

Text Summary: Interview with Rob van der Laarse (July 26, 2021)

Collaboration and its relationship to conflict Interviewer: Paul Verschure (Convergent Science Network)

Welcome to the Ernst Strüngmann Forum podcasts—a series of discussions designed to explore how people collaborate under real-life settings. Joining us in the series are high-profile experts from diverse areas in society, whose experiences will lend insight to what collaboration is, what it requires, and why it might break down. This series is produced in collaboration with the Convergent Science Network.

P. Verschure Hi, I am Paul Verschure and I am speaking today with Prof. Rob van der Laarse about the impact of cultural landscapes and competing memories on collaboration. Welcome, Rob. Great to have you here.

R. van der Laarse Thank you, Paul.

P. Verschure Could you start by giving us an overview of your professional development -- what brought you to where you are today?

R. van der Laarse I trained as a historian and worked as a historian for 20 years in the history department of the University of Amsterdam. I've covered many broad periods and theory, but also on the cultural history in Europe and the Netherlands. Around 2000 I moved into the Cultural Sciences Department, which I found very interesting. There were many new initiatives, like media studies, which were founded at that time. After two years in that department, I developed a new interest and fascination with the past. This lie far outside the attention of history departments at that time and is what we now call heritage and memory and was quite new in the early twenty-first century. I initiated graduate programs in heritage and memory studies and museum studies, which grew to become a department in restoration, conservation, and curating expertise. Nowadays, it is a quite broad discipline and is part of media and film studies and archival sciences. From all this expertise, we created a new research institute called the Amsterdam School for Heritage and Memory and Material Culture, which is now one of the most advanced of the six humanities faculties. Since then, I have returned to my earlier position as head of the Cultural Sciences Department, which needed a bit of a boost and they asked me to help. From about 2000-2010, we initiated several large projects, including the Dynamics of Memory—a big, broad NOW (Dutch Research Council) project in the Netherlands. I am also an advisor to government ministries, like welfare and education. I was one of the advisers to the Heritage of War program, which initiated the Dynamics of Memory; this national program was broadly sponsored by all the ministries as well as many museums, heritage institutes and funds. Over five or six years, I evaluated some 300 projects on new technology; in particular, digitalization, which in 2005 was new. In conjunction with this, we considered how to address events connected to the Second World War, as eyewitnesses to the war were aging and we were uncertain whether younger generations could be interested in that "old stuff." These concerns aligned with museums focused on resistance movements, etc. Also, how could one preserve the archive of victims put together by the Red Cross? NIOD (Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies) wasn't interested and said that there is some fool at the University of Amsterdam who is interested in heritage, so go talk to him. Ultimately, this became the largest program in science ever created jointly by the ministries. We connected with the Dutch Research Council, which started Dynamics of Memory. From there everything changed. Slowly, I started international projects, like Terrascapes, which is still an existing network, as well as programs with Cambridge University, where they were also interested in heritage research, with people like David Lowenthal. Or the kind of collaboration in which we worked together, Paul, like Accessing Campscapes, IC_ACCESS—an interesting project funded by HERA (Humanities in the European Research Area)]as well as ARISE in 2020. ARISE brought together six European universities and six Campscapes, growing later to eight of each, along with companies working in digitization and visualization. I am still working on other projects, like critical heritage, the future of Europe, these kind of training programs. There is also a spin-off from IC_ACCESS, Houses of Darkness, which

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works together with three of these Campscapes in visualization technology. Much is being done, but there's still room to collaborate with future partners, because this is only the beginning.

Paul Verschure You enter this discussion on collaboration well prepared in the context of memory studies and conflict history. What is collaboration, and what purpose does it serve?

R. van der Laarse Technically, collaboration is an interesting Latin term. It first became known in normal speech in France toward the end of the nineteenth century—the period of Ernest Renan's nation-state building concepts—and it carries a negative connotation; that is, collaboration means “doing something bad.” In modern-day usage, however, collaboration refers to positive behavior; that is, “working together to achieve something that you cannot do on your own,” as in research.

