The Dutch and Their Neighbors in Grand Rapids

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Grand Rapids' Dutch residents long felt themselves to be in peril; their neighbors even longer have believed them to be in power. Each perception is understandable, but neither was the simple truth, nor were the two together the whole truth. Yet because images do shape reality, these two tended to generate their own confirmation.

The neighbors' apprehension reflected the sheer number of Hollanders around them. In fact, the high profile of Dutch descent in Grand Rapids' demography ranks with the high profile of furniture-making in its economy as the two marks that most distinguish this city from others. Here a group least among the multitudes of American immigrants placed first in the ranks of the foreign-born, while groups high on the national scale either barely registered (Italians and Eastern European Jews) or held a secondary place (Irish and Germans). This deviation from national norms made Grand Rapids seem more Dutch than it really was.

The reversed proportions also meant that the Dutch would "own" Grand Rapids in another way. The city early on became the cultural capital of Dutch America, a place of importance for people who had never, or rarely, set foot here. For neighbors of other backgrounds the city might be home, a precious place, but on the periphery rather than at the hub of their national networks.

Then there was the third advantage, the Hollanders' "character." They were from northwest Europe, close to Britain (unlike Poland) but no rival to it (unlike Germany). They were "religious," something the native-born always like in newcomers, regardless of their own performance; better yet, they were Protestant; best of all, they were Reformed, within hailing

distance of the Puritan/Presbyterian current central in American culture. From this combination of religion and ethnicity, it was supposed, came the good work habits and quiet demeanor that made the Dutch solid citizens. From the mesh of these qualities with the furniture industry, it was further supposed, came the city's exceptional features: high levels of home-ownership and civic-mindedness, shady streets and sunlit government, stable values and steady profits. In the Dutch, civic boosters concluded, grand Rapids had a people as respectable as its premier product.

But this was said of the Hollanders more often than by them. Their first concern was both narrower ("our people" in town) and broader ("our people" across the country and across the ocean) than the civic leaders', and so their place in the boosters' rhetoric made them in one sense a possession of others. Nor was this capture just rhetorical. Between the Civil War and World War I (the era when both the Dutch and the furniture industry arrived) and for some time thereafter, Dutch numbers did not yield an equivalent power in town. In the formative era the Dutch owned few of the factories that made the furniture, and none of the principal plants. Outside of the Idema family's share in Steelcase, Inc., that pattern still holds today. The Dutch had no place in the cartel that made Grand Rapids furniture nationally competitive, nor among the bankers that financed the industry, nor among the savings-and-loan executives who lent the factory workers--Dutch, Germans, Poles, and native-born alike--money for the homes that made them so reliable.[1] The Dutch had a few newspapers of their own but little voice in the dominant, city-wide dailies or in the major downtown cultural institutions. They had some political representatives, but neither in number, quality, nor influence did these match the Dutch proportion of the population.

These sectors of power, rather, long remained in the hands of another group, a group that loomed so large so early on as to be invisible as an "ethnic" group. A "class," maybe. "Founders" and "leaders" were their own preferences. These were the native-born WASPs of New England-New York provenance who arrived in town a decade before or after the Civil War with the training, financing, and connections needed to direct the city's industrial future. Thus, to worship with the city's elite between the Civil War and World War II, one would hardly go to the Reformed or Christian Reformed edifices scattered throughout the neighborhoods, but to the downtown churches: for furniture executives, especially to Fountain Street Baptist and First Methodist; for politicians, to St. Mark's Episcopal and First/Park Congregational; for bankers and cultural leaders, to all of these plus Temple Emanuel, if the Houseman family were there.[2]

A look at the mass instead of the class tells another story but still not one of Dutch domination: from 1830 to 1970 the city was half Protestant, half Catholic. Or, to look at signal individuals instead of faceless groups, the city's first U.S. Senator, Lucius Lyon, was a Swedenborgian; its sometime mayor, banker, and land-speculator, Julius Houseman, was Michigan's first Jewish Member of Congress. Its twentieth-century eminences tell the story most plainly. Gerald Ford was an Episcopalian lawyer who rode a tide started by Fountain Street Baptist reformers and supported by a Dutch rank and file, who thus swept from Congress one of their own, Bartel Jonkman. Arthur Vandenberg, newspaper editor and U.S. Senator, had a Dutch name of no cultural significance. Of old New York heritage and Park Congregational affiliation, Vandenberg's identity was so thoroughly Americanized it knew nothing but America, as his isolationist politics made clear.[3]

In sum, the Dutch in city life long figured more as an unmovable object than as an irresistible force. They constituted a pool of potential for others to stir; they set limits upon what might go on in classrooms, commercial space, or city hall. It was this silent veto, this shifting of the thresholds of acceptability, that their neighbors observed, whether in resentment, admiration, or calculation, as Dutch power.

