials, however, this book does not, in fact, offer “an in-depth look” or “an insider’s perspective”, because its author never comes close to being an insider. Despite all the time

he spent working and living in the country, he is never able to see the Dutch as anything but foreign. He is forever surprised and even baffled by what he continues to see as their “oddities”, “idiosyncracies” and “mysteriousness”. After a while he is able to handle and sometimes explain some “odd” Dutch behaviours, but he never manages to stop seeing them as odd.

Perhaps one reason for this is that, as becomes clear early on in the book, Resch never actually learns to speak enough Dutch to conduct even a simple conversation. He blames, variously, the Dutch language’s “guttural sounds and particularly long words” (p. 39) and the propensity of the Dutch to speak English with foreigners. It is true that learning to speak Dutch frequently requires the learner to convince one’s conversation partners that one really does not want to speak English. But it can be done, as shown by several native English speakers of my acquaintance who have become quite fluent speakers. And as for those “guttural sounds”, contrary to Resch claim that they “are found in no other language” (p. 242), they occur widely in many of the world’s languages, including German and Scottish English. A little bit of practice usually suffices to get them

more or less right.

Initially, Resch makes some weak attempts to learn Dutch. First he tries to learn by reading the subtitles to English-language TV programming. Then, having noticed that Dutch looks quite a bit like German, he decides to learn German instead, figuring that since Dutch is linguistically kind of in-between English and German, proficiency in "Nederlandic", as he calls it, will follow automatically. To the surprise of our "intercultural affairs" expert, however, his Dutch colleagues are not only not impressed by this approach, they actively resent it. How odd. After all, would the French resent it if we learned Spanish in order to communicate with them, or would the Poles resent it if we learned Russian in order to communicate with them? And what's that Second World War got to do with it anyway? Those Dutch really are weird people.

Linguistic ignorance is not the only thing wrong with this book. Resch is also a remarkably incurious observer. A good example of this is his short comment on Dutch dress codes. Discussing what he calls Dutch "low maintenance" lifestyles" (p. 45), Resch mentions that Dutch women do not use nearly as much make-up, wear high-heeled shoes, or do fancy things with their hair and nails as he is used to from his female American corporate colleagues. He blames this mostly on the frequent rain and the fact that many people use their bike as the main mode of transportation.

The basic observation is not wrong. It is undoubtedly true that, at the higher ends of society in formal social situations in urban and corporate environments, Americans dress considerably more formally than the Dutch,

perhaps especially women. In looking for an explanation for this difference, however, Resch simply combines his observations about grooming with his observations about weather and transportation, posits a causal relationship, and voilà, problem solved. But hold on a minute, if he was really interested in this, would one not expect him to actually *investigate* this? What do Dutch men think of the difference in appearance between Dutch and American colleagues? Why do Dutch women themselves think they dress so much less excessively than their American female colleagues? How do the American female colleagues feel about showing up all dressed to the nines and then finding that their Dutch colleagues look like it's casual Friday? I don't have the answers to these questions, but the point is that Resch does not ask them. Moreover, I would venture that the reason for the relatively casual dressing style is not so much the weather and the bikes (high-powered executives do not really bike to work, they drive or take taxis) but rather the differences in opinion about esthetics: most Dutch people simply do not find big hair and fake nails very attractive. What would have been really interesting, and potentially revealing about more deep-seated cultural differences, would have been a serious investigation of what Dutch and American men and women find appropriate, attractive, or sexy in terms of grooming and dressing.

In addition to providing no real explanation, Resch's observations about Dutch dressing and grooming are also only half true. At the lower end of the spectrum, in informal situations, most Dutch people are in fact arguably *better* dressed than most North Americans. After having lived in Canada and various places in the USA for a number of years, both

my own and my Canadian-born husband's first reaction upon arriving at Schiphol Airport invariably includes something about how well-dressed the people are. Conversely, our first reaction upon returning back to North America invariably involves dismay at how badly dressed everyone is. When Dutch people "go casual" they do not, generally, go out in shorts, ill-fitting T-shirts, and sneakers or flipflops, but they still wear a shirt, although without the tie, and real shoes and decent jackets. One does not walk out the door in the clothes in which one was just sitting in the back yard trying to cultivate the elusive "healthy tan".

