

'Imagined Urban Communities'
Queen Wilhelmina Lecture
Femke Halsema, Mayor of Amsterdam

Columbia University
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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to address you here today. This, of course, is the oldest university of the state of New York. Which makes Columbia University a central part of your city's story over the centuries. And it is the stories of the city that I want to focus on today.

In 1983 the anthropologist and political scientist Benedict Anderson published *Imagined Communities*. It has become an iconic work about the rise of nationalism in the 19th century and the meaning of nationalism today. In this work, Anderson makes two interesting and important points.

First of all, he says that national identity is a product of the imagination. Not in the sense that it is 'imaginary' or unreal, but in the sense that it is constructed from collectively preserved memories, stories that are told again and again, culturally significant symbols and 'new traditions'.

National identity is not fixed. It is fluid and subject to change. We can influence and shape it. Our national self-image, for instance, is partly defined by what we decide to commemorate and what we decide to forget.

Secondly, contrary to popular belief, nationalism is not necessarily a conservative phenomenon. To think that, says Anderson, is a costly mistake. I quote: 'In an age when it is so common for progressive, cosmopolitan intellectuals [...] to insist on the near-pathological character of nationalism, its roots in fear and hate of the Other, and its affinities with racism, it is useful to remind ourselves that nations inspire love, and often profoundly self-sacrificing love.' End of quote. I agree with him that nationalism can certainly be combined with progressive values such as openness, tolerance or cosmopolitanism. The capacity to welcome strangers can actually be an important part of national identity, as it has long been here in the United States as in the Netherlands.

Well, this afternoon I would like to shift the perspective from the nation state to the imagined community of the *city*. Or should I say from nationalism to localism: the meaning of a strong and shared local identity for the city and its inhabitants. Is there a local identity and can it – like on a national scale – help create a community, inspire its citizens and provide them at the same time with a sense of belonging?

This is an urgent question because many citizens feel displaced and unwelcome.

As we all know today the nation state struggles to inspire a sense of loyalty and belonging

in its residents. The city seems to be doing a better job in that department. Amsterdammers feel more attached to Amsterdam than Dutch people do to the Netherlands (SCP 2017). It's the same with New York. An identity survey among young Amsterdammers of Dutch, Moroccan, Surinamese and Turkish origin shows that Moroccans and Turks feel more Amsterdammer than Dutch. Many, in fact, do not necessarily feel at home in the Netherlands, but instinctively see themselves as Amsterdammers¹.

They are proud of their city. *I am an Amsterdammer* – like *I am a New Yorker* – are words that resonate with significance, yet their exact meaning is also often elusive and prone to marketing claims like 'cosmopolitan, vibrant, and a cultural hotspot'. It is the language that tourist agencies use to praise cities around the world from Amsterdam to New York, and from Madrid to Beijing?

The local identity is usually only seen as derived from and subordinate to the national identity.

But I am convinced that if we want to give young people - and especially bi-cultural youth who form the majority of young inhabitants in Amsterdam - self-confidence and direction for the future, we are wise to strengthen the identity of the city they live in and give it more depth than we hear in marketing slogans.

As far as I am concerned, this means that we must systematically examine and re-evaluate local identity, its historical development, emotional significance and contribution to democratic citizenship. We have to look for a modern local identity that includes and protects very different people so that they can feel at home in our city, is it Amsterdam or New York.

1. Let me start with the historical examination. We are standing on the shoulders of our ancestors, the people who built and populated our cities in the centuries before us. Some political philosophies hold that a viable society can only exist if all its members share the same interpretation of history and the same values. But both in the Netherlands and in the USA, we are continuously reassessing our identity history books in hand. In this ongoing debate, pride and shame battle for supremacy. Was the 17th century really a Golden Age, a century of mercantile endeavour, curiosity and tolerance? Or was it a century of slavery, colonialism and greed? And how should we feel personally towards our past?