But meanwhile, the group was endlessly discussing its own Calvinism in quite a different tone. Were not Calvinists, according to Michael Walzer, the culture-shapers of early modern Europe? Were not Calvinists, according to Max Weber, the tireless activists who, to still the depths of their souls, developed a new ethic that changed the face of the earth? Were not Calvinists, according to some local Dutch voices, those commissioned to engage modern life not warily but with transforming zeal, not by inherited reflex but by a bold, fresh faith?[4] Their neighbors, looking at what the Dutch did already, might be just as glad that this activism was muted, but the question remains, what happened to it? Why the energetic rhetoric and the hesitant action? And what do the answers to these questions have to do with the twin perceptions of peril and power?

Quite simply, Dutch activism went into building up their own institutions. For their churches, schools, colleges, seminaries, psychiatric hospital, and homes for the aged the Dutch showed real passion and unstinting sacrifice. In so doing, the Dutch were applying lessons from their European past. First, religion is the foundation of life. Dutch-born or -descended as they were, ethnically as they might tint their faith, the group defined itself by that faith. That meant, secondly, that all of life was religious, that the world was indeed to be transformed according to the loving law of God. Thirdly, however, in modern times--in the United States

with its vaunted separation of church and state but also in the Netherlands --public life had become so secularized that it was difficult to build so consistent, wholistic a Christianity. Best, then, to Christianize intensively what one could: to maintain strict orthodoxy in church and home (hence one rigorous denomination after another); to extend the church-home connection over education at all levels (hence Christian schools); to cultivate leaders at college and seminary who could defend the community's interests in the wider world (hence intellectual development of Christian cultural critique).

As to the broader public life of economy and politics, there the best was not possible so the good--or the tolerable--would have to do. Translated, that meant for economic life an ethic of personal honesty in business or diligent performance at labor without much concern for larger structural issues. In political life it meant strict vigilance against corruption above and below; that is, thrifty government to suppress crime and dubious popular pastimes.[5] Not transforming the world but securing safety in the world was the Grand Rapids Dutch rule of life. Political astringency upheld that rule; economic prosperity at once confirmed and challenged it and so could neither be forthrightly enjoyed nor enjoined.

The Dutch thus felt imperilled not, first of all, because the English language and American manners threatened old-country usages but because that process removed one layer of insulation from the real threat: secularity's challenge to their dearest convictions. Yet the secular world, by the necessities of daily routine and by the mandates of high theology, remained their proper arena of conduct. The Dutch solved the tension by building a fairly complete world of their own where orthodoxy still applied, and by entering the outside order now with entrepreneurial cunning, now in fearful

exile, now in dutiful citizenship, but always with a double mind. The Dutch both feared and envied that world, and expected the feelings to be mutual.

It is against this template that the Hollanders' relations with their neighbors can be measured. The most obvious similarities lie in the immigrant origins of so many of these neighbors and in their joint devotion to the ethnic trinity of work, family, and religion. The most obvious differences stem from the time each group arrived, the power and opportunities then available to it, the cohesiveness each could achieve, and the specific meanings that "work" and "religion" held in its mental dictionary. Each group had a duality of its own but drew the divide along different lines.

The WASP elite, who arrived earliest, had the greatest advantages, not least in the ability to define the local world as American and "American" as their own image. Accordingly, they classified newcomers as either "un-" or "aspiring-American" and confidently assigned the Dutch to the latter category. But Dutch clannishness bothered them and at points of crisis could trigger their rage. Most notably, in World War I Alfred Wishart, pastor of Fountain Street Baptist Church, denounced the Christian Reformed Church as unprogressive, hence un-American, hence potentially subversive, for its Christian schools and traditional orthodoxy. This returned the suspicion the Dutch cast upon Fountain Street and, less forthrightly, upon other downtown churches for theological liberalism. Again and again the Dutch pronounced that heresy, which made over Christian truth in the mirror of modern self-adulation, as the single greatest threat to the church and the world's welfare.[6]

But an odd thing happened to these recriminations on election day. They disappeared. In the municipal charter reform of 1916, in the attack

upon Mayor George Welsh in the 1930s, in the Home Front campaign after World War II, the Dutch increasingly followed Fountain Street's lead in the cause of "cleaning up" city government.[7] When the rubber hit the road in local politics, cleanliness was not next to godliness; it was godliness for all the "godlessness" of its sponsors.

Deepening the paradox, the "unclean" seemed very godly to judge from their habits and architecture. Four structures long dominated the skyline of the West side: one German, one Irish, and two Polish Catholic churches (St. Mary's, St. James', St. Adalbert's, and Sacred Heart, respectively). The homes around these monuments were sometimes shabby by Dutch standards, the jobs of their occupants too blue-collar. But the Dutch formula of work, family, church, and Christian school could not have been better matched than in these neighborhoods. Indeed, the importance of neighborhoods, even the configuration of shops at their center, was the same for both groups. The two even went on strike together in 1911 against the furniture owners from the downtown congregations.[8] Why, then, did city politics in Dutch eyes divide at the Grand River? Why not a holy alliance of Catholic West Side and Calvinist southeast end to smite the scoffers of Heritage Hill?