But the term collaboration has a long history and can refer to very negative behavior. In the Netherlands, if someone asks you if you would like to collaborate, they are referring to only one thing: *collaboratie*, in Dutch, means “working with the enemy or occupying forces.” As the nation-state has become less important for many people now, the term is understood by younger generations as “working together in genocide processes or the Holocaust or something like that.” So, in the Netherlands, *collaboratie*/collaboration is a negative concept.

In the Anglo-Saxon world as well as in France, the term has a double meaning, and can be useful when we wish to refer to collaboration and *collaborationism*. Collaborationism is what the Dutch call *collaboratie*, whereas collaboration in the Dutch language would be called *samenwerking* or working together. In that sense, we can use the term collaboration in the Anglo-Saxon sense if we understand that it can also carry a negative connotation in countries that have experienced enemy occupation. This negative connotation is embedded in the concept of collaborationism.

Paul Verschure Could you unpack this with respect to the origins in the emergence of the nation-state?

R. van der Laarse A nation-state is a nineteenth-century invention. As a historian, the department I was part of was called the Dutch history section. Since about 1870, but not before, every country in the world has chairs in national history. How strange it seems that before 1870, there was no national history! There was a history of regions, of course, or “states.” In a small country like the Netherlands, states referred to what we now call provinces. In Germany, the term “state” is still used for different dutchies, for example. The different parts of the country each had their own state organization, just as you see in the United States. To refer to all this territory together as a state or a nation—that is really a nineteenth-century invention which began in the late Romantic period after the French Revolution.

From the 1820s/1830s there was the general idea that people did not live together simply because a ruler brought the different smaller noble estates together in a structured form, but rather due to natural cooperation between people. There, you already see terms like “cooperation” start to crop up and the idea that people share something (e.g., language, or history). To create this kind of “cultural imagined community” as Benedict Anderson would call it, you have to invent the history, which explains how nationalism later became more rigid and more competitive in a European context, especially between countries like Germany and France. There this history was rewritten—in a national context, a national dynamic. How remarkable this is. When we started *Dynamics of Memory* as a European project, I was one of the coeditors of a volume which aimed at finding out about this history of the Second World War—how a world war, and the Holocaust, were written using completely different narratives in all these European countries. That is quite remarkable. It means that even today, international phenomena in Europe are still being understood within a national frame, and that is rooted in the invention of the nation-state. You could say, formally, that the concept was invented around 1813–1815, but as a cultural concept—with this notion of history which bound people together—that dates from about 1887.

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- Paul Verschure What does the term collaboration describe in that sense? Is it the identification of an individual with an opposing nation-state, as in terms of an identity? What purpose did it serve when it arose?
- R. van der Laarse The remarkable thing is that people started to identify with a culture that was originally a regionally based before it was nationalized—different parts of one country that felt like being friends. For instance, there is a great book written by an American historian, Eugene Weber, *From Peasants into Frenchmen*, that describes this whole process starting in 1870 and ending in 1914. You see very late French people who spoke all kinds of different patois, different dialects, who were trained by the same school system, and who feel themselves to be French. And what happened is not only that they felt themselves to belong to one country (the nation) but also connected to a state. So, the nation became a nation-state. They became loyal to a state, which means that people started to fight for that state in an army. Conscripted armies also date from after 1870. The First World War was the first moment that you could say that the labor classes went to war. It was a tragedy, by the way, because socialism was international at that time. What you see in 1914 is that the First World War was not only a clash between France and Germany, it was also the demise of socialism, because it made perfectly clear to all the nation-states that nationalism had won, that nationalism was stronger than socialism. One guy was very clever in understanding that the combination of these two—national socialism—provided the winning formula.
- P. Verschure Exactly.
- R. van der Laarse From 1870 onward, and after the First World War, people became increasingly loyal to a state. They paid taxes, which was not done in the nineteenth century. This is a very recent development. Only after the World War II did we create a welfare state.
- P. Verschure Can we examine more closely the underlying features? What defines collaboration with the nation-state?
- R. van der Laarse The remarkable thing is that collaboration reflects what happened in behavior. The relationship between state and citizens became that of collaboration. During the First World War, and especially during the Second World War, collaboration (the basis for the modern nation-state) suddenly became associated with a negative concept when collaboration became known as “working together as citizens or as states with occupying powers.” That is, you were collaborating with the occupier, and that had everything to do with the invention of the nation-state, because in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, when a country was occupied, it was completely normal to work with the new state, the new authority. That was generally how things worked. Officially, this was even the case in the Second World War when the Dutch government, for instance, took exile in London. They told the Dutch bureaucrats that remained know that they had to collaborate with the German occupier. That was official policy. All local and regional government institutes worked together with the Germans as if nothing had changed. They took over the national government, of course, and appointed their own fascist collaborators in central, crucial administrative positions. But the others—the thousands, tens of thousands of others, including schoolteachers, etc.—continued their work, and after the war were accused of collaborating with the enemy.
- There is also economic collaboration; in a certain way, taxpaying is collaboration. It is only after the creation of the nation-state that the response to occupation by a foreign power—working together with an enemy nation-state—became a negative concept, became a kind of treason. In many countries, this was a new concept, in the sense that it had been normal before. Because this was completely legitimate behavior, there’s still a big debate among historians about what collaboration is, because economic collaboration or administrative collaboration at a certain level is completely normal. Without that, there would be chaos. To keep the trains running, etc., you need a kind of collaboration. But when the trains are transporting Jews to Auschwitz or Westerbork (in the Netherlands),

