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Addresses Marie Sandberg, Associate professor  
for manuscripts University of Copenhagen  
Faculty of Humanities  
Ethnology, SAXO Institute  
Karen Blixens Vej 4  
DK-2300 Copenhagen S, Denmark  
Phone +45 512 990 17  
E-mail sandberg@hum.ku.dk

Professor Regina F. Bendix  
Institut für Kulturanthropologie/Europäische Ethnologie  
Georg-August-Universität  
Heinrich-Düker-Weg 14  
D-37073 Göttingen, Germany  
Phone +49 551 392 5351  
E-mail rbendix@gwdg.de

Editorial assistant Magdalena Tellenbach, Ph.D.  
Järnvägsgatan 16  
SE-241 72 Marieholm, Sweden  
E-mail magdalena.tellenbach@akademisktext.se

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Subscription address Museum Tusulanum Press  
University of Copenhagen  
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# Mobocracy and Monarchy

A Ritualistic Reconciliation with the Anachronism of the  
Dutch Monarchy

by Peter Jan Margry

article in

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*Mobocracy and Monarchy. A Ritualistic Reconciliation with  
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by

Peter Jan Margry

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# MOBOCRACY AND MONARCHY

## A Ritualistic Reconciliation with the Anachronism of the Dutch Monarchy

Peter Jan Margry

The relation of the Dutch people towards their monarchy has always been ambiguous. The celebration of the monarch's birthday has become a festive and massive expression of Orangeism, turning the event into a national feast day for all. The celebration is, however, characterized by a certain suspension of rules ("freemarkets") and brings up forms of social inversion and charivaresque behaviour towards the House of Orange. This contribution examines to what extent this seemingly uncritical expression of contemporary Orangeism can be interpreted as a temporary symbolic "mobocracy" that helps to reconcile the nation's republican traditions and strive for modernity with an anachronistic monarchical system.<sup>1</sup>

*Keywords:* feast, monarchy, rituals, inversion, charivari, social action

During the street fair (*vrijmarkt*) in Amsterdam celebrating the Queen's Birthday<sup>2</sup> and the inauguration of Willem-Alexander as the new Dutch King, on April 30, 2013, a father with his young son set up an orange upholstered throne on the downtown Amstelveld square. Next to it was a sign asking: "What does it feel like to be a king?" For one euro people could sit on the comfortable throne and have a crown placed on their head, while a lackey (the son) provided them with a copy of the *Financial Times*, coffee and refreshments. Being photographed as king for the social media cost 50 cents extra. However insignificant this role reversal might seem, it illustrates the question that I wish to address in this contribution. I will attempt to offer an explanation for an apparent political anachronism: the success-

ful perseverance of the monarchy within modern democratic European nation states. I will do this with the Dutch monarchy as an example.

### Orange Mania

In a society that is characterized by modernity and rationalism, the House of Orange (Oranje) continues to enjoy an unusually great degree of support, also in comparison to other European monarchies (Lunshof 2002: 243–246; cf. Schoo 2002).<sup>3</sup> In other words, what makes it possible, or helps make it possible, for the monarchy to be as widely supported in Dutch society as it is? After all, governmental authority often, in one way or another, provokes a certain degree of opposition among people and one of the extreme forms of that authority is a political sys-



Ill. 1: What it is like to be a king: throne, crown and lackey. Amstelveld Square, Amsterdam, April 30, 2013. (Photo: P.J. Margry)

tem with a hereditary monarch as the head of state. As far back as in the 1980s, the sociologist Wilterdink asked why, then, there should be so little opposition to the monarchy in the Netherlands (Wilterdink 1989–1990: 133; cf. Biersma 2002). What is a monarchy doing in a modern bourgeois nation like the Netherlands, where egalitarianism is an implicit credo and being average and normal appears to have become a moral achievement? This kind of reflection has re-emerged in public debate at fairly regular intervals in recent years, often in the context of apparently massive “Orange feeling” and “Orange mania”.

This discussion became more insistent in the run-up to the abdication of Queen Beatrix in favour of her son Willem-Alexander in 2013 – an event that moreover coincided with the 200th anniversary of that same monarchy.<sup>4</sup> In this broad discussion in which the Dutch nation asked itself why it exists in the form that it does, it was never the (New) Republican Society that set the terms of the debate, but the discourse was chiefly steered by the “naive” astonishment on this phenomenon expressed by citizens, media and politics itself.

How is it possible that a nation, which invented

itself as a bourgeois republic, should have allowed itself to be saddled with an “artificially” created, authoritarian monarchy in 1813, and down to this very day tolerates it, albeit in a constitutional variant? In my contribution, I will present a new model for explaining the paradox of a “democratic monarchy”. A key feature in this discussion is a symbolic temporary “reign” by the Dutch people, a situation that can also be depicted with the term “mobocracy”. This term derives from the word “mob” and refers to an irregular rule by groups or masses.<sup>5</sup> For the Dutch case, I give this term a symbolic meaning with respect to the “reign” of the people as well as for its representation of the country’s total population.

Although the colour orange is rarely found in nature in the Netherlands, this striking and – in marketing language – “warm-dynamic” tint is emphatically present in Dutch society today. In the Netherlands the colour has a specific political significance as it, traditionally, has been connected with the House of Orange and, since 1813, with the royal house. The historic phenomenon of Orangeism – support in society for the Oranje dynasty – derives from that. However, since the late 1980s the colour orange has had an additional, even more emphatic presence. In that period, the Dutch society massively began to appropriate the royal colour as a form of implicit nationalism for itself (Billig 1995: 93–95).<sup>6</sup> While previously, orange was mostly found in the design of shirts of the Dutch national football team, and in banners, pennants and other decorations around royal and national holidays, these years witnessed an explosion associated with the present Orange mania. The turning point was when the Dutch team brought home the Cup in the European football championship in 1988, and masses of Dutch fans dressed and painted their faces in the national colours, and in particular orange, perhaps combined with a lion costume and a mask, as a reference to the heraldic beast in the royal coat of arms. This “most anarchistic popular celebration ever”<sup>7</sup> was a national event, and marked the beginning of a widely adopted practice which continues to flourish to this day, while peaking at specific celebrative moments, and which is even seen to generate social cohesion (Van der Ploeg 1996; Kullberg 2001, 2004: 18).

