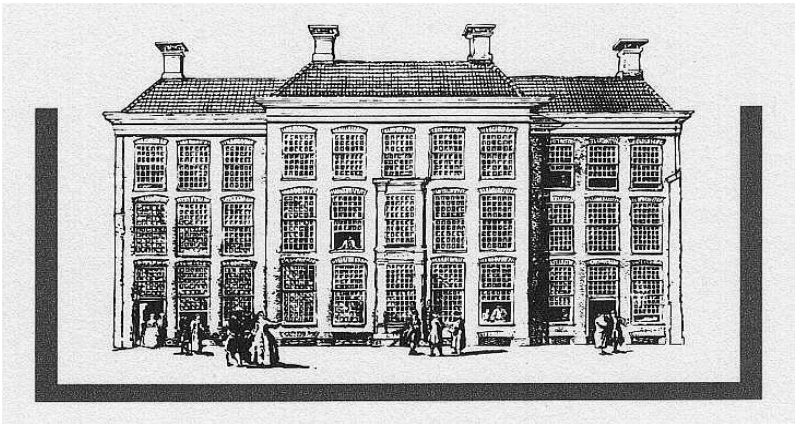


English Translation Valedictory Lecture

Jan Willem Duyvendak, April 24th 2026



Where to Belong?

Emotion, the Nation and Sociology

Opening slide 1: image of St. Jorishof

Dear Dean, dear KNAW Executive Board and KNAW Institute Directors, other dignitaries,
Dear colleagues from NIAS, the UvA, and the KNAW;
friends, family;
My dearest Menno.

We have never been so equal, at least in the Netherlands. Given the formal introduction I have just offered, it might sound improbable, but even in academia, which is characterized by hierarchy and tradition, the trend towards greater equality continues. For instance, there was recently a campaign under the motto “everyone a professor.”

How is it possible to understand that we have not only never been so equal, but also remarkably uniform in our viewpoints? I will examine this development of growing equality and increasing uniformity in the coming forty minutes, partially because many people have experienced the recent period differently. They ‘feel’ growing inequality and polarization. Among other things, I ask myself why our feelings about society are becoming increasingly detached from the actual situation.

That is a fairly ambitious task. Partly for this reason, I will not follow custom for farewell addresses in offering an exhaustive overview of the diverse subjects I have studied over the past decades in this farewell address, but rather highlight those *capita selecta* that are relevant to answering fascinating

questions of the present. Such a selective use of the past also seems appropriate to me, for a complete overview of publications—presented chronologically—easily suggests coherence, consistency, and the accumulation of knowledge and insights—whereas chance, luck, serendipity, and diligence have been equally characteristic of my career.

Who am I to stand here? I wish to begin with that question because I am aware that, even in science, it matters who asks the questions, who is able to ask questions. There is not a place for everyone at the university, and not everyone feels at home there. *Where to belong? How to belong?* That was the subject of the symposium we organized over the past two days (*Belonging to Academia*), which centered on which knowledge and people are given space within the academy—and which are not. What characterizes *belonging* at the university? Why make room for groups and research that were previously absent or less present at the university? Well, besides considerations of fairness, the diverse *backgrounds* of scientists also enhance the quality of research. Not their *standpoints*, let alone their (party) political ‘viewpoints’; these are less relevant at the university, precisely because everyone has opinions and science is certainly not just an opinion.

Recognizing the importance of multi-perspectivity in research does not mean that knowledge becomes relative and subjective, dependent on the individual observer. Science must indeed be aimed at collective truth-finding, in which we adhere to strict rules regarding methods in our research, verifiable by others, and open to criticism. In this way, we learn to look beyond our own limited perspective; precisely by accounting for our positionality.

Slide/Animation 2: Duyvendakken and the Old Lutheran Church

That is why I would like to share something about my background. This also offers me the opportunity to provide some context for the place where we are together. We are here in the Old Lutheran Church, the construction of which began in 1632; exactly the same year as the founding of the Athenaeum Illustre—the predecessor of the University of Amsterdam. It is quite remarkable that a secular institution like the university sought and continues to seek refuge in the church for important events—and has done so since the end of the 19th century.