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economic collaboration suddenly becomes a morally wrong. That's a debate which, after the Second World War, was not particularly strong. Think of France, for instance. Today we would say Vichy France was a group of collaborationists. These people were ideologically not part of the resistance; they served the German occupying state. But because Vichy France operated as if it was the continuation of a free French state—a view propagated by the Germans—when the allied forces liberated France from the Germans, the Vichy party immediately said: we still represent the free government; we didn't collaborate with the Germans. Immediately, people who ideologically worked for the Germans, the collaborationists, were rounded up and thousands were tried in Vichy France. This has been forgotten because it is the wrong kind of memory. For us, though, the whole of Vichy France was collaborating. Even after the Second World War, the term collaboration changed extremely. I remember from my own youth the trials of the project developers who worked for the Germans to build the Atlantic Wall. In the end, the developers were not regarded as collaborationists because they were perceived as having done a good job of giving the illusion that they worked with the Germans, and this spared Dutch people from being deported to Germany, etc. A kind of Robin Hood scenario; there was almost resistance.

P. Verschure Two dimensions pop up here: (a) tension between collaboration, which seems to suggest free will, and coercion, that you cannot do anything else, and (b) an element of moral judgment linked to whatever the root of history is at a point in time. It is linked to coercion: if I work within the context of a nation-state, my actions might be described as collaboration, but there's nothing else I can do, so I'm essentially coerced into going along. How should we disentangle these two elements?

R. van der Laarse In trials, for instance, collaboration is still the term used. That means that you must always confront the complexity of holding economic or administrative collaboration on the same level as ideological collaboration. Being a camp guard, for instance. A camp guard or a camp commander would always represent himself as being only an administrative collaborator: "If I wasn't there, someone much worse than me would probably have taken over because I'm not anti-Semitic. I'm not even pro-German. I just did my job." That was the general idea that was expressed everywhere in all occupied European countries. We were the experts—Fachleute, in German. We were asked to complete our work; we did our best job; we were neutral. This holds true if you are collaborating with your own state. But when there is resistance, and that resistance works against that state, this occupying state can be viewed as being no longer legitimate. Of course, if Germany had won the war, we wouldn't be having this debate. It's all relative. But there is a moral dimension. In resistance, there is a political, moral dimension of being a good patriot. In many countries, people who resisted were called "fighters" or "martyrs" for the nation, even on the monuments erected afterward; partisans. The problem is that national socialists who were collaborating with the Germans and even fighting against the Russians in eastern Germany and Russia, also called themselves partisans. The craziness is that there is almost nothing that helps in defining this. Again, thinking back to the First World War, this type of nationalism won the war, and nationalism could be seen as being very strongly focused in those occupied countries. You are a partisan when you fight against the occupier. But it could also be ideologically transmuted to fighting for the country that had the best national ideas. Let's say the national socialists had better ideas than the communists, for instance. If so, fighting against Dutch communists would be a patriotic thing to do. In that sense, terms like collaboration were very difficult to use in trials. You see it used in public debates because there's always this moral dimension that in some way it's bad. After the 1970s/1980s with the Holocaust narrative, a new dimension emerged: collaboration no longer meant simply working for the occupying country (whatever you thought about that), but included being part of or supporting the SS, even if you were only exploiting labor camps, for instance, like some government organizations did. The high demands for pay in the workforce created many of the camps in which Jews