The media coined the neologism *oranjegevoel* (Orange sensation, feeling or emotion) for this manifestation. This term began to appear with greater frequency in the media after 1994.<sup>8</sup> Since then, it has frequently been used in the media for both the positive affective attitude in Dutch society towards the royal house, national events or individuals (“heroes”) and sports teams, and as a partial explanation for the same phenomenon. *Oranjegevoel* is therefore not a usable analytic term, but much more the description of an emotion. Furthermore, it is an umbrella concept that, because of its suggestive power, is used by the media on any and every occasion. For instance, in late 2012 a major Dutch bank carrying an orange coloured logo started an advertising campaign in which the key word Oranje, capitalized, was paired with a series of important positive values and aims for individuals and the society, in the hope of capitalizing on the positive connotations of Orangeism and Orange sentiments.<sup>9</sup>

The question remains as to just how society itself experiences that Orange feeling. In February 2013, that question was presented through an online questionnaire to a large group of informants of the Meertens Institute in Amsterdam.<sup>10</sup> They were asked to describe what they understood as the “Orange feeling”. Roughly, their answers revealed a triple division, which in part connects with what was said above: it was primarily associated with sports and fans (“Orange fever”; with football). A second group associated it rather strictly with the royal house (Orangeism; the Queen’s Birthday). And a third group regarded it as a positive flagging metaphor for the Netherlands as a nation, while it was striking how infrequently the word “nationalistic” appeared in their descriptions. On the other hand, the term “solidarity” – a representation of the modern “we-feeling” (cf. Billig 1995: 174) – was frequently associated with it. For the rest, in their answers, this third group often combined the nation with the royal house. As a result, one can say that the second and third categories overlap, while the category of sport remains clearly distinct from these two.<sup>11</sup>

At this point I want to look more deeply at the question of what these latter two forms of the Or-

ange feeling really stand for. I will leave aside the more isolated sports-related expressions, and focus on the phenomenon in relation to the monarchy and the Dutch, in particular when they are combined in the expression of the yearly celebration of the Queen's (King's) Birthday.<sup>12</sup> Should the nationwide expressed Orange mania of that day be regarded as a barometer that refers to a new form of Orangeist loyalty to the royal house, or is the current Orange feeling to be reduced to a nostalgically tinted "folklore" or an expression of a consumerist celebrative culture? Or does the phenomenon perhaps also have social-political functions (cf. Corbin, Jérôme & Tartakowsky 1994)? But before I begin to answer these questions, I wish to briefly indicate how various "traditions" related to the support of the House of Orange – the public presentation of the monarch and the celebration of his or her birthday – have changed over the past century, and how these have contributed to the development of the Queen's Birthday, which was once, symbolically fitting to the content of this article, characterized as "the day par excellence on which the monarch and people shake hands" (Lekkerkerk 1997: 7).

### Becoming "Ordinary"

The monarchical political system, which was felt "alien" to the standing ideology of the former Dutch Republic (1588), was created in 1813 more or less by chance, as a consequence of the international political entanglements of that day. At the end of the nineteenth century the Queen's Birthday became a more nationally organized public festive event. The celebration was mainly arranged to celebrate the bonds between the Oranjes and monarchy and the "people". The motive for this can be connected with two central basic political strategies of those days. On the one hand, it was focused on support for the monarchy, to stimulate a national feeling – or "we-feeling" – in everyday life within a society deeply divided by the socio-religious pillarization of the country. On the other hand, the celebrations were a liberal civilizing offensive focused on improving the conduct of popular amusements in general (Van Schoonhoven 2002: 138–140; cf. Helsloot 1995: 299).

The court showed no pronounced ceremonial character, and was then already somewhat reserved and self-effacing (Van Osta 1998: 234–238). Organized as they were by local authorities and Oranje associations, only a limited part of society had the opportunity to express their love and loyalty to the Queen on these occasions, although the royal family were seldom present.

The rapprochement of the monarchy (i.e., the monarchs) in terms of its presentation to and dealings with society began in the twentieth century. It set off an interchange with society in which they adapted to one another in a number of respects, and in some cases took on each other's characteristics. The Queen's (birth-) Day would prove to be a useful stage for the latter, giving the Dutch a new floor and a new position in relation to their royals.

This actually started in the 1950s when Juliana opened the gardens at her Soestdijk palace during the Queen's Birthday celebration in order to decrease the distance to her people. At a respectable distance, from the steps of the palace, the royal family greeted the still carefully selected representatives from society who passed by in review. When after 1952 this observance – the "défilé" – could be broadcast on television, Soestdijk became the epicentre of the Queen's Birthday. The television broadcasts assured that the royal family came into the Dutch homes as individuals of flesh and blood – albeit in mediatized form. Joining these two distant worlds in real-time became an important factor in demythologizing the royal house. During her reign, Juliana made the Dutch adage of "just act normal" her own, as much as possible, perhaps not entirely internalized, but particularly as an outward attitude (Schenk & Van Herk 1980: 69–78). The mass psychologist Jaap van Ginneken noted that the people love the "bicycle monarchy" of the Oranjes because they seem so normal and informal, "they seem like family" (Van Ginneken 2003: 35–36; cf. Jenkins 2002: 4.1–3) – an expression of the Dutch dedication to egalitarianism and rejection of hierarchy.

The long 1960s brought changes to the Netherlands, which did not leave the royal house untouched. Like others of her generation, Beatrix expe-

rienced that “the times they are a-changing”. Where once the continued existence of the monarchy, legitimized by dynastic continuity, had been defined by myth, distance and distinction, a demythologizing and democratizing of the monarchy to an increasing degree began to take shape.<sup>13</sup> By their new openness and relative simplicity, the Dutch monarchy was able to adapt successfully to the changing ideas and sentiments in society’s everyday life.

Increasingly invasive media coverage and a flourishing tabloid press led to the court and royal family becoming increasingly “humanized” and their becoming a public possession. The royal family was included in the network of Dutch celebrities (Brunt 1989–1990: 221–228). According to the Dutch political analyst Jérôme Heldring, the penchant of the younger generation of princes for marrying women from outside the circle of nobility brought with it a dangerous “vulgarization” of the monarchy: “[It is] a consequence of ‘wanting to be ordinary’, and thus undermines the *raison d’être* of the monarchy, which is not ordinary, and cannot be.”<sup>14</sup> It is, however, very much an open question whether this assertion, which reaches back to the views of Walter Bagehot on the British monarchy, also applies to the Dutch situation. To date it would appear that the opposite has proved to be the case, as one can see from the recent “Máxima-effect”, coined after the first name of the popular consort of the new King Willem-Alexander.