My home in Amsterdam, the official mayor's residence, is a magnificent 17th century building situated on one of the famous canals and was built by - you guessed it - a slave trader. And this university has a similar story. Some of its founders, including Henri Beekman who was originally from Holland, were slave owners. Yet it is equally true that academics of this university have over the years garnered no less than 72 Nobel Prizes.

¹ Inge van der Welle, *Links en labels*, 2008

Let me give you another example of our ambivalent past. In 1946 Queen Wilhelmina honoured Amsterdam with the motto 'Heroic, Steadfast, Compassionate' to commemorate the February Strike of workers and civil servants in 1941 in Amsterdam. The strike was held to protest against the persecution of the Jews. This motto was added to the city's coat of arms and now forms an inseparable part of our symbolic identity. But were all Amsterdammers brave enough to resist the Nazis during the Second World War? Certainly not. Many looked away or actively collaborated with the deportation of tens of thousands of their Jewish neighbours.

Clearly, the city-history provides important ingredients for building a shared story. The history also causes pain. This means our interpretation of the past needs to be constantly reviewed, as we absorb new citizens from different and often distant regions, with a painful memory of our not so glorious past.

Their histories too must be added to the mix. Only then can they be part of the local identity that comes from history.

2. Cities are built on emotions. As Alicia Keys and Jay Z sing of 'the concrete jungle where dreams are made of'. Or as a Dutch band De Dijk sings 'deze stad is een veel te mooie vrouw': 'this city is too beautiful a woman'.

We all know that feeling as you return from holiday or a far-flung trip, and you drive into the lit-up city at night or roll into the station, and find yourself in the midst of the anonymous crowd. Nobody knows you, nobody has missed you. But you have missed them, in a funny sort of way. The city with its specific smell (the smell of water in Amsterdam), its familiar sounds, the unique reflection of the sun in the Hudson or the Amstel. That sense of pride when the New York Yankees beat the Boston Red Sox, or our soccer team Ajax hammers Real Madrid.

Some feel it more than others, but we all feel it to a certain extent. It is elusive and irrational, it rises up and subsides again. But it is always lingering beneath the surface. It is the love, pride and sense of belonging you feel for your city. It is not something you can put your finger on, and it's very personal – no doubt some of you here cannot stand Alicia Keys or hate the smell of the Amstel and the IJ. That is why emotion is such an important ingredient in our civic identity. It is the crucial spark that ignites our personal allegiance to our city.

3. Our oral as well as our formal history, the stories we tell each other and the emotions we share are the basis for local citizenship, for active participation in the democratic community. But it is not enough.

Cities are part of the nation state and not independent entities.

Until the 18th century Amsterdam had a privileged class, in Dutch: *poorters*, alongside the ordinary residents. This privileged status was obtained through birth, marriage or by paying a sum of money. In exchange you could become a member

of a guild, hold administrative posts and were exempt from paying toll. So this form of civic citizenship existed long before national citizenship was introduced in the 18th century.

In 1653 the Dutch West Indies Company, which was responsible for the Dutch settlement on the island of manhatta, awarded city rights to New Amsterdam. This meant that mayors and aldermen were appointed to represent the people. A few years later, civic citizenship rights were introduced based on the Dutch model: with rights and obligations. For a few years, life went its peaceful and democratic way in New Amsterdam. But then the English arrived, and the rest is history.

Last year Maarten Prak, a Dutch historian, published a book entitled Citizens Without Nations. According to him, local forms of citizenship used to exist all over the world but were abandoned after the French revolution in favour of a national version of citizenship based on greater equality.

In his book Prak convincingly demonstrates that the local institutions (social services, guilds and civic militias) resulted in a high level of public participation, acceptance and trust.

He claims that Europe actually became less democratic when local civic citizenship made way for national citizenship. In his view, we need to revisit and reappraise the role that local citizenship can play alongside national citizenship.

Do not get me wrong. I would not want to replace state citizenship with city citizenship. But I would like to shape the latter more actively and more consciously of the meaning it has in people's lives.

