

# THE EMBARRASSMENT OF MODERN LIFE

Higher standards and selectivity in the Netherlands: 1970-2000

Many interpretations of social developments in the Netherlands show a tone of concern. While one author may express fear that social cohesion and solidarity are being lost, another may report on deterioration of the public domain. Many believe that the quality of education has declined, while complaining just as loudly about advancing insecurity. In other words, many commentators are adopting a culturally pessimistic view, warning us of the possibility of disaster. Remarkably, there is a growing tendency to trace the causes of all problems back to the 1960s. Although progress has obviously been made since that time, such progress relates primarily to our private lives. Opinions regarding public life and society as a whole are becoming more negative, a feeling that was shared by a majority of the population in 2004 (SCP 2004: 6-7). These developments raise two questions.

First, we could question the veracity of such pessimism. To what extent is it consistent with empirical information that has been collected in various sectors of social life since the 1960s? Are these voices of gloom based largely on subjective impressions? Even if this is the case, we are left with a second question. Is a certain level of pessimism typical of the Dutch national character? Is it related to the moral concerns that Simon Schama described a few decades ago? (Schama 1987). Which socio-cultural factors are reinforcing the malaise that is prevalent among the Dutch population? In this contribution, I focus primarily on the latter question. To this end, I trace the development of social life in the Netherlands since the 1960s. I consider ambitions, standards and expectations in addition to actual conduct. Malaise implies tension between ambition and behaviours. Such tension could arise from increasing expectations or standards (while actual behaviour remains the same) or from deterioration in actual behaviour (while the standards remain the same).

In fact, we must distinguish the various sectors of social life. Although such distinctions are somewhat artificial, they are unavoidable. Both our expectations and our actual behaviour are related to specific situations. A school is different from a restaurant, and the rules that apply in the political realm are different from those that apply in the family. I therefore chart eight forms of malaise. After a brief discussion about politics, I mention seven other sectors of social life in which comparable forms of discontent play a role. This comprises the greatest portion of this article. I conclude with a section in which the relationship between normative development and civic malaise are treated in more general terms.

A final note before embarking upon the substantive discussion: When I speak of standards, I am not referring to moral guidelines, philosophical principles or religious ideals. I am primarily referring to day-to-day behavioural rules, usual standards and common expectations that play a role in the daily lives of common Dutch people.

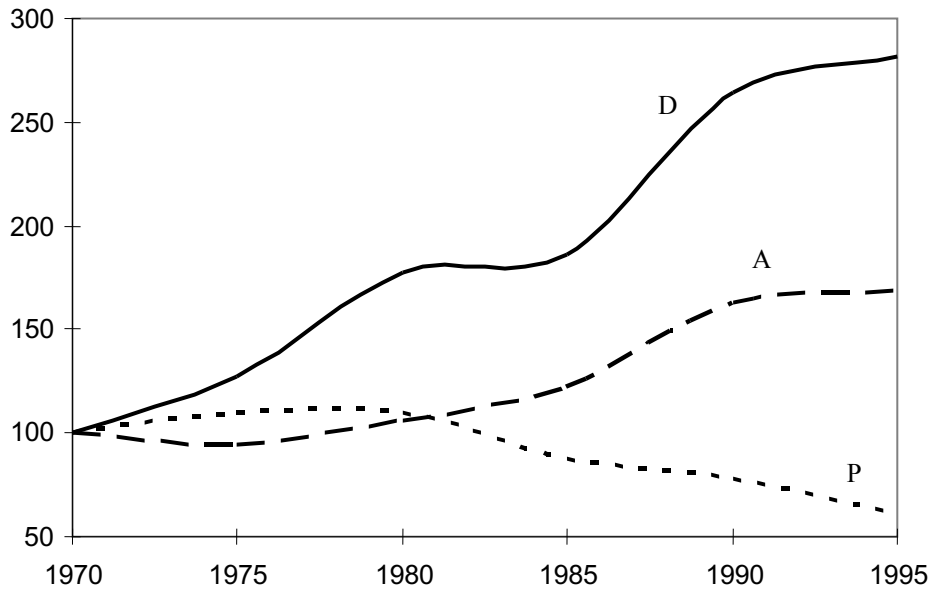
## 1. Political malaise

Decreasing voter turnout for elections is one indicator that citizens are becoming increasingly distrustful of politics. The decline in voter turnout for parliamentary elections is not alarming. Since the end of compulsory voting, eighty per cent of all voters have gone to the polls for national elections, with a lower rate (65%) for municipal elections. Voter turnout for provincial elections has been even lower (50%), to say nothing about elections for the European parliament, where slightly more than one third (35%) of all voters have gone to the polls (SCP 1998: 745). In addition to voter turnout rates, voter trust in specific political currents or parties has declined sharply. The number of undecided voters and the number of voters who change their party preferences each election are among the indicators of this development. Nearly half (46%) of the electorate switches parties each election, and an ever smaller proportion of the population appears to have stable political convictions. This is not surprising, as the programmatic and ideological dividing lines between parties have become much less strict than they were in the 1960s or 1970s. Since 1994, there have even been two administrations involving a coalition between socialists and liberals, who have traditionally been in diametric opposition to one another. Such developments have been transforming politics into a form of administration that has little to do with opposition or competition. This transformation is more clearly visible in the breakdown of party membership, as illustrated in Figure 1 (Curve P). While ten per cent of the Dutch electorate was attached to a political party in the mid-1960s, the share is currently less than three per cent. In fact, political parties are relevant only to professionals who are looking for a career in politics or in public administration. They have little to do with ordinary citizens.