My great-grandfather, my grandfather, and my father were all Lutheran ministers, and all three preached in this church. The same applies to my mother, who delivered her so-called trial sermon here during her theological studies at what was then called the Municipal University. But because she was a woman, she never obtained her preaching license. She was not going to work as a minister anyway. And the men, too, had to contend with the church, albeit for very different reasons. My grandfather was stripped of his preaching license by the Lutheran church when it turned out that he was homosexual – he was sent into early disability retirement. My father also left the church, but entirely voluntarily: like countless other Dutch people, he lost his faith in the late sixties and early seventies of the last century. That meant he had to find a new profession. He became a lecturer in higher education.

In a sense, I have stepped into the shoes of both my grandfather and my father – but what does that mean? Some

will conclude from the preceding overview that there is a great deal of continuity; for them, the sociologist is essentially a kind of secularized minister. I propose a different interpretation: certainly, the past matters for who I am, for who we are, but how the past 'has effect', or even whether the past continues to have an effect at all, depends heavily on the present. Being homosexual or being Lutheran is something totally different now than it was a few decades ago: positionality is not a fixed identity.

Slide 3. Academic Freedom

Sociologists are not secular preachers; the political opinions of sociologists are uninteresting. The relationship between science and politics benefits from appropriate distance. It is therefore regrettable that right-wing radical politicians are all too eager to interfere with academia and with other pillars of liberal democracy. When that happens, then yes, we must speak out, but precisely to preserve the autonomy of science, the arts, the free press, and the judiciary.

Slide 4. Equal and Consensual

Since my inaugural lecture in 2004, I have shown—often together with my colleague Hurenkamp—that the Netherlands is more uniform in its viewpoints and everyday behavior than many believed then and still believe now. We also argued in *De macht der gewoonte, The Power of Habit*, that the drive for equality has recently manifested itself in the broad embrace of 'the ordinary man'. And in my recent book *Ghost Gaps*, I raised the question of whether the Netherlands might actually be less unequal than many people think.

Or rather, I should say, than many people ‘feel,’ for polarization is often not about factual differences but about experienced emotions: ‘affective polarization’ is, in fact, high in the Netherlands. Due to this emotional polarization, people believe that there are indeed many factual inequalities and points of polarization in the Netherlands, whereas, upon closer inspection, these can often be viewed as *ghost gaps*. Of course, there are remaining differences (in income, education, housing, health), but shouldn’t we primarily be struck by the enormous progress that has occurred for (almost) everyone in all these areas? Moreover, the divides between city and countryside, men and women, young and old, people with and without a migration background, and between gays and straights have decreased even more drastically, although—and this is interesting—emotions regarding these differences sometimes run high.

How is it, then, that so many seem certain that we have never been so polarized and conflictual? The first reason for this is the meaning that politicians, the media, and citizens attach to political protest. Many media outlets, in particular, suggest to us that the countless mobilizations of recent times prove that there have never been so many conflicts, and that the divides between groups have never been so wide. But is that really the case? This is where insights gained by social movement researchers over the past decades come into play.

Slides 5. Political Citizenship (1)

All these (and other) studies show that people mobilize when they believe their actions can succeed and when they have resources at their disposal—money, networks, media access, and political contacts. The very poorest and the most

marginalized mobilize the least: they lack the means to do so and often attribute their deplorable state to themselves – or else they believe it fits within a natural or divine order.

The fact that rural dwellers came to the Randstad with their tractors does not expose a divide between city and countryside, but precisely the opposite: farmers no longer want to be lectured by Randstad residents, for whom they no longer hold any respect. They are emancipated and prove to be remarkably politically capable. Perhaps it is difficult for some in the audience to view the farmers' revolt, or more broadly, the populist revolt of the past twenty-five years, as an emancipation movement, but I believe that the pursuit of equality was indeed, certainly initially, a driving force behind many of these mobilizations. Everyone in the Netherlands wants to be taken seriously, everyone is outspoken, and never before have so many participated in political protest. 2025 was a record year with 3,000 demonstrations in Amsterdam alone.

Slides 6. Political Citizenship (2)

The fact that we think differences (Polarization! Inequality!) have never been so great is not solely due to the media's facile interpretation of protest. A second reason lies in the emotionalization of society and politics, and specifically in our increased sensitivity to inequality. This sensitivity stems from the deep conviction that inequality is wrong, a conviction that also causes small differences to be quickly perceived as large divides. I will first discuss the emotionalization of politics in a broad sense, before zooming in on the consequences of emotionalization on our perceptions of inequality.