The answer lies on several levels. The Dutch arrived one step ahead of the Poles and wanted to stay one rung above them. Though both were inwardly focused, the Dutch have shown a greater sense for the city as a whole. For instance, both built religious schools but the Third Ward perennially supports, while the First Ward perennially rejects, public school millages and related civic/cultural proposals. Most important, the West Siders divided up life differently from the Dutch. "Bridge Street" was long a by-word for tavern row, yet lies in the shadow of St. James Church. The Poles put up two churches but several more fraternal halls that attended to less

that would merge into Ahavas Israel, went its own way entirely. Symbolically, Jewish institutional centers have gravitated toward the northeast end, away from the Catholic West Side and Calvinist southeast end alike.[11] And so the two groups have stayed distant, their relationship more cool and guarded than hostile.

Dutch-Black contacts have been the opposite. They started out hot, close, and from the Dutch side, frankly racist. The initial meeting was worsened by circumstance. Though they were among the earliest immigrants in American history, African Americans came late to the urban North, arrived with largely a peasant experience and value system, and in Grand Rapids settled in precincts that the Dutch had long owned. As Dutch neighborhoods became Black, a new voice took over--dramatic, oral, and expressive, as foreign to Dutch sensibilities as was its Democratic vote on election day. The culture clash and social divide redoubled distrust and triggered substantial white flight.

Contrary to the Jewish case, however, in this instance contact continued and eventually led to positive engagement. Above all, this stemmed from the two sides' common religion and common religious intensity. For after the neighborhoods changed, churches still stood at their center and issued a message--of personal salvation and straight living, of glory to God and help to the needy--that had to strike Dutch ears as familiar. The inner city, then, became the site of a crucial exercise in mutual aid. From the Dutch side, drug- and housing-rehabilitation, food clothing, and medical care have flowed out week after week, year after year, following some old group instincts. This is mutual aid, however, because it goes beyond the ethnic boundary. That is, the African-American presence in their own former precincts more than anything else has taught the Dutch about the quality and

faith of people other than themselves.[12] From their material surplus and toward a once fearsome people some of the Grand Rapids Dutch have been able to make gestures toward redeeming their souls and the best part of their past.

If the ways by which they maintained their heritage put the Dutch off from others, deeper themes within that heritage can also connect them with others. If they tapped the European past to dream of restoration with Poles and Germans, they have images from the Hebrew Bible in common with Jews and African Americans. Doubtless the three would locate their exile and exodus at different times and places. But in seeing each other as fellow pilgrims they might become less estranged and, without mistaking Grand Rapids for the Promised Land, strive to make their common earthly city a place of uncommon humanity.

ENDNOTES

1. Frank E. Ransom, The City Built on Wood: A History of the Furniture Industry in Grand Rapids, Michigan (n.p., 1955); Jeffrey D. Kleiman, "The Great Strike: Religion, Labor, and Reform in Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1890-1916" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Michigan State University, 1985).

2. James D. Bratt and Christopher H. Meehan, Gathered at the River: Grand Rapids, Michigan and Its People of Faith (Grand Rapids, 1993), pp. 18-33, 58-59, 81-105; Kleiman, "The Great Strike."

3. Bratt and Meehan, Gathered at the River, pp. 25, 30-31, 33, 58-59; James D. Bratt, Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: A History of a Conservative Subculture (Grand Rapids, 1984), pp. 188-89.

4. Michael Walzer, The Revolution of the Saints (Cambridge, MA, 1965); Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (New York, 1958); Nicholas Wolterstorff, Until Justice and Peace Embrace (Grand Rapids, 1983); Bratt, Dutch Calvinism, pp. 14-33, 50-54, 98-102, 142-156.

5. Bratt, Dutch Calvinism, pp. 62-66.

6. Bratt and Meehan, Gathered at the River, pp. 102-03; Bratt, Dutch Calvinism, pp. 59-61, 87, 125-31, 257-58.

7. Bratt and Meehan, Gathered at the River, pp. 101-05; Bratt, Dutch Calvinism, pp. 64-66, 188.

8. Kleiman, "The Great Strike;" Bratt and Meehan, Gathered at the River, pp. 89-191.

9. Anthony B. Travis, "Mayor George Ellis: Grand Rapids Political Boss and Progressive Reformer," Michigan History 58/2 (Summer 1974): 101-30; Bratt and Meehan, Gathered at the River, pp. 104-05; Bratt, Dutch Calvinism, pp. 63-64, 71-74.

10. Bratt and Meehan, Gathered at the River, pp. 53-63, 73-81.

11. Bratt and Meehan, Gathered at the River, pp. 139, 147-51.

12. Bratt and Meehan, Gathered at the River, pp. 53, 124-25, 158-65, 195-201.