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had to work before the deportations to the extermination camps started. All that kind of collaboration has been reviewed and reframed from the perspective of knowing what happened afterward. We know in the end where it led to, and that makes collaboration morally wrong. That is now the general opinion shared by most Dutch people.

P. Verschure As you said, this informal definition didn't hold up in the court cases. Can you explain that? Was it really rejected offhand? Was it investigated?

R. van der Laarse Immediately after the war, the term "collaborators" was used for cases of treason. In Dutch, *landverraders*. These people—the national socialists and this specific group of collaborators—were generally referred to as collaborators and immediately sent to the former concentration camps from which the Jews were liberated. In the end, though, almost all trials failed because what is a collaborator? This can be clearly defined for a national socialist party member: this is a person who ideologically identifies with that regime, even if you personally never collaborated. This happened quite often. Small farmers, for instance, in some parts of the country who, for whatever reason, became a member of an organization that became a national socialist organization were, of course, accused of ideological collaboration although they never worked for any German organization or did anything wrong in that sense. Others who actually collaborated would say, "we collaborated because we had a position before the war in the state apparatus, and we continued to do that work because we wanted to keep our country together, and we were legitimized by the government in London. We collaborated *for* them." That situation is very difficult to explain: What is the gradation? You can do that only when you have proof that these people collaborated ideologically as well. When this collaboration included membership in a national socialist party or organization, this could be proof that a person actually worked for the occupier.

P. Verschure There were also cases involving so-called traitors: Dutch citizens who worked directly for the Gestapo to infiltrate resistance movements. These cases resulted in convictions. Were they viewed as collaborators or traitors, in the sense of treason?

R. van der Laarse Collaboration is only possible when (a) a person has a position in the state apparatus prior to occupation and (b) then works with the enemy. A government (e.g., Denmark, Norway, or Belgium) that stayed in country and did not go into exile collaborated with the Germans. The Balkans, for instance, the Ustaša regime, or the Ukrainian nation: they collaborated. If a person was a secret agent without having held a position before in the Netherlands, for example, that person worked for an enemy organization. That is treason. That person worked in the service of another country's—the occupier's—military or police organization. But that is a strange concept. For example, it was used against the communists who fought in the 1930s in Spain against the fascists. They lost citizenship in the Netherlands and only received it back, some of them, in the 1970s, even though they were active resistance fighters during the Second World War; you couldn't be more patriotic than that. They never earned back their status and lost their jobs to national socialists, who returned from the camps in the early 1950s or the late 1940s after the Cold War started. As a result, these resistance fighters were not considered trustworthy citizens. Collaboration and treason can follow strange trajectories. These people were accused of having served not an enemy state, but simply a foreign state, and fought against the Germans, which, before the Second World War, was still a befriended nation. So, if you fought against the German army, for instance, in Spain from 1936 to 1938, then you were fighting in the service of the Spanish government, although officially Spain was a befriended nation. The Netherlands, for instance, forgot that and said: "But you were fighting against our Germans; that's betraying the nation." This concept is also weird, yet there was another way out: many people who worked for the Germans (e.g., policemen) simply went to Germany after the war. If they lived in near the German border, for instance, they simply had to relocate 50 kilometers to live in Germany. Most of these people have now died, but not too long ago, they lived a completely normal life with one exception: they faced a death sentence in the Netherlands, but the Netherlands was

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unable to catch them because the German government would extradite them to the Dutch state. This is another example of the complexity involved in defining collaboration. The Germans would say these people collaborated in a positive way during the occupation. For the Dutch, collaboration was not a serious crime. What a person did—working for a foreign occupying organization, taking part in killings of resistance fighters—were, however.