However, there is another side to the story. The fact that most citizens have little enthusiasm for traditional politics does not mean that they are rejecting democracy. On the contrary, their support for the democratic system and the liberties that are associated with democracy have only increased. The greatest proportion of the population is interested in politics and reports following the news in this area. Likewise, a growing number of people are expressing their opinions in public or writing letters to the editors of newspapers (SCP 1996: 491; SCP 1998: 747). If we consider politics in a broader sense, and not only in terms of the parliamentary process, the outlook is much more positive. Nevertheless, a substantial portion of the population continues to harbour cynical feelings; they have few democratic ideas and prefer strong leaders. In previous research, I have described this group as anxious citizens (Brink 2002: 76-78). They are characterised by low income, little education and a defensive attitude towards the dynamics of modernization. They often have conservative and authoritarian preferences. In my opinion, however, the fact that these preferences have been decreasing over a thirty-period period is of at least equal significance.<sup>1</sup> As shown in Figure 1, an increasing share of the Dutch population are thinking and feeling democratically (Curve D).

An additional point is relevant. Increasing numbers of citizens feel that people should develop political activities themselves. To illustrate this point, I refer to the third line in Figure 1. This line represents agreement with such alternative

Figure 1  
Political developments (1970 = 100%)



D = Democratic attitude, A = Willingness to take action,  
P = Membership political party

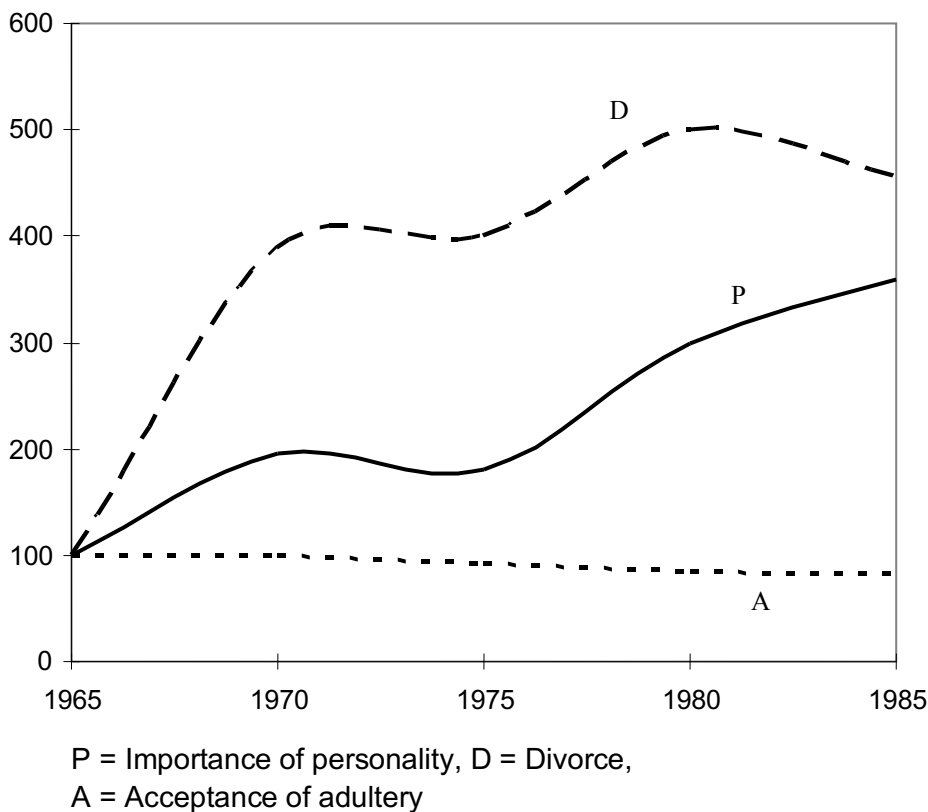
actions as staging a sit-in in opposition to an unjust law, taking over a school to protest larger classes or waging a wildcat strike to protest massive lay-offs (Curve A). Support for such citizen-based non-parliamentary activities has been increasing over the years. The number of citizens that have actually taken part in associations and organisations with ideological goals has been increasing as well. Since the 1970s, membership in such organisations as the WWF, Greenpeace and the Natural Monuments Association has experienced spectacular growth, and the same applies for charitable donations (SCP 1998:762). In my research on the political habitus, I also sketched the socio-cultural profile of these ambitious citizens. They are usually highly educated and earn high incomes. Although they show great interest in public affairs, they may have a critical view on professionals in the administrative and political field. In every respect, this group forms the contrary to the anxious citizens, and they account for approximately twenty per cent of the population. Between these two categories is an intermediary group of awaiting citizens, who tend to adopt a wait-and-see attitude. This group accounts for approximately half of the population (Brink 2002: 76-86).

In light of this evidence, we cannot say that the area of politics is characterised by massive malaise. Although discontent does exist, it is accompanied by increased expectations. Furthermore, the two tendencies could be related. It is possible that the malaise has grown *as a result of* our increasing ambitions. At any rate, this is the proposition that I defend below. It applies not only to politics, but to many other sectors of society as well.

## 2. Partner selection and divorce

The ways in which marriage and family life have changed are a case in point. Expectations in this area have clearly risen in recent decades. The qualities and desires appearing in personal ads in the Netherlands offer an indication (Zeegers 1988: 181-224). Until the mid-1960s, there was a strong emphasis on the practical aspects of marriage. Advertisers provided information primarily about their financial situations, domestic situations or occupations. These types of characteristics also dominated the characteristics desired in a future partner. Little was said about personal qualities or interests. In the decades that followed, however, we have observed a change. The list of demands has become strongly coloured by affective and psychological qualities. Although men and women did not neglect to mention their financial or domestic situations in the 1980s, they devoted much more attention to appearance, particular interests, education and other personal qualities. This applied both to the ways that candidates presented themselves and to the expectations that they had for potential partners (Brink 2004: 186-187). To illustrate this trend, which the literature portrays as emotionalisation or psychologisation, I refer to the development of desires in the area of personality, as shown in Figure 2. In recent decades, both men and women have received more attention for this type of characteristics (Curve P). In other words, the process of forming relationships underwent a remarkable transformation in which new and higher aspirations played a role.