In more than one instance Resch seems not so much to be comparing Dutch with American society as much as urban with non-urban culture. More than the American in Holland he then is the boy from "conservative suburbia" (p. 280) on his first unsupervised visit to a big city - which just happens to be Amsterdam rather than New York. In the chapter on Dutch tolerance he discusses the position of gays and lesbians and categorically states: "Gay men and women are fully integrated into Dutch society and can be as open as they please with their sexual preferences. Gay people do not feel compelled to congregate in the same neighbourhoods and aren't laden with pressures to belong solely to all-gay institutions or clubs." (p. 279). If only this were true! Overt repression of and violence against gays and lesbians may be less prevalent in the Netherlands than in some other countries, but many gays struggle about coming out, have conflicts with their parents, their churches, their colleagues and friends, and if they come from rural communities often find themselves with no other choice than to move to a big city - just like in

North America. The overt tolerance of gays in big cities says little about gay lives outside of the urban areas. And while gays may not be *forced* to hang out together in the same neighbourhoods and clubs, in actual fact they frequently do. There are obvious areas in Amsterdam dominated by gay bars and clubs, where gays do feel more safe than in other parts of the city. Gay-bashing is by no means non-existent, and in fact there have recently been a number of violent incidents against homosexuals.

Resch seems to have resided mostly in the nicer areas of Amsterdam in upscale hotels, even when he was in the country for months at a time. His knowledge of "the Dutch" is clearly based mostly on his experiences with well-heeled corporate types and fellow expats. His Amsterdam is populated by blonde "Gentle Giants", as he prefers to call the Dutch, even after he gets lost on the subway one day and ends up walking around the Bijlmer, a suburb with a very bad name, parts of which have become an ethnic ghetto for illegal immigrants from all sorts of backgrounds. He experiences "culture shock" (p. 302). The incident serves as an introduction to a treatment of Dutch ethnic diversity, immigration policies and the rise of right-wing politicians in the final chapter of the book. While this treatment is fair and largely correct in and of itself, and even treats the events surrounding the murder of politician Pim Fortuyn in 2002 in a fairly even-keeled way, again Resch does not provide anything like an "insider account". His facts mostly come from one source, and the discussion is so general as to apply equally to many other European countries. In discussing the increasing influence of Islam in the Netherlands, for instance, Resch does not mention

its obvious visibility in the streets of the larger cities nowadays - the *halal* butchers, Turkish restaurants, exotic foods, daily newspapers in many different languages including Arabic and Turkish, or any of the other "new" things which have become integral parts of the culture of the major Dutch cities. None of this was part of Resch's experience: he did not buy his own food, and seems never to have set foot in a mixed neighbourhood or street market. In his Amsterdam, minorities stay hidden in the Bijlmer, and one finds them by getting lost on the subway.

A true "insider's view" of immigration and ethnic diversity would include much-discussed issues like the appropriateness of female head- and body coverings in schools and other public places. Or it might discuss the fact that a city in which the sauna's are generally co-ed, as Resch mentions with obvious prudish shock, was forced to close its public swimming pools at one time because it could no longer guarantee the safety of teenage girls in bikini's. But Resch, of course, does not read Dutch magazines or newspapers, watch Dutch TV or listen to Dutch radio stations other than ones that continuously play Top-40 music. And since it is also unlikely that many of his corporate colleagues live in ethnically mixed neighbourhoods, he has no "insider's view" to offer here either. Of course it is not his fault that his treatment of the problems relating to immigration has now been superseded by the murder of film-maker Theo van Gogh in November of 2004 by a Muslim extremist - but I doubt that had this book appeared after that murder it would have had anything to say that would enlighten the outside world in any way.

These weaknesses are a shame, because here

and there the book offers a glimpse of what it could have been if Resch had simply restricted himself to providing an "insider's view" of what he knows best: corporate culture and the experiences of an American consultant trying to work for a Dutch company. When he leaves the generalities and describes events and incidents of his working life, things sometimes become interesting. A good example can be found in chapter 7 on "Dutch Consensus Building and Compromise". This starts with a very general comparison of Dutch and American ways of getting employees to implement change. The Dutch, according to Resch, have endless meetings until there is complete consensus, while the Americans would just get an order from above and be expected to execute it. After much irrelevant discussion of the importance of dikes and the German (sic!) language in all this, Resch finally gets to describing his own experience in dealing with the Dutch *vergadercultuur* 'meeting culture', which is nothing less than hilarious. After attending many endless meetings, he simply cannot take any more meetings at which "even the lowest man or woman on the totem pole was allowed to ramble on and on about absolutely nothing of significance to the matter at hand" (p. 247). He therefore decides to turn his inability to speak Dutch into an advantage by using it as an excuse to leave meetings early, with the pretext that he wants to give the others an opportunity to continue the discussion in Dutch. This, to his surprise, backfires in that it has the unfortunate effect that he "lost credibility" because he is no longer seen as "a serious player in the *overleg* process"; instead, he is "viewed as just another 'typical American cowboy shooting from the hip.'" (p. 248). If Resch had just for a moment stopped taking himself so seriously, he could

have turned this and other incidents into funny and revealing anecdotes around which he could have built a story about an initially flabbergasted outsider who, after a series of stupid but funny mistakes, learns to get along with his Dutch colleagues. (Incidentally, after reading such incidents one does wonder about the “intercultural affairs” advice clients of the Resch Consulting Group are getting for their money.)