Another effective strategy for accommodating to the new era was the manner in which Beatrix and her consort, before her ascension to the throne, identified themselves with the avant-garde in intellectual and artistic circles of the time, in a sort of “zeitgeist project”. Being involved in activities in a progressive or idealistic context, they created growing sympathy for the monarchy among influential people who would not otherwise have been inclined to support the monarchy. This took the wind out of the critics’ sails and what little anti-monarchist sentiment there was, largely remained below the horizon (Wilterdink 1989–1990: 151–152; Huijsen 2013: 328–334). The same strategy would later be employed for Willem-Alexander and Máxima, at the start of the twenty-first century. While there were incidents, the

anti-monarchism was primarily a result of the then general process of democratization and anti-authoritarianism, and expressed itself as a criticism of style and not as a principled rejection of the monarchy (Wilterdink: 1989–1990: 147, 152).

In connection to the previous, arts and culture were expressly instrumentalized for the Dutch monarchy. The arts played an important role as a trait d’union with the society. Beatrix’s involvement with modern art, both actively and passively, made her position as the head of state easier (Kempers 1989–1990: 94–95). The wise disposition of cultural capital can divert less desirable attention away from political power or controversial matters. Beatrix also increasingly allowed contemporary artists to depict her or comment on her role in a modern or non-conformist manner in art, or for coins and postage stamps. This too helped create the image of an open, modern monarch, not afraid to step into the domain of irony, divergent views and popularization. Culture has proven to be one of the pillars supporting her reign, expressed in the extensive TV interview with Beatrix in 1988 (Kempers 1989–1990: 94–95).

In a variation on Norbert Elias’s power-conditioned “royal mechanism”, Wilterdink characterized such a process of adaptation as a “royal strategy”: a process in which a royal house opens itself up to society, taking into account various groups in society, whether favourable or critical, with the intention of creating a positive relationship with “potential ‘carriers’ of anti-monarchism”. By applying such a strategy, the House of Orange was able to make the monarchy less controversial than it had ever been before (Wilterdink 1989–1990: 155, 158).

It is said that the apparent paradox of the monarchy is that it is strongly dependent on “form”, but that in its modern guise that form and the myth are increasingly disappearing. Thus, the Dutch monarchy is no longer supported by the traditional elite, but has become dependent on the wider population (Schoo 2002: 227, 231). The post-war ascension of Juliana to the throne brought a Queen who from the very beginning in 1948 promoted openness, immediacy and commonality to create such bonding with her people. She already realized that in that era of

renewal and reconstruction she had to present herself to the society in a different way, and that meant as someone who was no different from anyone else in the kingdom, as a person in which her people to some extent could recognize themselves. Her coronation speech would prove to be a programmatic statement with regard to this outwardly professed egalitarianism and unpretentious attitude around her, a new phase in which the monarchy and society grew somewhat closer to one another.<sup>15</sup> It would remove the monarchy further from its stereotypical symbols, court culture and its (moderate) extravagance. Her daughter Beatrix would continue in that line. It is now characteristic of the royal family in the Netherlands that they regularly travel by train, or when they travel together on occasions such as the Queen's Day, by motor coach, both means of thrifty communal conveyance that are within the everyday

experience of most Dutch people. A new popular festive format for the celebration of the Queen's Birthday would connect the royal family even more to its subjects and therefore made the popularity of the monarchy within society at large increase.

### The Queen's Day – New Style

In the interview mentioned above, from 1988, Beatrix elaborated on her mother's presentation and said of her role as the Queen, "I think you must try to function in such a way that many people can recognize themselves in the totality of the monarchy" (Wouters 1989–1990: 247). That was a mission statement about her specific interpretation of her reign. It is not improbable that the "royal riots" during her coronation in 1980, which arose from the squatters' ultimatum "No homes, no coronation" (i.e., housing as a *quid pro quo* for permitting the ceremonies to



Ill. 2: Canals clogged with boats, partygoers and spectators, most of them decorated in orange. Prinsengracht in Amsterdam, April 4, 2014. (Photo: P.J. Margry)

take place undisrupted), and that resulted in a new wave of discontent over the inequalities in society, played a role in the development of her outlook on new forms of royal festive events. Whatever the case, Beatrix had already come to the decision to reinvent the Queen's Birthday observances and no longer celebrate the day with a reception at the palace as her mother did but with encounters on the street. The format and content of the day changed radically (Meijer 1999: 217–226). It is relevant to mention that the actual birthday of Queen Beatrix, January 31, was not celebrated. She preferred to keep the celebration of her own birthday on the birthday of her mother, Queen Juliana, because of the milder weather conditions in spring (April 30), relevant for the mass open-air celebrations and a wide participation.

This new Queen's (King's) Day starts the night before or in the early morning all over Holland. It is like an open market, which is not just a street fair, or an unregulated flea market, as it includes aspects of both and even more than that. It displays – over the whole town, all over Holland – an open stage for musical and theatrical performances and for all kinds of individual playful and comical activities and acts. The day's programme slowly changes from a more family-oriented feast into a massive open-air party event for the younger generations, especially in the cities. None of the parties equals the magnitude of the Amsterdam celebration as it nowadays receives up to 700,000 visitors, who fully clog downtown as well as the canals (with party boats). To keep the partying masses better under control, limitations have been set for the start and the end of the festivities, the sale of alcohol and the amplification of music. In no other European monarchy an equal way of a yearly massive national open-air celebration can be found. Royal birthdays or the monarchy itself ("Constitution Day") are elsewhere usually celebrated in a far more formal way. The popular practice of parodying and mocking the Dutch royal house in a playful way during the proper birthday of the Queen – which will be dealt with in the next section – is equally singular in its kind (cf. Philips 1999; Jenkins 2002: 4.7).<sup>16</sup>