Figure 2  
Developments in married life (1965 = 100%)



These higher expectations continue to play a role after a relationship has developed. The manner in which Dutch people consider sexual fidelity is one example. Because of the greatly expanded freedom, many people think that morality has become quite loose in this area. Such is decidedly not the case. Since the 1970s, researchers in the Social and Cultural Planning Office of the Netherlands (hereafter, SCP) have asked for reactions to the statement that the occasional fling can do no harm to a good marriage. Thirty years ago, fifty-seven per cent of the population agreed with this view. The share has been decreasing since then; in the late 1990s, the statement was rejected by three fourths of those polled (SCP 1998: 140). In other words, a vast majority of Dutch people prefer sexual fidelity as long as a relationship lasts. Instead of decreasing over time, this share has increased. If anything can be concluded from this curve (Curve A) in Figure 2, it is the proposition that our tolerance for deviance has decreased in the past thirty years.

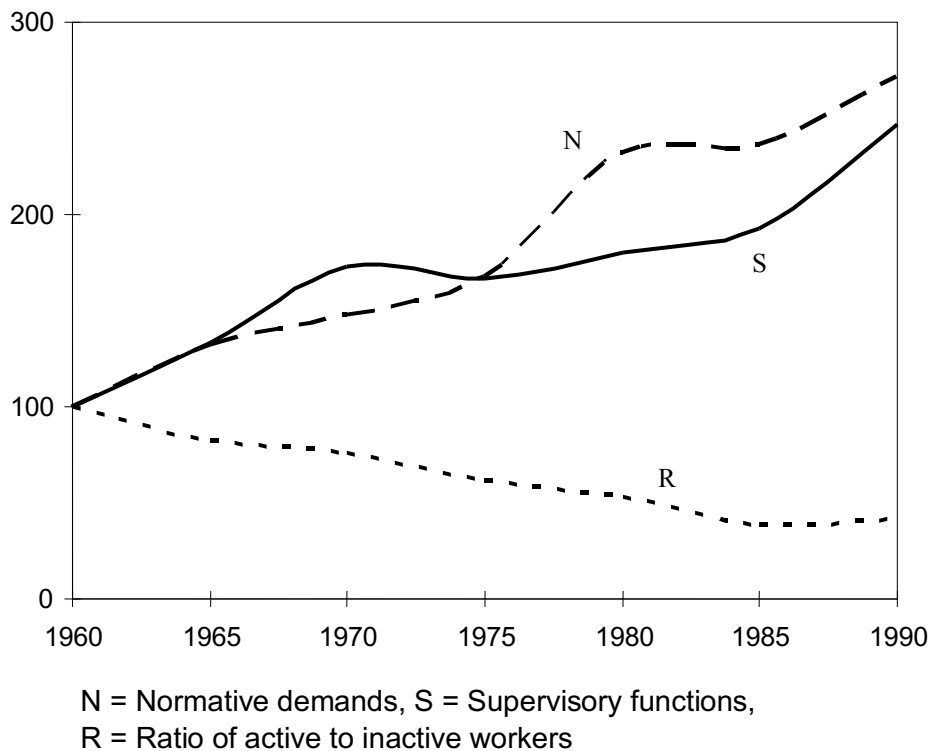
The fact that partners have built up higher expectations on many points does not mean that their relationships have become much more stable. Nearly all indications suggest the opposite. Many young people are delaying the start of a stable relationship. The same applies to the point at which they decide to start a family. One consequence is that the average age at which a Dutch woman first becomes a mother is currently thirty years. Further, the practice of cohabitation by unmarried couples has become much more widespread in the past two decades. People are less inclined to commit themselves to formal marriage, and they are demonstrating a preference for cohabitation or other flexible living arrangements. In addition, an increasing share of the population does not desire a permanent relationship at all, preferring to remain single and devote all of their time and energy to their own careers (SCP 1998: 78-81).

Finally, relationships are more frequently ending in divorce or separation, as shown by Curve D in Figure 2. This is a paradoxical development; even as the standards and expectations in the area of love have been gradually rising, marriage practices have been undergoing a process of erosion. In my perception, these two developments are related. Precisely because partners are developing higher expectations of each other, their chances of disappointment and divorce are growing. This effect can also be observed in the motives of people who choose to separate from their partners (Graaf and Kalmijn 2001). The most prominent complaint of divorcing couples is that they have grown away from each other, that they can no longer share their ideas with each other or that they do not receive enough attention from each other. The weight of this type of affective and psychological problems has increased in the past decades, and classic motives (e.g. physical violence) are playing less frequent roles.

### 3. Demands on employees

Similar tendencies can be observed in the area of work and working relationships. As commonly known, our economy has been undergoing a gradual but decisive change since the Second World War. This has less to do with increasing prosperity – although this phenomenon is also associated with higher expectations – as it does with the importance of various types of services. The agricultural sector decreased sharply, accounting for only a small percentage of the working population in the

Figure 3  
Labour-market developments (1960 = 100%)



mid-1990s. The number of shares in the industry decreased as well. In 1960, forty-four per cent of all employees earned a living in this sector, and by the mid 1990s, the share had decreased to only one fourth (CBS 1994: 45). In contrast, the various forms of service multiplied considerably, such that seventy per cent of all employees now earn a living through this type of work (SCP 1998: 362-363). This shift is relevant, as it implies a complete change of attitude. While perseverance and physical strength traditionally played a major role in agriculture and industry, modern services depend primarily upon social and communicative competencies. One consequence of this change is that other demands are being set for the recruitment of new personnel. To illustrate this tendency, I refer to Figure 3. Research into personnel advertisements over recent decades shows that employees are increasingly expected to meet socio-normative demands. This refers to such qualities as loyalty, personal initiative and the ability to work with others (Curve N). Remarkably, this tendency is equally applicable to higher positions as it is to positions in the middle or lower levels. In fact, social and normative demands have increased across the board. Differences have emerged, however, whereby lower-level positions have become more likely to require employees that meet collective standards, while the demands for higher-level positions tend to focus on individual functioning (Moelker 1992: 80-81).