There is certainly something positive to be said about the (re)appreciation of emotions. Emancipation movements, in particular, taught and continue to teach us that emotions can play a role in making society more equal and inclusive. Think of their anger, but also of their pride. One of the most successful emancipation movements is the gay movement, or more broadly: LGBTQ+.

Slide 7. LGBTQ+ mobilisation

There are few examples of such rapid and successful emancipation as that of gay men and lesbian women in the Netherlands. Once a despised minority that had to hide its desires and could not stand up for its interests, the situation has changed radically in a few decades (and, at least to date, has mainly improved). Not only is support for equal rights in the Netherlands unprecedentedly high compared to other countries, but 'the homosexual' has also transformed from an outcast into almost the ultimate embodiment of Dutch identity. This enormous change has brought much individual happiness (how lucky I have been compared to my poor grandfather). Such rapid emancipation also inspires collective optimism – certainly for other marginalized groups.

However, emotions in politics do not always play an emancipatory role; emotions can also be mobilized to foster harsh exclusions. Particularly among the radical right, negative emotions such as resentment, anger, fear, and envy dominate. Whereas in the past minorities were disqualified and kept out of the political arena because they were too emotional (youth, women, people of color, and the less educated), the radical right now engages in almost exclusively emotional politics without being disqualified as a result (even

though minorities are still better off not being too emotional if they want to be taken seriously).

The problem with emotions is that they are difficult to talk about: “I just feel that way”, and that feeling is then ‘authentic’ and ‘truthful’. It is no longer about how things are – what the facts are – but about how we experience the world, what we feel about it: for instance, according to the Schoof cabinet, the Netherlands had an asylum crisis because people in the country supposedly ‘experienced’ it. This subjectivation of politics kills discussion – precisely because that experience contains the claim that it really is so “because I experience it that way, after all”. The assumption is then that the emotions experienced correspond perfectly with the actual situation, which, as I show in *Ghost Gaps*, is usually not the case, because the situation is perceived as much more unequal and polarized than what actually occurred.

With one notable exception, however: the wealth gap in the Netherlands is indeed very large, certainly compared to most other countries, yet emotions do not run high regarding this. We worry immensely about gaps that are stable or even decreasing, while shrugging our shoulders at a genuinely existing large gap that has repercussions in countless other areas.

The fact that we think (feel) that most gaps are large (or might even become larger) is because we accept less and less inequality: everyone wants to be equal to everyone else; and the smallest difference then quickly feels very large. Many Dutch people have therefore, as mentioned, become more sensitive to inequalities, in a double sense: our feelings guide

our view of the world and we no longer tolerate inequality. That is why we perceive that most gaps are widening (our emotions steer our perception of reality). Consequently, we are very angry about these supposed widening gaps, and that anger, in turn, seems to prove that the gaps are indeed large, for why else would we be so angry?

On the one hand, groups that feel treated unequally are increasingly less accepting of their situation. The *claim to climbing*, the demand for recognition (*recognition* in the sense that sociologist Michèle Lamont uses it), has been formulated over the past decades by countless emancipation movements: by workers, women, gays and lesbians, Black Dutch people, people with a migration background, and more recently also by the less educated, farmers and other rural dwellers, and 'ordinary' Dutch people, also known as 'hardworking' Dutch people.

That emancipation has also taken place within the university. For although we must also be mindful of remaining forms of exclusion here, it is the academia's openness to newcomers ('external democratization') that stands out most: the massive influx of first-generation students since the 1960s. Sometimes it seems as if this first-generation influx is currently the largest, but that picture is incorrect: the influx of first-generation students has actually decreased drastically this century (except among students with a migration background): from 30% to 20% in the last ten years alone. Attention to first-generation students is increasing, while their share is declining.

While the experiences of first-generation students (and staff) are finding increasing resonance, we seem largely blind to the development that children of highly educated parents do not always reach the same level as their parents, or that their parents fear this: the fear of social decline.

Slide 8. Fear of Falling

And that brings me to the '*on the other hand*': on the other hand, the world of formerly more powerful groups is changing. In that sense, every successful emancipation contains the seed of loss and new forms of exclusion. With the *claim to climbing* comes the *fear of falling*, and in two ways. First, striving and rising groups pose a threat to those who are established; newcomers are excluded with all strength and for as long as possible. Second, successful emancipation struggles themselves also lead to risks of exclusion and marginalization: after all, so much has been gained that there is much to lose.