The new Queen's Day celebration format, no

longer associated with the royal residence or the observance of the Queen's actual birthday, in a certain sense depersonalized the celebration. This made the monarchy implicitly central to the festivities.<sup>17</sup> In turn, this development has in part been possible due to the years when the Dutch pillarization – the rigid socio-political segmentation of society – was declining; there was a need for a national holiday in the Netherlands, which transcended the divisions in society. Liberation Day (May 5) was for some time regarded as the national holiday that united the country in the post-war era. However, with the war becoming more and more an element of the past and in relation to the country's neo-colonialist status and the new waves of immigration, "liberation" was no longer a suitable heading. At the same time, there was no support for a more "rational" alternative that could perhaps have been more widely appropriated, such as a "Day of the foundation of the nation", an "Independence Day", or a "Day of democracy". Although the monarchy as an institution became more central, that did not appear to be any problem for obtaining broad political support for the new status of the Queen's Day. It has been suggested that the observance is totally separated from politics (Knorr 2012: 121), or as historian Frijhoff formulated it, that it is a strictly communal ritual that has nothing to do with the state (Spiering 1996). However, the festivities have in fact diverse political dimensions. There are two central elements in its significance: first, the celebration is increasingly able to function as *the* national holiday, and second, it is de facto the only opportunity that Dutch society – with its "republican" history – has to periodically and collectively relate to the "alien" institution of monarchy, which the Dutch successfully abandoned already in 1588.<sup>18</sup> How society at large reconciles with the monarchical system nowadays will be discussed below.

### **Mobocracy in the Netherlands**

As said above, one of the socio-political paradoxes in the Netherlands is its acceptance of the monarchy in the context of the contemporary nation state. This is not the case only for the Netherlands; a similar situation exists in several European countries. But



Ill. 3: The kiss, “Give me a kiss, maid”: she is one of us and one like us, in *De Telegraaf*, May 2, 1988.

perhaps its existence in the Netherlands is even more remarkable as its monarchy is not purely ceremonial in its functions, and because it is a country that seems to almost have a compulsion to reinvent and renew itself (cf. Kennedy 2010: 43–44). Against this background, it becomes difficult to explain how this society continues to receive unusually high scores in its appreciation of the monarchy, even after the social upheavals of the 1960s and 70s. After all, during those “revolutionary” years there was a possibility to have broken with established, traditional and anachronistic structures (De Rooy 2002: 233–261). While that did happen in various parts of the society, the monarchy remained untouched – something that is also reflected in the statistics. Over the past decades, the regard for the monarchy has hovered between 85 and 87 percent.<sup>19</sup> In 2012, it was still 87 percent; in

2013, the year of Willem-Alexander’s accession to the throne and discussions about the monarchy, the figure fell again to 85 percent. Whatever the case, the “national” character of the day lies not only in this high appreciation figure, but also in its balanced observance by neo-colonial and multicultural Netherlands. Even newcomers in the Netherlands find it easy to adapt to this festive ritualistic Orange performance of “citizenship” (cf. Damsholt 2009). As both a national expression of individual experience and as a representative expression of collective feelings, the researcher Paul Kalter saw “our culture functioning optimally” in this celebration (Kalter 1995).

It was only after 1980 that the changes, as a consequence of the previous decades, led to a new public “democratizing” framing for the monarchy. While the coronation riots still could be seen as the last

convulsions of the counter culture of that period, an extraordinary event in 1988 suddenly made the extent of the change clear. On April 30, 1988, about a month before the massive outburst of Orange mania as a result of the European championship, Beatrix made a surprise visit to Amsterdam's Jordaan neighbourhood. She was unexpectedly stopped by a resident of the neighbourhood, Maarten Rijkers, who asked her informally to give him a kiss.<sup>20</sup> While she did not do so, she did permit him to kiss her on both cheeks in the traditional continental manner. Photos of the encounter became front-page news, and the kiss took on iconic proportions. Never before had a Dutch monarch permitted herself to be kissed by an unknown subject. The kiss came to symbolize the new relationship with society.<sup>21</sup> The photo reflects the new proximity that Her Majesty "grants" her people, but more than that, it stands for the idea "She is ours, one of us, and really she is just like all of us". Since the days of Juliana this idea of "equality" has been reinforced and perpetuated, and now manifests itself pre-eminently in the Queen's Birthday. An interesting sidelight to this is that this surprise visit to Amsterdam slipped into her schedule because the Government Information Service had begun to fear that there was a growing distance developing again between the royal family and Dutch society. Therefore, they started a PR strategy to improve Queen Beatrix's popularity (Meijer 1999: 218). The monarchy's process of becoming "ordinary" relates to the idea that Jenkins put forward about the requirement of some ordinariness by the Danish monarch to truly represent the nation (Jenkins 2002: 6.4–5). In the Netherlands, the yearly celebration of the Queen's Day ritualizes the royals' seemingly ordinary status.

The phenomenon of social or symbolic inversion can help explain the ways the desire for "equality" on the part of Dutch society was sought after during the Queen's Day. Social inversion is a cultural expression with which a society or group in the society desire to temporarily alter, level out or even reverse existing social relationships and roles in an informal, and often playful manner (Babcock 1978; Manning 1983; Hill 2008). The everyday world as we experience it is then temporarily placed on its head.

In this, the situation affords possibilities to put existing formal structures and individuals (particularly those in authority) in their place, to ridicule them and criticize them. In addition to the general merrymaking that accompanies these occasions, inversion has the function of temporarily obscuring or, on the contrary, of exposing sources of friction in society and easing uneasy relations or structures. Besides that, inversion ritually deals with the issues that arise from the regular relations and hierarchies in daily life. Among the more familiar examples of social inversion are carnival and the church-related Feast of Fools (Van Gennep 1937–1958: 2766–2777; Harris 2011). Carnival is intended to realize an informal equality and familiarity among those celebrating it, temporarily suspending existing norms, giving primacy to ludic language (local dialects) or the vernacular, presenting alternative structures (Prince Carnival, etc.), at the same time providing a safe podium for mockery, and social and political critique (cf. Bakhtin [1941]1984: 196–277; Heers 1983: 240–246; Braun 2002).

In an analogous way, I wish to use this theoretical framework to interpret the meaning of the current celebration of the Queen's Birthday within the context of topicalities as state, monarchy, identity and nationalism in everyday life. In this festive event, the royal family, the local organizers and the individual celebrants and game players form the ritual agents. The royal family is able to mediate equality, populism and democracy, while the other two agents create the full festive experience and the conditions for an open jest season towards the royals, without exceeding the implicit limits of decency. In the whole process, the media are an additional factor necessary to supply information and interpretation and realize interaction among the agents.