One important point is that the share of higher-level positions has increased sharply (Ruyssveldt and Van Hoof 1998: 109). Although the share of lower-level positions changed little between 1960 and 1995, the share of higher-level positions increased considerably (from 15 to 37%), while mid-level positions decreased proportionately (from 56 to 35%). Curve S in Figure 3 shows how the share of

supervisory positions has developed over time. This category comprises jobs that involve demands in the areas of experience, independence and educational level. In general, qualifications have increased for many Dutch people. Approximately one fourth of all employees currently hold university (or graduate) degrees or higher professional certification (SCP 1998: 359). Although productivity in the traditional sense has not increased, the Netherlands is a world leader in the area of productivity per unit of time. Another interesting point is that work has received more meaning. For example, work and occupation formed important values for sixty-three per cent of the Dutch population in the mid-1990s, representing a remarkable increase from fifty-three per cent in the late 1970s (Felling e.a. 2000: 106-108).

To summarise these trends, both the demands that are placed on modern employees and the expectations that employees have of their occupational practice have been increasing gradually. These developments come at a price. In the Dutch economy, labour forces are constantly becoming redundant, with the result that unemployment has been high for almost twenty years. The seriousness of this phenomenon is disguised if we consider only the number of workers receiving unemployment benefits. We must also consider people who draw public welfare benefits, who take early retirement or who become disabled. This broader definition of unemployment clearly reveals the structural characteristics of this phenomenon. As shown in Figure 3 (Curve R), the relationship of active to inactive members of the working population has declined continuously. Since the mid-1980s, approximately one fourth of the working population has been out of work (SCP 1998: 382). This is remarkable, given that employment opportunities in the Netherlands have improved greatly since 1985.

The SCP offers two explanations. First, the growth of employment opportunities over the last twenty years has taken place primarily in higher-level positions and services. Those who had always worked in industry or construction were thus no longer qualified, which resulted in a continuous increase in long-term unemployment. The labour-market position of these workers – many of whom have little education and are of foreign background – is quite weak. Second, those who do have jobs are at even higher risk. This applies particularly to people who must work under stress or high work pressure and those who are confronted with the consequences of flexibilisation or reorganisation. A disproportionate number of these workers eventually become disabled (SCP 1998: 401-403). In both instances, people in the Netherlands pay a high price for the growing demands that are placed on workers in a modern economy. In this, we encounter the paradox of simultaneous progress and deterioration in economic life.

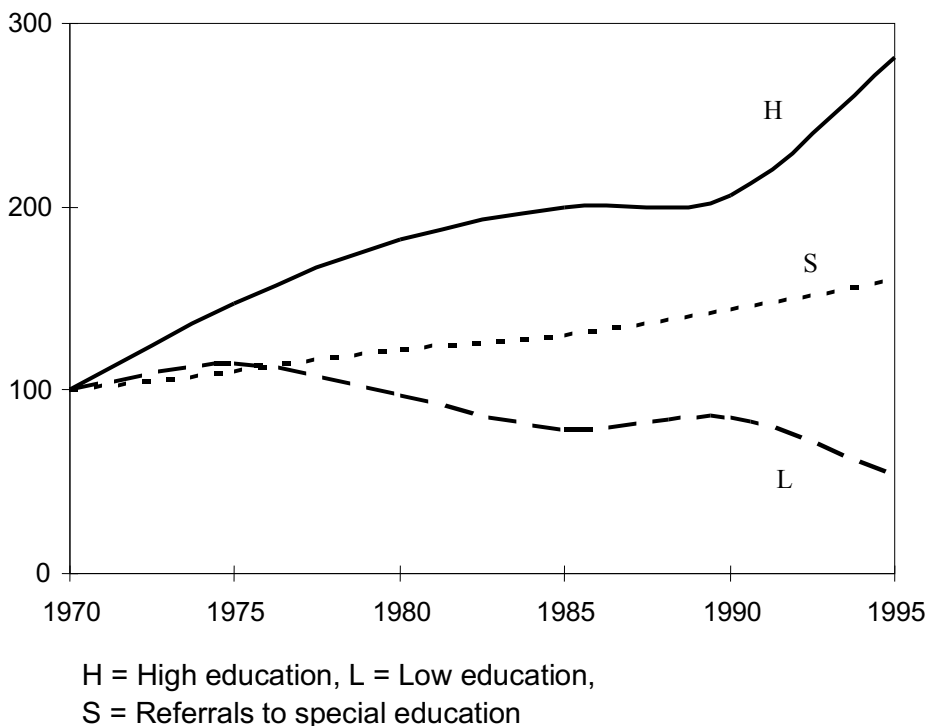
#### 4. Selection through education

Expectations are also increasing in the area of education. In the 1950s and 1960s, only one third of all children continued to secondary education. The greatest majority went to work upon completion of primary school. Since that time, interest in secondary and higher education has increased continuously; in the mid-1990s, half of the Dutch population had completed some form of higher education (CBS 1994: 242). Remarkably, economic and political circumstances have had little effect on this development (Figure 4, Curves H and L). In contrast, the educational level of parents has indeed had a major impact on the educational careers of their

children. Children of highly educated parents are disproportionately represented in academic and higher professional educational programmes, while the parents of vocational students tend to have relatively low levels of education (Bronneman e.a. 2002: 120). This situation could be the result of a self-reinforcing development, particularly in the sense that higher education is most attractive to children who have received the necessary cultural and intellectual capital from their parents. In this case, the pursuit of a constantly growing level of education can be explained largely by the increased educational participation that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s.