These two forms of *fear of loss*—beautifully described by the German sociologist Andreas Reckwitz—explain why in one of the richest countries, where people claim to be the happiest and where the inhabitants are also the healthiest, one in three inhabitants votes radical right. Are these—as some political scientists have thought—the 'losers of globalization'? This seems an inadequate and unsatisfactory explanation, certainly for the Netherlands. After all, voters for the radical right come from all income groups, and the main reason for their political preference lies not so much in actual deprivation but in the fear of change, the fear of loss: that things will go less well for them and their children.

The emancipation of various groups, in rapidly succeeding waves, means that those with a relatively established position feel threatened. They will have to share their place with others. In these kinds of situations, a classic interaction arises between 'newcomers' and 'established' groups, in which the former are seen as a threat by the latter. The *fear of falling* (the term coined by Barbara Ehrenreich in her book on the beleaguered American middle class) – the fear of descending the social ladder, partly because others are rising – is great among established groups; therefore, equal treatment must often be hard-fought. But the 'striving groups' possesses a strong moral weapon, for who can be against equality and against the groups attempting to achieve that equality? But it is precisely the inability to resist the claims of new groups that leads to shame among the established, which subsequently often manifests as anger towards the newcomers.

The fear of falling seems to have never been greater. It is no coincidence that the loss of economic security has been a dominant theme in Dutch politics in recent years. While poverty in the Netherlands has declined spectacularly and has never been so low, there is a great deal of fear of falling into poverty.

Slides 9. Social Citizenship (1)

What can be done to reduce that fear? For not only does it give a distorted picture of the current situation, it also leads to great concern about the future. We would therefore expect politicians to take measures to halt the increase in fear – and therefore commit themselves to the preservation of social security and, more broadly, the welfare state. After all, this

welfare state contributes pre-eminently to 'peace of mind' (to quote Abram de Swaan).

Slides 10. Social Citizenship (2)

As Arlie Hochschild has shown, in the United States, the actual decline of groups of residents in certain areas is a major explanation for the growth of the radical right. In the Netherlands, there is certainly also a decline in public services, both in the city and in rural areas, but much less actual socio-economic marginalization. Here in the Netherlands, it is rather the sense that divides and inequality are increasing, combined with the fear of loss, that together contribute to a comparable electoral development: the growth of populist, nativist, and even fascist parties.

The fear of loss also plays a role in socio-cultural matters, particularly in the Netherlands, a country that has changed rapidly in recent decades, by becoming more liberal. As a result, newcomers, who are much more religious than the recently secularized native population, are treated with suspicion out of fear that recent achievements will be challenged and undermined.

Slide 11. Culturalized Citizenship

In the voting booth, socio-cultural issues appear to carry even more weight than socio-economic anxieties. This is due not only to concerns about a cultural backlash but also to feelings of superiority: the populist revolt has resulted in new forms of hierarchy, in a new self-awareness among 'ordinary' Dutch people. In their view, they finally seem to be finding recognition for who they are: the 'real' Dutch people, who are rooted here and embody Dutch culture. They are the true

natives, while newcomers are strangers, and the elite is alienated from its own people.

In these new relationships, citizenship is not—or is less—defined in social or political terms and rights, but primarily culturally (hence the endless discussion about what Dutch citizenship entails).

Slide 12. Home and Belonging

Discussions about immigration and globalization have increasingly narrowed down to the question of who belongs here. The fact that the debate in terms of ‘home’ resonates so strongly with many is partly because the idea of home touches upon a fundamental need for recognition, rootedness, and connection—with others and with our material and natural environment. But how can we strip this focus on *belonging* and home of its stifling and exclusionary character, such as we see when it is suggested that established residents no longer feel at home here due to the arrival of migrants who supposedly do not belong here?

Slide 13. Nativism (and Indigeneity)

Not every difference is the same: while few in the Netherlands still openly defend unequal treatment based on education, class, gender, sexuality, or color, the situation is quite different for migrants. Do residents not have more rights than those who have just arrived? Or does it also depend on why people migrate and in what capacity? The literature distinguishes between two types of nativism. Firstly, ‘progressive’ nativism, as in the case of the anti-colonial context in which the indigenous population was a victim of powerful colonial newcomers, and an appeal to their *indigeneity* helped to drive

out the colonizers. Secondly, there is 'negative' nativism, in which the newcomers are actually the weak party, because they had to flee war or poverty, for which the established population is unwilling to compromise, citing their *nativeness*?