Not only do I think this is necessary for the future of young people growing up in Amsterdam and for instance in New York, but it is also the only way to tackle a number of developments that threaten cities in general and Amsterdam – and I think New York – in particular.

Let me list these threatening developments – or should I say challenges? - for you.

1. The growing economy in our cities is not only benefiting residents and respectable businesses. Soaring real estate prices encourage speculation and money-laundering. The real estate market is not very transparent and criminals can easily buy properties through shell companies to stay out of sight and avoid normal permit procedures. On this subject, the Dutch-American sociologist Saskia Sassen has written about a certain type of money and the way it can influence and change our cities. It is not necessarily illegal money. She calls it 'high finance': it's a way of earning money that extracts value from society and creates a material and moral vacuum.

Parallel criminal economies are not a local phenomenon. These organisations and systems have ramifications across the entire world; from the coca producers in Latin

America, via Los Angeles, Antwerp to Amsterdam. From the Cayman Islands, via Moscow, to Switzerland. But the corrosive and undermining effects are visible at local level.

We see them, for instance, in the real estate market when new property sales or developments are forced through purely for commercial interests, or when lots of shops of the same kind suddenly appear in the streets, or when there is an increase in the number of contract killings in the criminal world. The illegal economy displaces and threatens the legal economy and erodes the sense of security and well-being of citizens and business owners. People see office buildings standing empty as investment properties, and shady shops and restaurants that obviously do not make enough money by legal means to pay the rent: this makes people uneasy. Criminal activities like these undermine our cities both financially and morally.

2. Another worrying development that poses a threat to our identity are polarisation and radicalisation. The threat level has remained substantially unchanged for several years now. The risk of a terrorist attack in our city is very real and the biggest threat continues to come from Jihadi groups. Last year an IS-inspired German stabbed two American citizens in Amsterdam Central Station. But I should add that, more recently, our security services have also detected a growing threat from extreme right-wing circles.

Radicalisation, as we see it, is the process by which people embrace the desire to impose their views through undemocratic and, possibly, violent means on society. Clearly, our primary concern is the possibility of a violent attack. But even without this extreme outcome, radicalisation with its associated lack of tolerance and rejection of our society is extremely worrying. Particularly as it is usually invisible; it happens in hearts and minds, in backrooms and on the internet, and recently in Amsterdam at a secondary school. Clearly, this invisibility does not make the threat any less serious. Urban society works as long as we share certain basic democratic principles with each other. At one end of the spectrum we must be careful not to intervene in people's personal lives, even if their opinions or behaviour repel us. At the other end, we must remove anything that facilitates radicalisation and prevent residents from turning their backs on society.

3. In 2025 Amsterdam expects to welcome 29 million visitors, with a population of (at that time) about 1 million. The majority will visit the oldest part of Amsterdam: the red-light district. These people are not necessarily interested in culture and history, but tend to come in groups and are attracted to the cannabis cafes and window prostitution. Most, incidentally, just gape at the ladies. But the people who live in that area suffer from the inundation of tourists. Another effect is that the city centre is becoming a place for tourists only. The post offices and libraries have already gone. Unique shops have shut their doors and made way for nutella bars and ice-cream parlours. The social fabric is crumbling and only fast food, souvenirs and low entertainment are left. That is sapping the morale of the people living in the centre. And other Amsterdammers too are shunning the city centre which they once regarded as their extended living room.

4. In his book 'Vanishing New York' Jeremiah Moss lamented the process of gentrification in New York. He sternly warns us, and himself, as lovers of art galleries, cycle paths and trendy coffee bars that: 'Sometimes a latte is not just a latte'.