As noted above, there is still no satisfactory, coherent explanation for the popularity and success of the new style of the Queen's Birthday, the celebration as it grew into a national holiday and one day unregulated massive festive open market under Queen Beatrix. It is true that many cultural researchers have tried to present an interpretation of the way in which the carnivalesque and chaotic Orange storm is ex-

pressed on the Queen's Birthday, but their explanations are often just as banal as the banality that they claim to recognize in the festivities. The sociologist Vuijsje described it as a "revolting drinking spree"; the cultural historian Pleij spoke of "Orange hysteria" and "Orange terror" (Pleij 2003: 77, 94); Meijer, a specialist in the affairs of the Oranjes, characterized it as "coarse sentimentality" (Meijer 1999: 225); and Von der Dunk accused the participants of "infantile tendencies" and "political pathology" (Von der Dunk 2000). Even the Social Cultural Planning Office had no better explanation to offer than to say that it is "a mystery what is really being celebrated". I will try to unravel that mystery.

My point of departure for a new explanation is thus the apparent abnormality of the persisting and even growing strength of the position of the monarchy in a modern, democratic society, and the growth of the Queen's Birthday into the only "real" national holiday that represents both the royal house and the monarchy. In Michael Billig's framing it is the national flagging of shared national identity banally expressed through the present day's Dutch festive culture (cf. 1995: 174–177). The usual explanations for the acceptance of the monarchy during the reigns of the recent monarchs are generally limited to references to a continuing, broad conservative-traditionalist monarchical undercurrent in society on the one hand (cf. Kennedy 2010: 16), and, on the other, the growing pragmatism with regard to the national polity and the modern professionalism, the "Beatrixism", with which Queen Beatrix fulfilled her "profession" (Schoo 2002: 211). In addition, there are references to the phenomenon of festivalizing and the popularity of thematic celebrations (cf. Hauptfleisch 2007). These factors do in fact play an additional role, but to my mind the acceptance of the monarchy at all levels of society is strongly facilitated by the compensatory power of "mobocracy". An inverse "rule" of this nature, in which the population in a certain sense takes the reins in hand and reverse the roles, has its high point during the Queen's Birthday. This "rule" however is of course, by means of the new celebrative format, facilitated by the monarch herself and to a certain extent tolerated by the

authorities. During eve and day, some regulations and ordinances are literally and formally suspended, and the Netherlands is transformed into one great open market in which a good deal is permitted. On the Queen's Day, when the greatest possible collectivity rules public space, the "mobocracy" symbolically carries out its "policy statement". Essentially, the collectivity makes it clear that it is ultimately the boss in a modern democracy. That happens in an apparently uncritical, carnivalesque manner, in the open markets and mass parties that take over the centres of Dutch cities.

Just how massive the celebrations on this occasion are was the subject of an analysis by the Dutch survey agency NIPO. In 2007 and 2008 about 60% of the Dutch population (i.e., about 10 million people, out of 16) celebrated the Queen's Birthday in some way. About half of them (5 million) watched the festivities on television, while 40% (4 million) visited one of the street fairs in 2007. For 2011 NIPO produced other, more specific figures: 33% (5.4 million) of their respondents went to the street fairs, 32% (5.3 million) celebrated it outdoors in their own community, and another 29% (4.8 million) also watched the festivities on television, while 19% did nothing (cf. Knorr 2012: 117).<sup>22</sup> The transformation of the Queen's Birthday from what had been chiefly an event for children into an adult partying event in public collectivity makes it possible to attach political and social-critical notions to the celebration.

Thus, in this political and inverse sense, the Queen's Day also connects with the model proposed by Hauptfleisch, in which the celebration is regarded as a meaningful "eventifying system" (Hauptfleisch 2007: 39–40). That is to say, it is a ludic celebration in which social questions can emerge, not only as innocent or marginal amusement but also through bottom-up social criticism or political commentary pointing to underlying social issues (cf. Manning 1983: 27–30). On the one hand, egalitarianism is expressed symbolically by the widespread appropriation of the family colour orange, while on the other the House of Orange is held up to the light in political commentary and mocking games, while once again referring to their dependent position as

servants of the people. It emphasizes that the people, who in their constitutionally guaranteed role as voters could decide on the future of the monarchy, ultimately hold power over them.

For me, the most important characteristic of the Queen's Day is the temporary and reciprocal reversal of social relationships. For example: since the 1980s, the people no longer go to the monarch's palace to pay its respects, but the royal family calls on the people. However, it was Beatrix who out of political reasons personally decided that they would henceforth do so. On that day the royal family symbolically steps down from the throne, as it were, and literally takes a bus to join the people and participate in their everyday affairs. In the two chosen towns or cities that the Oranjes are able to visit that day, the day-to-day dimensions of Dutch traditions and culture in the past and present are acted (or re-enacted) for them. In part, that occurs in traditional activities, but these are organized in a politically correct way, with a multicultural diversity and an artistic and cultural dimension. On the one hand, the royal family are spectators of these cultural expressions of the local community, while being instructed about their significance, but on the other hand they are more or less compelled to participate in the amusements, local customs and cultural activities. Once a year they are then subject to participation in everyday civil life. Reporting on the folkloristic activities during their visit to Sittard, one newspaper used the headline: "Royal guests dance like ordinary people".<sup>23</sup> In 1996 in Sint Maartensdijk they had to fill sand bags, and a year later in Velsen they were set on a mechanical rodeo bull. Each year they participate in more or less "traditional" Dutch amusements like sack races, pillow fights, the tearing off Dutch cake from a cord with their mouths, run punning mandarin orange races, etc. These are unroyal activities, which they seem to perform dutifully, but which are looked upon with irony by the society or perceived as mockery.

