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Pillarization

Pillarization is the segmentation of society into groups ('pillars') that each identify with a particular religion or worldview, while the political representatives of each of these groups strive for mutual accommodation and conflict avoidance. While the term technically refers to a historical process, i.e., the emergence and expansion of this mode of dealing with pluralism, it is also used to refer to the end result of such a process. Pillarization started to erode and dissolve ('depillarization') after societal demands for democratization and emancipation sparked processes of secularization back in the 1960s.

Pillarization is found in some, though certainly not all, pluralist societies, the best examples being the Netherlands and Belgium. The former country is traditionally religiously pluralistic with sizable Catholic and Protestant groups existing next to each other. Besides these two, the Netherlands featured a socialist pillar. The existence of a fourth liberal one has always been a matter of debate, principally because while liberals obviously dislike a society that consists of mutually exclusive pillarized communities, it was precisely and paradoxically this shared aversion that united them. Belgium unlike the Netherlands did not feature a Protestant pillar, because it historically boasts a Catholic religious monopoly. In Belgium, the Catholic pillar has traditionally dominated the Dutch-language region of Flanders and the

socialist one the French-language region of Wallonia, historically Belgium's industrial heartland.

Pillarized societies sustain the plausibility of religions and worldviews by shielding believers from the potentially corrosive consequences of exposure to competing worldviews. Pillars provide their members with political parties, trade unions, broadcasting organizations, schools, and universities, that are all firmly tied to their own religion or worldview. The Netherlands, for instance, boasted Protestant, Catholic and socialist broadcasting organizations (e.g., NCRV, KRO and VARA, respectively); newspapers (e.g., Trouw, Volkskrant, Parool, respectively); political parties (e.g., ARP, KVP and SDAP, respectively); trade unions (CNV, NKV, NVV, respectively); and universities (VU University Amsterdam, the Catholic universities of Nijmegen and Tilburg, and the University of Amsterdam, respectively). The logic of pillarization also extended into the realm of leisure activities by catering for an even wider range of (typically local) youth organizations, sports clubs, music associations, choirs, and hobby clubs. In the heydays of pillarization, even businesses and enterprises tended to recruit personnel from the pillars their owners identified with. Pillarized societies thus feature marked religious polarization at the grass-roots level, as exemplified by taboos on intermarriage, discouragement of interreligious friendships, and even housewives refusing to buy in stores with owners from the wrong pillar.

From the 1960s onwards societal demands for democratization and emancipation sparked processes of secularization and depillarization. Since then, many formerly firmly religiously-rooted organizations have come to downplay their religious identities and/or have merged with what used to be ideological competitors. In the Netherlands, the Catholic (NKV) and socialist (NVV) trade unions merged into the FNV in 1976 and in 1980 Protestant (ARP, CHU) and Catholic (KVP) political parties merged into the new Christian party CDA. While Catholic and Protestant universities still exist in Belgium and the Netherlands, their religious

identities have become less upfront than they used to be. The Catholic University of Nijmegen was renamed Radboud University Nijmegen, thus downplaying its Catholic identity, while still leaving it recognizable to Catholic *connaisseurs* (Radboud was a tenth-century bishop). Similarly, the Catholic University of Leuven is nowadays routinely called ‘KU Leuven’, with ‘KU’ (‘Katholieke Universiteit’, or ‘Catholic University’) puzzling many an international observer, yet once again appreciated by Catholic insiders.

Political scientists have studied pillarization as a mode of social and political organization that prevents countries with multiple competing minority groups from succumbing to conflict and polarization, as exemplified by the civil war in Lebanon in the 1970s and 1980s. For while pillarized societies surely feature marked polarization at the grass-roots level, they also boast political elites that stick to a logic of accommodation to prevent full-out political conflict. Political scientists have also studied the consequences of (de-)pillarization for voting behavior, typically within the framework of so-called ‘cleavage politics’. This is the tendency of political parties to represent a particular type of interest (e.g., class or religious interests) and of voters to support parties for precisely that reason. In this theoretical context, it has been shown that pillarization incites religious voting that cross-cuts class voting and hence dampens class conflict. Students of politics have furthermore demonstrated that while pillarization made voting behavior and election outcomes highly predictable, this has changed from the 1960s onwards due to depillarization. New political parties emerged, often giving voice to the socially critical spirit of the times, and parties could no longer count on a loyal and predictable quota of voters. Depillarization in effect led to the emergence of the ‘floating voter’ and increased the necessity of political campaigning in election times.

Finally, in the Netherlands, depillarization has in at least two ways stimulated the rise and electoral success of rightist populism since Pim Fortuyn paved the way for Geert Wilders

in the early 2000s. On the one hand, depillarization has fueled longings for a new collective identity to fill the void left by the dissolution of the pillarized ones. This explains Dutch populism's marked ethno-nationalism, played out again and again as an irresolvable conflict between 'freedom-loving and tolerant native Dutch' and 'backward and intolerant Islamic immigrants', typically by construing acceptance of women's rights and gay rights as cornerstones of Dutch identity. On the other hand, while citizens felt politically represented by 'their own' politicians under pillarized conditions, depillarization has prompted experiences of political alienation and an unbridgeable gap between politicians and 'the people'. This has increased the appeal of populist rhetoric about a corrupted and self-serving political caste that is not even interested in the problems of ordinary citizens.

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Cross-references

Culture

Diversity (including Pluralism)

Modernization (including Modernity)

Nationalism

Politics

Reasonable Accommodation

Secularization (including secularism)

Further readings

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