Nonetheless, the higher expectations cannot be attributed entirely to the parents' level of ambition. The educational system has also contributed to this development. We have retreated from the classical method in which all students were expected to process the same amount of learning material. More attention is being paid to the specific possibilities and opportunities of individual students. In addition, the accent has shifted from ready knowledge to cognitive skills and working habits. Partially because of this shift, the level of abstraction has been raised and good language skills have become more important. The higher level of ambition is also manifest in school recommendations. Research from the SCP clearly shows that more and more students are being referred to higher general education, while the share of referrals to lower secondary education and vocational training programmes is declining proportionately (Bronneman e.a. 2002: 93). Remarkably, this increase has not been accompanied by improvements in the educational performance of students. Standardised test scores remained at the same level throughout the 1990s. Furthermore, a higher educational recommendation is not always a guarantee for success; after three years in secondary education, a

Figure 4  
Educational developments (1970 = 100%)





considerable proportion of students transfer to lower-level schools. In this respect as well, grand expectations quite frequently lead to disappointment (Bronneman e.a. 2002: 94-95, 128, 158).

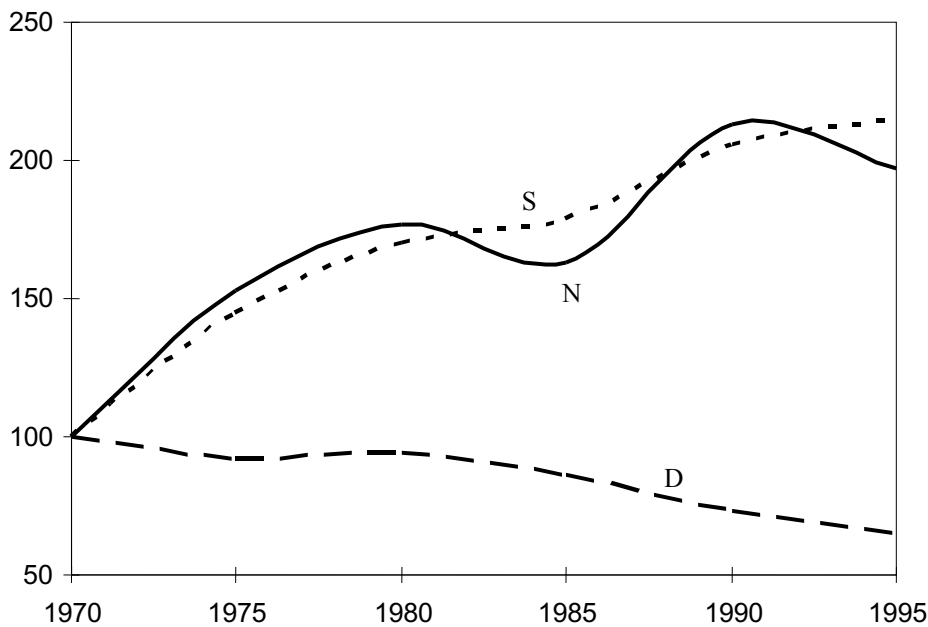
One could even defend the proposition that the selective effects of the educational system have increased in strength. As higher demands (both social and cognitive) are being placed on students, the share of students who fail to meet these demands is rising. To illustrate, I refer to the gradual increase in the number of children who are in special education. In Figure 4, Curve S shows that this number has grown continuously since 1970. This is remarkable, given the many educational improvements that were enacted during the same period. These measures were intended to limit the dropout rate as much as possible. Doornbos refers to such actions as reducing class size, resisting grade retention, introducing child-centred educational methods, increasing the role of school counselling and adopting a more objective system of evaluation. All of these measures together, however, have failed to reduce the number of students that are in need of special attention. On the contrary, the number of students who are referred to special education continues to grow, while normal primary schools are facing increasing struggles with behavioural problems and learning deficiencies (Doornbos 1991: 16-21). We should see this as the reverse side of higher standards. If we continue to raise the bar in both cognitive and social terms, the number of students who are unable to meet these standards will inevitably increase as well. A similar situation can be observed in secondary education. Since 1990, the number of problem students in secondary education has increased sharply, in both absolute and relative terms. This also stems from the higher demands that are being placed upon young people from all sides (Bronneman e.a. 2002: 152).

## 5. Knowing right from wrong

I now address a domain that takes a central place in all of these developments: attitudes towards right and wrong. Let us first establish that the opinions of many Dutch people have changed noticeably in this area. This change is apparent in responses to the question of whether morality and behaviour in the Netherlands has improved or deteriorated (Brink 2004: 192). In 1970, the reactions were equally divided: thirty-one per cent were of the opinion that morality and behaviour had improved, thirty per cent felt that they had deteriorated and thirty-nine per cent perceived variable development. These opinions looked quite different thirty years later. Only a slight proportion (6%) of the population thought that there had been moral progress, while one-fourth (25%) spoke of variations. The share of those who found that matters had deteriorated increased greatly, however, accounting for more than two thirds of the entire population (69%). Figure 5 (Curve M) charts this development, which is consistent with the manner in which public opinion has changed. In the late 1990s, many found that the Netherlands had deteriorated and that efforts were needed to recover its norms and values.

A pertinent question in this regard involves how this development should be interpreted. It is generally assumed that the processes of depillarisation and secularisation play an important role in this respect.<sup>2</sup> During the period of pillarisation, the churches were fully capable of defending their moral standards, but their influence has diminished considerably. In fact, the process of secularisation in

Figure 5  
 Developments regarding morality (1970 = 100 %)



N = Negative evaluation of morality, S = Secularization,  
 D = Difference between right and wrong no longer clear

the Netherlands accelerated beginning in the 1970s (Figure 5, Curve S). As a result, the percentage of Dutch people not affiliated with any church increased from thirty-three per cent in 1970 to seventy-four per cent in 2000 (CBS Statline). Furthermore, the frequency of church attendance declined among those who did remain faithful to their churches. Combined with depillarisation, these developments severely weakened the impact of church teachings regarding right and wrong. In other words, the moral authority of the churches has been undermined since the late 1960s, and they continue to become less capable of influencing public life.