For centuries, jesting, banter and getting people to make themselves look ridiculous have been the pre-eminent means of adding force to inversion. Members of the royal family are by no means im-

mune against this. For many Dutch, the Queen's Birthday is the day-long for writing, drawing or performing something that will mildly make fun of the royal house. The majority of the respondents of the Meertens' questionnaire agreed that the idea of inversion was applicable, and many found the Queen's Birthday to be "*the moment for poking fun*". Others wrote, "it is precisely the moment for jesting, because it is precisely then that we don't need to take the masses seriously", and "poking fun certainly befits a popular celebration".<sup>24</sup> For instance, one considered ridicule necessary "to prevent them from thinking they are too holy or becoming more arrogant than they already are". Short of a complete rejection of ridicule, there were some who laid out qualifications: "with decorum", "nothing gross", "mild jesting, not injurious, cynical or insulting", or "no ridicule, but critique is o.k.". Another characterized it as typically Dutch: "it fits with our national character to take royals like this with a grain of salt." Anything that goes too far and runs into actual *lèse-majesté* will not be accepted by the society, and will result in prosecution. For the rest, *lèse-majesté* is seldom or never encountered on the Queen's Birthday.<sup>25</sup>

The old satirical practice of verbal "shit-slinging" against highly placed persons was seen when a Máxima lookalike sat in a public toilet with the sign "king, emperor, admiral, we all have to take a dump", paraphrasing a riming line in a popular TV ad for toilet paper. In the town of Rhenen in 2012 a new scatological variant was introduced when the Crown Prince was requested to take part in toilet tossing (see cover picture). Before the toss he was given a pair of gloves with darker coloured palms that already suggested faecal stains. Subsequently other competitors of course allowed him to win, and Crown Prince Willem-Alexander took home his prize: a miniature toilet pot. Having a member of the royal house engage in an activity like this fits in the tradition of what in the past was called *charivari*: a public ritual of collective protest against violations of certain norms and values or, in this case, against imbalances in social status (Le Goff & Schmitt 1981: 9). In a *charivari* the positions of the victim and of

those performing are defined by their discrepant positions in society. In the case of the toilet tossing the royal family were mocked and put down in a mild way, as the Crown Prince was jestingly put in his place – on the same level as everyone else – via a deeply taboo subject.

A comparable and similarly useful theoretical framework was formulated by the American sociologist Charles Tilly, who investigated how and why ordinary people “make collective claims on public authorities” in times of social and political tension, enlisting repertoires of “popular contention”

and “collective action” for this purpose (Tilly 1995: 41–48, 2004: ix). Throughout history, he points to a wide variety of “social movements assert[ing] popular sovereignty” (Tilly 2004: 13, 151–152); imitating and criticizing governmental actions is one of them. In a certain sense, Dutch mobocracy can also be regarded as a social movement, albeit one with an implicit, more symbolic character. It is a movement which temporarily returns power to the people in a more or less playful manner, and which through inversion serves to put the Oranjes on an equal footing with the people. The event is not about a true



Ill. 4: Prince Pils cardboard statue: mocking the Crown Prince's purported studentesque drinking habits. Haarlem, April 30, 2013. (Photo: J. Helsloot)

reclaiming of power by the people, but deals with a reciprocal ritualized subverting of either position. Through the logic of the celebration the involved ritual agents of the Queen's Day also achieve re-establishment and consolidation of the normal order afterwards (cf. Handelman 1998: 63–67).

However that may be, one month after Rhenen it became clear just how close to the edge of legitimacy the toilet ordeal was, when the Crown Prince delicately and indirectly got his revenge on the organizers when he said that he felt ashamed, not for himself, but for the fact that a large proportion of the world's population lack sanitary facilities.<sup>26</sup> With that, he tossed the issue of embarrassment back onto the organizers. For the rest, he was not the only one who was ashamed; many respondents could not get this event, which they felt to be abject, out of their minds either. Although for many this *charivari* went too far, for years members of the royal family have been subjected to similar activities, which were conceived especially for them, and in general done so with little visible reluctance. Some have been things for which people once would have been arrested, for *lèse-majesté*. Beyond these, the monarch herself is usually spared direct confrontational mockery and criticism in the two places that she is visiting. One does, however, find them elsewhere in the open markets. There are always various attractions in which social criticism is focused on the monarch (and her successor). By jeering at them in a playful way, the society as a whole “negotiates” their position and symbolically temporarily takes power. The most popular are various tossing games in which messy objects (eggs, tomatoes, pies, water balloons, wet sponges) are thrown at a target – a picture of the Queen or Crown Prince. Sometimes it is balls that are thrown to knock over Oranje dolls, or one can toss rings over them, or throw darts – or sometimes even shoot a bow and arrow – at royal heads. Dressing up and impersonation is equally common, with drag queen Beatrixes and Prince Pilsen (referring to Willem-Alexander's purported drinking habits, left over from the years as a student) being far and away the favourites. Old satirical topoi from popular culture resurface when the King is pictured walking

a pig or portrayed in a high chair waving his rattle and a piss pot; the background thought is then the ascription of stupidity and immature conduct. One also regularly sees photomontages and posters with texts intended to poke fun at the member of the royal family pictured. The more curious modern variants have included a wood louse race in which each insect bore the name of a member of the royal family, and “maxicosi-curling” in which dolls were thrown into baby buggies to symbolically create offspring for Máxima. As the media always report in detail on the Queen's Day activities, these rituals and jests also reach the royals in a mediatized way. In this way – even when royals were not present – the rituals keep their charivaresque function.

Apart from the ridicule and caricatures that people fire off against the stuck-up, stiff, awkward behaviour and social inequality of the Oranjes, there is one more serious question that keeps returning: money. Although in comparison with other monarchies there is no grand “theatre of the state” to speak of, the finances of the monarchy are perhaps the touchiest issue for the society. Although there is hardly any insight into whether these costs are much higher than if there were a president as the head of state – the general opinion is that they are not – the “royal” aura of even a “modest” monarchy influences the public. This involves not only the structural costs, but particularly the incidental expenses for what is seen as fringe benefits, like a gated exclusive vacation home in poor Mozambique or the upkeep on the royal yacht, “The Green Dragon”. In response, on the Queen's Birthday people display photo masks and bare buttocks (“the emperor's new clothes”), or protest banners and direct criticism along the lines of “who's going to pay for this?”. But, as long as royal “mistakes” remain in proportion and excuses are made, no noticeable change in the public opinion could be determined so far.

Additionally, for the city of Amsterdam the former City Hall on the Dam – the symbol par excellence of the bourgeois trading nation that made the Netherlands great – remains a sore point. Since Napoleonic times this monumental symbol of the might of the bourgeois republic has been a royal pal-



Ill. 5: Coronation commemorative coin with the masses (the “mob”) on the back, 2013. (Photo: public domain)

ace. This “injustice” regularly surfaces in criticism, precisely because the previous and the current symbolism are so in conflict with one another. This has been a recurrent element in the history of the capital city and the Oranjes (cf. Kennedy 2010: 152–157). Some subsequently rename their city with stickers into “Republic Amsterdam”.