The main problem with this book is that Resch has bitten off much more than he is able to chew. He tries to cover far too many topics about which he is not knowledgeable, either by personal experience or by serious study, with the result that this book ends up being a collection of superficial facts or observations followed by either meaningless generalities or “explanations” not supported by any evidence. Maybe that is enough when advising corporate clients about how to negotiate the most obvious pitfalls when working in a foreign culture, but it does not make for an “in-depth look” or an “insider’s view” of a whole culture. Given his claims about total coverage of all of Dutch culture, it is difficult to understand why Resch does not discuss things like the workings of the media, the school system, government, politics, important sports other than soccer (including at least the *Tour de France*), food traditions, leisure and vacation habits, literature, science and religion.

Finally, the book could have done with much more careful editing. There are many errors and inconsistencies, from small typos to serious errors of fact or judgement. I am omitting numerous cases of plural subjects with singular verbs or vice versa, run-on sentences, and stylistic infelicities of the type “monarchies permeating throughout the continent (p. 82)”;

“a family bicycle ride, *a.k.a.* Dutch style” (p. 147); things are a “site to see” (p. 147, 270); servers being at one’s “beckon call” (p. 198), etcetera.

An incomplete list of small but still annoying factual errors includes the following: Not everyone eagerly awaits the next *Elfstentocht* with sharpened skates at the ready: one needs to be a member and join a waitlist to compete (so Resch can give up his ambitions to ever participate) (p. 38). The language is not called “Nederlandic”: it is called “Dutch” in English and “Nederlands” in Dutch (the term “Netherlandic”, with *-th-*, is sometimes used by linguists to refer to a certain subset of the Germanic languages, but never to refer to an individual language) (p. 39). Vincent van Gogh worked quite a bit later than the Age of Enlightenment (p. 130). *Sinterklaas*’ “little helpers” are not little (p. 179). The word for ‘hospitality’, *gastvrijheid*, does not literally mean *gast-vrijheid* ‘guest-freedom’ but *gast-vrijheid* ‘hospitable-ness’: it has nothing to do with being free of guests and everything with being free towards guests (p. 195). The Dutch equivalents of the Joneses would certainly not be called the “von Joneses” but the “Jansens” (214). No one expects trains to leave on time anymore, and trams have never run on time (p. 219). There exists no part of Belgium called “Nederlandia”: the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium is called *Vlaanderen* (p. 222). The Dutch do not tip less than Americans because of any different attitude toward tipping: they tip less because in the Netherlands the service is included in the price, making tipping a truly optional gesture (p. 223). Not all Dutch people will defend the Queen if negative comments are made about her: there are quite a number of republicans and people who oppose the Royal House, as was demonstrated by the riots on the occasion of Queen

Beatrix's wedding in 1966 and her coronation in 1980 (p. 231). Many people nowadays don't smoke and never have (p. 232). There is no such word as *overlegs*: *overleg* does not have a plural form (p. 237). Dutch governments do not "comprise a *group* of coalitions", they *are* coalitions (p. 256). Brussels is not a French-speaking city in Belgium: it is officially and practically bilingual (p. 266). The train station is not called "station de *tren*" in French: it would be called "station de *train*" if it were not already called "la gare" (p. 266). While Canada has more than one province in which French is spoken, it has only one "French speaking province" and certainly only one province which has ever tried to secede (p. 266). *Verzuiling* 'pillarization' does not take place primarily along political and class lines, but is first of all a religious phenomenon (p. 307). And Dutch houses do not generally include a space that can be called a "*den*" (p. 327).

I have saved Resch's two most annoying errors for last. First of all, the existence of arbitrary grammatical gender in German does not "call[s] for an extraordinary amount of memorization for even the most basic of grammatical principles, which indoctrinates German children into the world of exactness and strict attention to detail at early ages" (p. 240). The French language has equally arbitrary grammatical gender, and much less of a reputation for exactness and attention to detail. Aren't the French supposed to be, on the contrary, so romantic and chaotic?

But most damningly, Dutch parents do NOT generally "*encourage* their children to have sex at early teenage years" (p. 186). They may not be quite as uptight as some American parents upon discovering that their children have

become sexually active, but that is a far cry from *encouraging* them. So after spending all this time in the Netherlands, Resch is really no better than any of the American tourists who walk around the Red Light District gawking at the prostitutes feeling morally superior before going back to their gated communities.

The Dutch have a useful expression for people who make claims based on insufficient evidence: *niet gehinderd door enige kennis* 'not hampered by any knowledge'. Resch does not seem to have run into this expression in his researches. Fortunately the Americans too have a useful term for immature writing characterized by faulty generalizations based on inadequate observations: "sophomoric". Interestingly, there is no good Dutch translation for this adjective.

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