Does this development mean that citizens are now subject to more moral confusion than before or that they are simply doing as they please? The figures suggest just the opposite. I illustrate this point according to two propositions that the SCP has regularly presented to the population since 1970. The first refers to moral confusion resulting from social diversity, and the second refers to moral uncertainty resulting from social dynamics. Because the Netherlands has become both more diverse and more dynamic in the last thirty years, it is logical to expect that citizens would have become increasingly confused in the area of morality. This is decidedly not the case (see Figure 5, Curve D). Increasing numbers of Dutch people are saying that they are capable of differentiating between right and wrong. The increased social diversity and dynamics has apparently had no effect on this. We know that this is strongly associated with educational level. If there is moral confusion in the Netherlands, it is concentrated among the less-educated citizens (Brink 2002: 62-76).

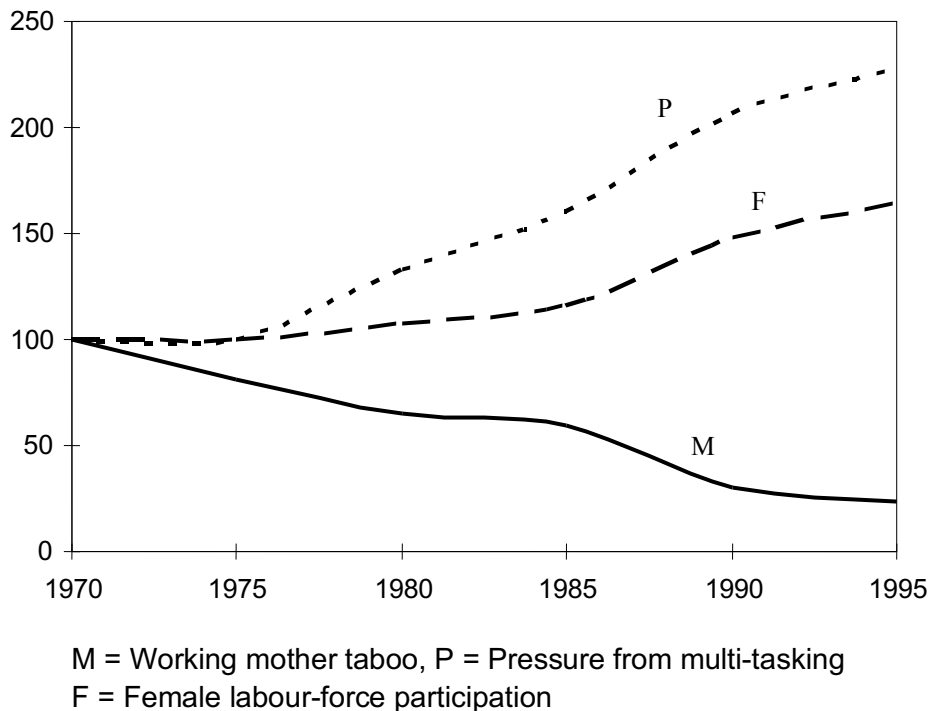
One could even defend the proposition that the moral standards have become higher in recent decades. This might be considered as an unintended although not completely undesirable consequence of secularisation: Only when judgements about

right and wrong are no longer reserved to priests, ministers or other moral specialists ordinary citizens can form their own judgements. This could also explain why people are now taking a much more critical view of society as a whole. In this respect, their judgements concerning moral deterioration refer not only to the growth of problematic behaviour – an unmistakable development in itself – but also to a gradual rise in personal moral perception.

## 6. More women at work

Women’s liberation is obviously an important development, having effects in many aspects of life. For example, the educational disadvantage that girls have experienced traditionally has disappeared entirely in recent decades. Expectations have increased accordingly. Even in 1970, a large share of the population (73%) held the opinion that school was just as important for girls as it was for boys, and this share has only increased over time. In addition, Dutch girls gained more freedom in the area of sexuality. This is illustrated by responses to the question of whether it is wrong for a girl to have sex before marriage if she is in love with a boy. In 1970, only twenty per cent of all respondents felt that she should be free in this regard; in the mid-1990s, this share had increased to more than three fourths (77%). Moreover, an increasing share of Dutch people also approve even if the girl is not in love with the boy (Brink 2004: 193). This demonstrates the remarkable increase in women’s freedom of movement that occurred over a relatively short time. It would be inaccurate, however, to limit the implications of emancipation to the private domain.

Figure 6  
Developments in women’s liberation (1970 = 100%)



One very important change is the growing participation of women into the labour process. This development first required breaking from the idea that mothers of small children should remain in the home. We can conclude from Figure 6 (Curve M) that this norm is no longer supported. In the mid-1960s, eighty-one per cent of all respondents objected to the idea that mothers should take paying jobs as long as they were responsible for the care of young children. In 1970, however, this share had decreased by half, and in 1995, only a small minority (9%) objected to mothers holding paid employment (Brink 2004: 187). This normative shift corresponds to practice. During the same period, the labour-force participation of women increased from one fourth around 1970 to more than half in 2004 (CBS Statline). These figures, however, do not reflect only full-time employment. A considerable share of the growth in employment opportunities around 1985 consisted of part-time jobs. Women comprise the largest share of employees who work only a few days each week (SCP 1998: 369). Nonetheless, the female workforce increased relatively quickly, and women now have more occupational variation than ever (Figure 6, Curve L).

Although many interpret this development as progress, it has had a number of disadvantageous effects as well. I am referring primarily to the increasing pressure due to multi-tasking. Women who take paid employment continue to perform a major portion of the household tasks. The share of women who combined multiple tasks rose from fifteen per cent in the mid-1970s to forty-five per cent in 2000. While men spend less time on household tasks or caring for children in absolute terms, their pressure due to multi-tasking increased as well (from 25% to 49%) (Breedveld and Van den Broek 2001: 15). This suggests a general development that is manifest across all citizens. For example, although education can make a difference – in the sense that people with higher levels of education are more likely to (have to) combine tasks than are people with less education – multi-tasking pressure has grown for groups of all educational levels (Figure 6, Curve P). This trend applies to unemployed people as well, although it is less of a problem for this group than it is for people who hold paid jobs (Breedveld and Van den Broek 2004: 20).