Gentrification, of course, is also a well-known phenomenon in Amsterdam. Neighbourhoods that are transformed from grim slums into lively hubs of art and culture; with a mixture of old and new residents. Combined with initially reasonable house prices, this vibrant mix acts as a magnet on young families, professionals, expats and of course real estate investors. As Moss observed somewhat dramatically: 'A middle class white person in a low income neighborhood, especially in a neighborhood of color, is like a drop of blood in a pool surrounded by circling sharks.' The sharks, of course, are the speculators. And so dream and nightmare merge. Uniformity is the end product. Meanwhile, there are neighbourhoods on the periphery of the city that nobody seems to notice, neighbourhoods where poverty, crime, school drop-out and domestic violence make up such a toxic cocktail that gentrification is unlikely to ever get a foot in the door.

These are also the neighbourhoods where young people grow up, feeling estranged and unwelcome.

If the city no longer belongs to many diverse kinds of people, but to a small number of individuals who do not live there, but exploit it as their cash cow, then something essential has gone missing. And if extremism is allowed to prevail, and differences of opinion are no longer accepted, then again something essential has gone missing. When these phenomena occur, a city like Amsterdam protests. People openly express discontent, turn their backs on the public space or, even worse, leave the city altogether.

The answer is found in preserving, mobilising, creating and recreating a shared local identity. In actively helping establishing a local imagined community that is inclusive and brings hope to its citizens.

So what can we do to protect and preserve a local imagined community, and mobilise it as a force for good? I see six takeaways.

1. *Create a safe and secure urban environment.* If we fail to ensure that everyone feels equally safe and secure, we cannot expect all our citizens to contribute to a strong civic democracy with a shared identity. A city that is strong and resilient.
2. *Protect the public space.* The city belongs to everyone. Our neighbourhoods, squares and streets are public spaces that we must protect so that all citizens are assured of a safe and peaceful life. It is their space.
3. *Admit and enforce fluidity.* Civic identity brings together a great many contrasts. It is subjective *and* objective, the present and the past, individual and collective, emotional and rational. The fact that it is a fluid and ambiguous concept does not,

however, mean that it is 'empty' and meaningless. Just the opposite.

4. *Delve into history to tell the stories of the past.* Not a single story of a single strong leader, but a great variety of stories to reflect the diversity and autonomy of *all* Amsterdammers and New Yorkers. Within that diversity, we can choose to highlight a recurrent theme to serve as a guiding beacon. As Rebecca Solnit writes in her beautiful little book *Hope in the Dark*, the past offers us perspectives for a future of hope. You must know the major changes that a community has gone through in the past to embrace the possibility of renewal, change and improvement in the future. 'Hope' accommodates both pride and shame, and simultaneously creates forward-directed energy. Civic identity, in short, is not just based on the memory of many, but also on the imagination of many.
5. *Increase political involvement.* That imagined future of the citizens centres on the changes they are looking and hoping for. As noted, their close involvement with the city and each other is not reflected in strong political involvement. It is up to the local politicians to change this. The turn-out at local elections would be much bigger if residents knew their voice was heard at all times, and not just during the elections. Perhaps we should even have the ambition, as Maarten Prak suggests, to rethink our understanding of civic citizenship and give it a more formal status in law.
6. *Acknowledge who is at the centre of everything.* The identity of the city is visible in buildings and symbols. Dam Square in Amsterdam. Central Park in New York. The canal belt. The Statue of Liberty. But without people it is all meaningless. Our civic identity is carried within the Amsterdammers and New Yorkers themselves. They help to solve the problems I have described by showing, through their words and actions, what it means to be an Amsterdammer or a New Yorker. Respectable shopkeepers and public-spirited real estate developers. Young people in vulnerable neighbourhoods who act as inspiring role models for their peers and show that crime is not the only option, that you can have self-esteem and pride without rejecting society. Women and girls who break out of the traditional mould and embrace freedom; they too deserve to be put in the spotlight. And the residents who resist gentrification and tourism in their neighbourhoods and try to maintain cohesion in the city by being good neighbours for each other. They all deserve our support because they are the living embodiment of what it means to be an Amsterdammer and a New Yorker.

Thank you.