But is this a watertight distinction? Is it not a problem everywhere when an intrinsic connection is suggested between one people, one culture, and one territory, whether by radical right nativists or by defenders of indigenous peoples?

I will conclude. What to do in a context where politicians, in particular, exacerbate differences, create divides, and fuel panic about polarization? Scientists could raise the question of why we are so obsessed with differences, overlooking increasing equality and uniformity. Why do we think we have never been so different? Have 'we' truly become increasingly diverse (let alone superdiverse): compared to what? How great was the distance in the past between people from different regions, even within the Netherlands? How different were people from other pillars? Perhaps social scientists should take fewer snapshots of reality and more films, in which we have a keen eye for the direction in which society is developing. Then we would see, for example, newcomers becoming part of the mainstream. A difficult process, certainly, with growing pains among minorities and the fear of falling among the majority.

Finally, we can take a more critical look at ourselves: do we as scientists not also have a certain tendency towards dramatization, if only because publications about divides and

crises attract more attention? Perhaps we should stop calling everything a divide or a crisis? Let us indicate more precisely whether we are dealing with a genuine divide, or a small gap; with a genuine crisis (such as global warming, geopolitical developments) or a crisis that we can solve through sound policy (such as the problems surrounding nitrogen or the shortage of affordable housing). The world is already riddled with exaggerations and hyperboles, with escalating emotional polarization – let us as scientists advocate for precise analyses. That could be our most important contribution to reducing the fear of loss.

Slide 14, back to the start

And speaking of fear of loss... that brings me to the thank-yous, or rather: expressions of great gratitude. Since we learned that Menno van Leeuwen, my husband, is seriously ill, we have been living day by day – the future is uncertain and we do not want to be paralyzed by the fear of possible further loss. That we are managing reasonably well so far is mainly thanks to you: family, friends, colleagues, neighbors, and acquaintances. Thank you, thank you.

In this context, I would like to specifically mention Fleur van der Valk, our hematologist, and Linda Hemelaar, our nurse practitioner. Together with them, I want to thank everyone who surrounds us with so much good professional care.

Menno's condition makes this retirement different; normally I would have dreaded it (I am quite attached to my work), whereas it now offers the opportunity to live together more in the same rhythm. Incidentally, NIAS and the UvA have already made this partly possible over the past year and a half, for

which I am grateful. At the Department of Sociology, I have been virtually invisible lately, which I regret: having two jobs is actually never a good idea, and certainly impossible in combination with intensive care duties.

I absolutely do not solely want to thank the colleagues at the UvA and NIAS-KNAW for the space they have recently offered me, but above all for the fantastic collaborations over the past years (23 years as professor at the UvA, 8 years as director at NIAS). They have been the most enjoyable positions I can imagine – I have tried to make the best of them.

I would love to thank everyone individually and mention them by name, but that is not possible, so I am doing it collectively.

At the UvA: everyone working in Sociology and especially in the Political Sociology program group; my current PhD students and the more than fifty PhD graduates who obtained their doctorates under the supervision of my peers and me; colleagues from other disciplines (at both the FMG and FGW), from the AISSR, from various interdisciplinary research centers, and from the boards of trustees of various endowed chairs. At NIAS, I would like to thank the staff, but also eight cohorts of fellows (more than 400 in total), as well as the many partners with whom NIAS collaborates closely; the colleagues at the HUC as well as at the KNAW and its other institutes.

I would also like to thank my co-authors of articles and books (many of whose names you saw pass by on the slides), and certainly the international colleagues as well.

To the members of various reading and discussion clubs, thank you very much for the lively conversations.

Friends, acquaintances, neighbors: sociologists know better than anyone that humans are social beings. I cannot imagine an existence without you.

Unlike friends, you do not choose your family. But otherwise, I certainly would have chosen you.

Who are we without the other? I hope it will be a long time before either Menno or I have to answer that question.

After years of giving lectures on 'home' and long-term study stays abroad dedicated to 'belonging', I am now finally coming home for real: forever.

I have spoken.