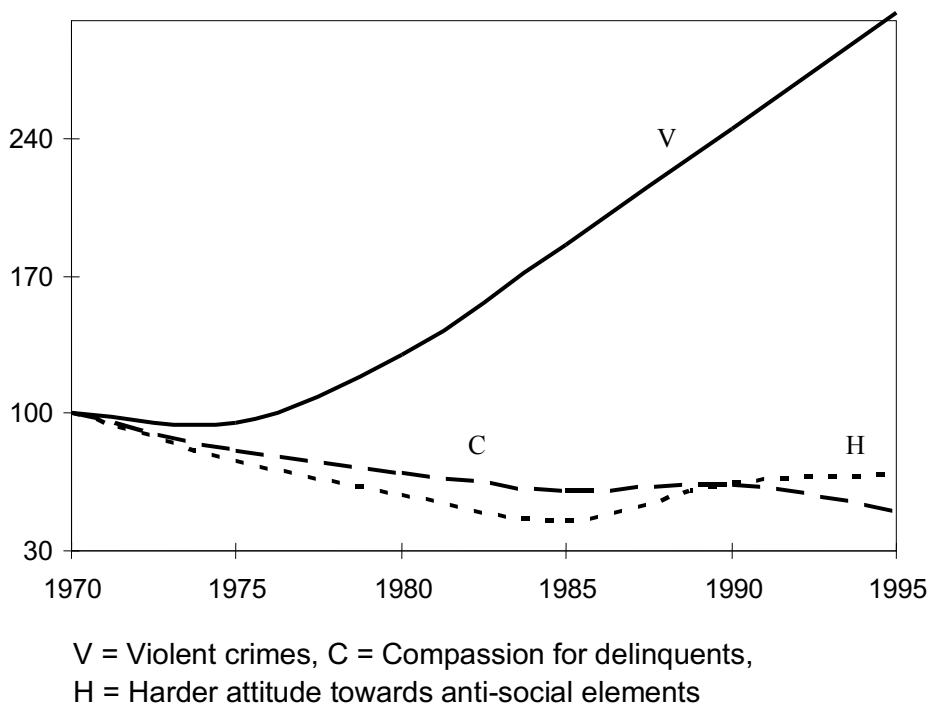
The tendency towards greater multi-tasking pressure can obviously not be explained solely by the entrance of women into the workforce. Many other factors play a role here. Nonetheless, the classic housewife – who spent a large amount of her time in and around the house and could arrange her own tasks – ensured the existence of a buffer. Now that this buffer has disappeared, a greater number of tasks must be divided among more people, while the time that is available for these tasks has diminished greatly. At any rate, this factor is currently one source of stress in daily life.

## 7. Crime and punishment

In the public domain, crime and punishment can be related to the expansion of an assertive lifestyle (Brink 2001: 71-87). This term refers to an attitude in which citizens tend to act largely according to their own interests, feelings, values and convictions. This attitude can develop only if people have a certain level of economic or financial reserves at their disposal. The increasing prosperity of a large

share of the Dutch population cannot be underestimated in this regard. Nonetheless, it also requires that people have cultural and intellectual resources to some degree. It is no coincidence that this lifestyle is most prominent among more highly educated groups. Politically, it requires a tolerant climate in which differences of opinion do not immediately lead to conflict. An assertive lifestyle requires both the willingness and the ability to negotiate. As a result, the assertive lifestyle requires substantial room for manoeuvre. Assertive citizens literally take up considerable space; they

Figure 7  
Developments in criminality (1970 = 100%)



live in large homes and they move about across long distances (CBS 1994: 89, 106-107, 110). They also demand considerable space in a social and affective sense; they like to be heard, and they are quick to sound the alarm if their opinions are receiving too little attention. From a psychological perspective, they demonstrate a great sense of self-worth and adopt a sovereign attitude in their dealings with fellow citizens. They also run a greater risk of being hurt, which can easily lead to aggressive or violent reactions.

Fortunately, many people are still able to feel aggressive impulses without acting upon them. This has to do with their sense of values. In many situations, it is tempting to act exclusively according to one's own advantage, but most citizens are able to resist this urge. They abide by the law, consider the codes of social traffic and take their fellow citizens into account, even in the absence of surveillance or control.

Nonetheless, we must ask if this sense of values is undergoing erosion in the Netherlands. Figure 7 illustrates the increase in the number of violent crimes (Curve V) since the mid-1970s. In the past three decades, the number of crimes against life increased by a factor of five, while the number of incidences of abuse have tripled.

Forms of vandalism increased even more strongly, rising by a factor of ten between 1970 and 1995. Only the number of sexual offences remained relatively constant (Wittebrood 1998: 105-106, 137). These figures reflect only registered criminality, and they should not be taken to represent actual developments without further interpretation (Brink 2001: 37-52). Nevertheless, this increase could also be seen as an expression of diminishing values. Compared to several decades ago, more citizens are currently willing to give in to a wave of aggression. They are not prepared to restrain themselves in this regard, and they immediately come to blows. This is more applicable to men than it is to women. It is especially applicable to young men, who tend to have more difficulty taking others into account and to act largely out of their own situations. This is not only because social control has decreased; it is also due to the fact that social values have been eroding.

In the meantime, this development has called forth the reactions that could be expected. Many citizens are now adopting a harder attitude toward delinquents. This can be illustrated by the proposition that people should seek not so much to punish criminals as to try to change them. In 1970, seventy-four per cent of the respondents still agreed with this statement, but that share has decreased. It is currently only about one third (37%). Sexual delinquents can count on even less understanding (SCP 1998: 637). The social climate is hardening, as can be observed in the diminished sense of compassion for delinquents (Figure 7, Curve C). This is consistent with research by the SCP, which shows that an increasing share of the population favours more severe punishments and the construction of more prisons (SCP 2002: 655-678). Further, support for a more repressive approach to anti-social elements has been increasing since the mid-1980s. This can be surmised from reactions to the proposition that social problems can best be resolved by removing anti-social and criminal elements from society (Figure 7, Curve H). Support for this proposition initially decreased, only to return to its original level since 1985 (SCP 1998: 637). This is remarkable, given that various factors that are often associated with a repressive habitus (e.g. low education, preference for strong leaders) did not increase during the same period.