The abdication and inauguration on April 30, 2013, meant that starting in 2014 there was a transition from a Queen’s Birthday to a King’s Birthday (April 27). With the accession of the new King, new expressions of mobocratic role-play immediately emerged in society. First of all, asked to do so by the organizing coronation committee, his subjects presented him with a list of their dreams and expectations. The *Droomboek*, containing 6,500 dreams from individual Dutch people, allowed the society to express itself regarding those subjects to which it felt the King should devote his energy.<sup>27</sup> To assist him in that task, an official royal song was created through crowdsourcing, which welcomed Willem-Alexander as the new monarch and at the same time promised him support and guidance from society for his important mission: “We walk with you,” sang the participants. The accompanying film clip reaffirmed that visually, with images of a small multicultural cross section of the population, each of whom had

raised three fingers on one hand, representing the W of Willem. With that gesture, they swore, as it were, to fulfil their task.<sup>28</sup> From the side of the government, the mobocratic role and position of the people were confirmed numismatically with a special coronation coin, which, apart from the usual portrait of the monarch on the head, also uniquely depicted a “mob”, his subjects celebrating the coronation. While it is true that these functions and aims are not expressed in so many words in these projects, they can be interpreted as symbolical illustrations of the new relationship that has been established between the royal house (i.e., the monarchy) and society in the past decades.

Finally, it emerges from the questionnaire that the population nevertheless remain critical, and that the current policy of “tolerance” with regard to the monarchy will depend on the way in which the King fulfils his role. In its considerations the society makes a rational judgement: the respondents’ answers frequently suggest, almost with a sigh, that there really does not seem to be any better alternative. When they look at the problems with presidents in surrounding countries, and the costs that go with them, most acknowledge that for them the Dutch monarchy and the way in which it has taken shape, seems to be the least unattractive solution.

Its irrationality is in part redeemed by the Queen's Birthday, the holiday that more than 80% of the respondents see as a form of "bread and circuses", but at the same time is seized upon to take the Oranjes down a notch or two. Only 10% of the respondents of the questionnaire still see the Queen's Birthday as homage to the monarch, which, in the time of Queen Juliana and her *defilé*, was the heart of the celebration.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

The question of the governmental "nature" of the Dutch – republican, monarchic or Orangeist – recurs constantly in discussions in Dutch society. Seen from an intellectual-historical perspective, republicanism has some support, but, as many authors<sup>30</sup> have argued, there is no serious disposition to republicanism. The cultural practices related to this issue among the population indicate that the modern nation state can actually get along quite happily with an anachronistic institution like the monarchy. The Queen's Day celebrations are the expression of this, par excellence. Over the past decades that day has developed into the country's national holiday, and is thus no longer a purely Orangeist birthday observance, but a day that celebrates the nation state every bit as much as the constitutional monarchy.

The long 1960s, which saw the crumbling of Dutch pillarization, the arrival of new power relations and growing individualism, called for a modernization of the relation between the society and the monarchy (i.e., the House of Orange). While the starting points for this in the Netherlands, with its modest monarchy, were already favourable, the monarchy itself saw to it that a modernization and the adjustments took place smoothly. Since the Second World War the Dutch royal family started actively positioning themselves as "open", "modern" and "ordinary", as being like their subjects. This strategy precluded too strong objections against the monarchy, and opened up ways for commenting in a more ludic way. Queen Beatrix's idea of redesigning her birthday celebration in 1980 by going "humbly" to her people in the country, elaborated on that. The Queen entering everyday civic life on her own birthday, combined with the of-

fer of festive open markets, proved to be a successful formula. The populace could participate in a real national holiday of a truly festive kind and at the same time take on a new attitude with regard to the Oranjes. In connection with a broad repertoire of public ritualistic expressions of derision and *charivari* surrounding the royal family and the monarchy practised during that day, a temporary inversion of relationships and equality has been suggested here. This practice can be seen as a form of "banal" nationalism or Orangeism. The massive celebration of the monarchy on the Queen's Day is not only quantitatively unique among the European monarchies but also in its undisguised mockery and criticism of the monarchy and its royals, made possible by an implicit reciprocal agreement. This is, however, an ironic symbolic construct, which allows the society to – at least provisionally – reconcile its seemingly irrational governmental conduct, and tacitly accept and perpetuate the "anachronism" and the power of the monarchy. The high scores of support of the Dutch monarchy can be explained by this periodic public confirmation of the monarch and the system of hereditary monarchy through the mobocratic behaviour of its people. To this end, the royal house deliberately displays a degree of subservience, while at the same time giving the people what they are entitled to: bread and circuses, while, afterwards, having the royal status reconfirmed. In this, the populace are no objective, single-minded Orangeist movement, but is realized through a multi-layered *imagined community* (Anderson 1983; cf. Billig 1995: 70–73), which continues to support a link between the Netherlands and Oranje for affective, pragmatic or rational reasons. Since this involves a widely accepted idea of a binding force, which is definitive for the existence of the nation, this is also a form of civil religion, which effectively contributes to the continuance of the nation as it is known, and to the well-being of its citizens.<sup>31</sup> And so, on the Queen's Day the whole Dutch society celebrates while celebrating society as a whole nation.