The call for a harder approach against anti-social behaviours has apparently become dissociated from its former conservative context. It is currently prevalent throughout broad layers of the population and can no longer be considered a typically right-wing opinion. This is one reason why the debate about norms and values is currently so strong. Although I wonder whether a more repressive approach would contribute to an increased sense of values, it is completely understandable that the erosion of this sense of values has resulted in a demand for a more repressive approach.

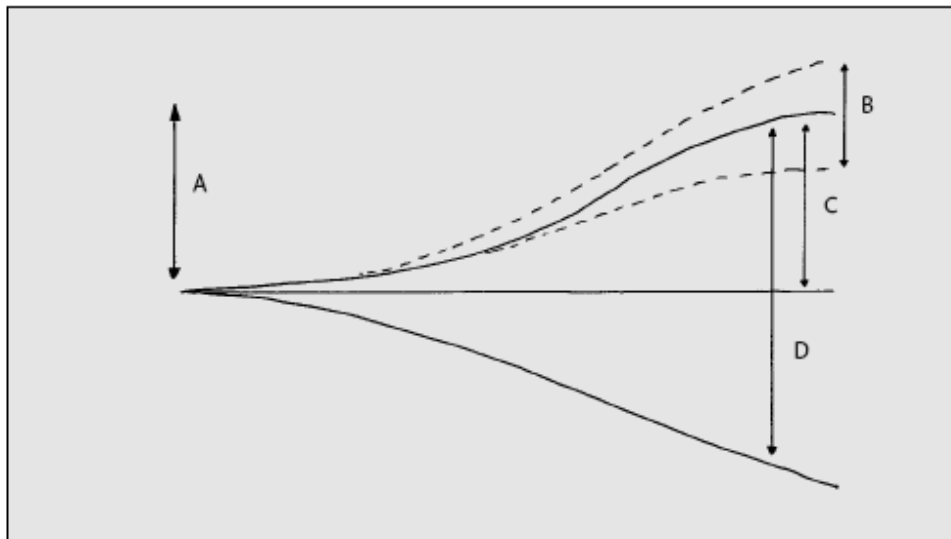
## 8. A theoretical model

One could derive a number of theoretical ideas from all of these developments. In my view, the developments that have been sketched above reveal a general pattern consisting of four elements. First, we can observe a process of increasing expectations in several domains of social life. Slowly but surely, the norms, ideals and quality demands have increased in recent decades. In the area of politics, citizens have higher expectations, particularly with regard to their own influence. They wish to be heard, and they are not prepared to accept the judgements of

officials without question. They gladly participate in (the debate about) public affairs and attach great value to democratic procedures. In private life, the personal and emotional aspects of marriage are receiving more attention. We cherish higher expectations in the area of sexual fidelity, and we attach more value to a shared interest. Economic progress consists of more than an increasing level of prosperity; the share of higher-level functions has increased as well, as has the number of Dutch people who work in the services sector. One consequence is that employees are now increasingly expected to possess social and normative skills. An ascending line can also be observed in the area of education. Participation in secondary and higher forms of education has grown. In addition, higher demands are being placed upon students with regard to language skills and the ability to work independently. A similar situation has emerged with regard to morality, despite secularisation and depillarisation. The number of people who make their own distinctions between right and wrong is increasing, even as the number of people who experience moral confusion is decreasing.

Women's liberation brought progress as well. The freedom of movement for women increased sharply in recent decades, not only economically, but also in social and sexual terms. The public order is the only domain to deviate somewhat from this pattern. The process of coarsening that has emerged in mutual relations among citizens is inconsistent with the proposition of higher expectations. This problem is nevertheless receiving increased attention, and the police and justice system are

Diagram 1  
Three types of malaise resulting from higher standards



taking a much more active approach. I personally think that we have become more sensitive to all sorts of nuisance and that we have placed higher demands on social traffic than was the case several decades ago.

Standards are therefore being raised in many sectors of social life. Because this shift is occurring very gradually, it is barely penetrating the consciousness of those involved, but is nonetheless noticeable after a time. If we compare current ambitions with those of thirty years ago, the differences of level become immediately obvious. In Diagram 1, the gradual rise in social standards (Distance A)

is represented by the upper curve. As shown in the previous figures, empirical developments will always deviate from such a smooth line, but they are of a corresponding type.

The diagram illustrates three potential problems that this development can raise. First, rising standards can lead to a greater dispersion or variation. This process – represented by two dotted lines in Diagram 1 – generates a form of normative *diffusion* (Distance B), causing those involved to perceive that standards are becoming blurred. A second possibility is that rising standards create a different *perception* of existing behaviours. Although the behaviour itself has not changed, people experience a sense of deterioration because their standards have reached a higher level (Distance C). In the diagram, this process of relative deterioration is related to the straight line in the middle. Finally, it is possible that higher standards are objectively associated with worsening behaviour, as represented by the lowest curve in the diagram (Distance D). This effect involves more than differences in the perception of the behaviour; it involves the emergence of a form of *selection*. Increases in the normative level can thus generate difficulties in three respects.

Paradoxical as this outcome may seem, it occurs frequently in the process of modernisation. In fact, many complaints about the deterioration of social life in the Netherlands can be explained in this way. It seems to suggest that the ‘embarrassment of the rich’ is not only a phenomenon from the past; it continues to exist until the present day.

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## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Note that this analysis refers to 2000. Remarkably, the call for powerful leadership regained strength at turn of the millennium.
- <sup>2</sup> 'Pillarisation' refers to a period in which Dutch social and political life was organised on the basis of confessional segregation. In the 1970s this system began to disappear ('depillarisation').