## Notes

- 1 This article was completed on January 20, 2014. Research and writing were done within the context of the project on “Dutchness” at the Meertens Institute in Amsterdam. I would like to express my thanks to the two anonymous reviewers for their comments.
- 2 Although the feast was called the “Queen’s Birthday”, the actual birthday of Queen Beatrix was on January 31, but was celebrated on the birthday of her mother: April 30. The birthday of the new King is April 27 (in 2014 however celebrated on April 26) and King’s Day will therefore again be celebrated on the proper birthday.
- 3 Recent approximate average pro-monarchy percentages in national surveys: the Netherlands 86%, Denmark 80%, Norway 73%, Sweden 70%, Spain 49%.
- 4 See for instance recent media files such as: <http://nos.nl/dossier/467420-troonswisseling/>; <http://www.trouw.nl/tr/nl/13209/Troonswisseling/index.dhtml>; [www.nrc.nl/troonswisseling/?utm\\_campaign=footer&utm\\_source=nrc.nl](http://www.nrc.nl/troonswisseling/?utm_campaign=footer&utm_source=nrc.nl).
- 5 This term has been used by Gilje (1987), but differently; he applied the particle “mob” for rioting and violent groups – some hundreds of persons, of all social strata (1987: 289) – against socio-political changes.
- 6 This apparently recent tradition does need to be placed in historic perspective, in view of the fact that in the nineteenth century – and also before – many people wore orange cockades and bowties. Also after the Second World War it was not unusual to use orange in decorations for the Queen’s Birthday, and in scarves etc. worn with other clothing; it is for example recorded that in Oirschot, in Brabant, on April 30, 1949, “everyone had adorned themselves with orange” (Van den Bogaart-Vugts 2000: 105).
- 7 “26 juni 1988: Het meest anarchistische volksfeest ooit”. *Trouw*, May 10, 2008.
- 8 Based on the newspaper databank Lexis Nexis and the historic newspaper databank at the Dutch Royal Library, it would appear that beginning in 1988 the term was already being used several times a year, initially with particular reference to football, then also to matters related to the monarchy and national affairs. Prior to 1988, the word appeared only ten times.
- 9 Precisely because the word is consistently used with a capital letter, it may be taken to actually refer to the royal house at the same time. The basic rule in ING strategy was: “Touch the mentality of all The Netherlands: what binds us together and makes us who we are.” Thus they appear to suggest that (the colour) orange would touch “the” national mentality and would exercise the same sort of “binding” force as the Oranjes have. For the ING strategy see: <http://www.slideshare.net/INGNL/een-nieuwe-communicatie-aanpak-16-nov-2012>.
- 10 The questionnaire was set out via the online “Meertens-Panel” system (see: <http://www.meertens.knaw.nl/cms/nl/onderzoek/panel/>); the 4,761 respondents or informants were asked to answer 11 open questions concerning their views on the “Orange feeling”, the Queen’s Day, the House of Orange and the monarchy. 1,290 respondents returned a filled-out questionnaire, most citations used in this article all derive from this dataset; not every related citation is therefore separately referred to. The data are stored at the Meertens Institute, a Dutch research institute on culture and linguistics.
- 11 Questionnaire Orangeism, question 1, 2013, Meertens Institute.
- 12 Since my research began before the abdication of Queen Beatrix was announced, and is only based on information about the Queen’s Birthday festivities, I will continue to use that term here, despite the fact that it has now been transformed into the King’s Birthday.
- 13 Contrary, to a certain extent, to the English monarchy, for example (Billig 1992: 65–85; cf. Gathorne-Hardy 1953).
- 14 <http://vorige.nrc.nl/krant/article1534880.ece> (by J.L. Heldring on May 25, 2001), accessed September 10, 2013.
- 15 In this speech she stated “I want to say emphatically here that for a Queen her task as a mother is just as important as it is for every other Dutch woman”, and speaking of her new status, asked “who am I, that I may fulfil these duties?”, [http://www.histotheek.nl/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=376&Itemid=93](http://www.histotheek.nl/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=376&Itemid=93).
- 16 Philips (1999) found that the Danish media expressed “mild critique from a position of ironic distance” at a royalist marriage.
- 17 One point that emerged from a poll done by the *Brabants Dagblad*, April 30, 1997, was that among the alternative terms for the Queen’s Birthday, Oranje Day and Day of the Monarchy were regularly mentioned.
- 18 In 1588, the rebellious Dutch rejected the authority of the Spanish-Habsburgian king and created their autonomous Republic of the Seven United Provinces.
- 19 The percentages remained more or less stable over these years; with an average of 84% for the monarchy, 9% against, and 7% with no opinion (Wilterdink 1989–1990: 149). In NIPO opinion polls since 1945, even in times of burning royal issues, Biersma found a constant line with percentages of 90% or close to it for and the rest against (2002: 33, 40, 45). Over the last decade the percentage remained stable between 85 and 87 percent; see: <http://www.tns-nipo.com/tns-nipo/nieuws/van/steun-monarchie-blijft-stabiel/>. For the rest, the methods used in polls of this sort leave little room for nuance, so that it is not clear what they signify and claim to represent (see Glynn et al. 1999 regarding this).

- 20 It is not clear precisely how the man addressed Beatrix. The family later said it was “Your Majesty” (*Majesteit*); the journalist present heard “Maid” (*Meid*).
- 21 The kiss is also sometimes regarded as a reconciliation between Amsterdam and Beatrix, on the first occasion when she had appeared among such crowds since the riots at her coronation. A later symbolic reflection of the kiss took place in 2005 when Beatrix greeted rapper Ali B with a streetwise “box”.
- 22 <http://www.tns-nipo.com/tns-nipo/nieuws/van/steun-monarchie-blijft-stabiel/>.
- 23 *Brabants Dagblad*, May 1, 1995.
- 24 Questionnaire Orangeism, question 4, 2013, Meertens Institute.
- 25 Questionnaire Orangeism, question 4, 2013, Meertens Institute.
- 26 <http://www.ad.nl/ad/nl/1012/Nederland/article/detail/3263323/2012/05/30/Kroonprins-schaamde-zich-voor-wc-pot-gooien.dhtml>. Afterwards the Government Information Service was quick to point out that the Crown Prince had participated because the toilets were going to be sent to a development project in Africa.
- 27 <http://www.mijndroomvooronsland.nl/nl-NL/1/het-droomboek>.
- 28 For the text of the song, see: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h\\_IRn6oBwWY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_IRn6oBwWY); for the clip: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MEUKyKb4g6k>.
- 29 Questionnaire Orangeism, question 3, 2013, Meertens Institute
- 30 See for instance Huijsen’s dissertation: <http://dare.uva.nl/document/358682>.
- 31 I have previously defined civil religion as “the religious symbol system which relates the citizen’s role and society’s place in space, time and history to the conditions of ultimate existence and meaning” (Margry 2011: 6).
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- Peter Jan Margry is Professor of European Ethnology at the University of Amsterdam, and his current research focus is on contemporary religious cultures, cultural memory practices and cultural heritage in the Netherlands and Europe. He is Executive Vice-President of the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore (SIEF). His most recent book (together with Cristina Sánchez-Carretero) is *Grassroots Memorials: The Politics of Memorializing Traumatic Death* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011).  
(peterjan.margry@meertens.knaw.nl)