P. Verschure Stepping back from the nation-state perspective on collaboration, a defining feature seems to be shared goals. Entities or agents can collaborate because there is a shared goal. In this context, there's an asymmetry when we speak of a nation-state (or the idea of a nation-state and all its organizations) and an individual. Do you think there's a sense of a shared goal in that context? Or should we redefine that?

R. van der Laarse That's a good question because it strengthens the concept of the state: governments collaborating with an occupying country or with an Axis country, for example, with the promise of being independent, like the Vichy regime, or some of the Eastern European countries, or Denmark. Denmark delivered its Jews to the Germans on the promise of being independent, and even social democrats were in the government then. They also delivered their communists to the Germans, which was good for the social democrats because they were in competition with the Danish communist party.

Collaboration on the government level was quite normal during wartime. In the Netherlands we generally use the term *collaboratie* not on that level, although this is probably the only level which you can use it in a neutral way, because this is something which you can define. Generally, in public speech, the term is used primarily for citizens who collaborated with the enemy. This becomes blurred because what's collaboration for one citizen is not collaboration for another.

Take, for instance, the famous case of the mayor in wartime, the *burgemeester* [mayor] in the *oorlog* [war]. This Dutch concept makes clear how problematic things can be. Suppose you're a mayor of a small village or a large town, and the townspeople want you to stay on in this capacity during the occupation because they trust you to moderate the situation, which is reliant on negotiations. After the war the situation changes and you could be formally accused of collaboration—not in the ideological or moral sense but because you worked with the occupying regime. (In reality, some of these mayors actually hid a lot of Jews at great personal peril.) There was a famous case involving the Jewish Council, the *joodse raad*, that the Germans used based on some members of the Jewish elite in Amsterdam. It was famous among the Jews before the war for supporting German Jews, for instance, with refugee camps. These were also the people who created Westerbork, which originally was a German-Jewish refugee camp. After the occupation, the Jewish Council were appointed by the Germans to represent the Jews in the Netherlands, particularly in Amsterdam. But instead of representing Jewish interests, the Council slowly began to collaborate by compiling registration lists and selecting people to be sent to the camps. Every time, with every new step, their rationale was: "By selecting these thousand people for this week, we may be able to save five hundred others" up to the moment when no one was left, and they themselves were interred.

P. Verschure This is important to note because it means the occupier put a process in motion to engineer this collaboration. Would you agree?

R. van der Laarse Yes, exactly. It shows the cleverness of the German occupier. What I always make clear to students and colleagues is that fascism has nothing to do with primitivism, backwardness, or with people who are against change. You often find this now in interpretations of populism. These are people who like Brexit, for instance, because they don't want to be part of Europe because it's modern. National socialism, like fascism in Italy, was extremely modernist and supported to a high degree by people like us: among the educated intellectuals, by professors, by political powers. The national socialists possessed a lot of knowledge here and knew very, very well how to occupy territories and

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deal with people under occupation. They were experts, maybe brilliant experts, maybe the best occupiers that ever existed. They did everything faster than the Roman Empire or Napoleon. What they did was unbelievable. It's not comparable to anything on a world scale. It could have been successful if not for some stupid mistakes that were made at the end. I mean successful on their terms. For us it would have been disastrous. What they created was Jewish self-destruction. A system that created an illusion of collaboration, as if people across Europe were being invited to work together with other groups on a collaborative project, when in reality this project involved the selection of people, possibly oneself, destined for an unknown destruction machine. On an individual level, you can't see this. You think you're doing the right thing. In a certain way, you may even think it is better for Jews to live somewhere in a new state, like Israel, but in the East. All these strange illusions. There were also such plans in the Netherlands: Why not send the Jews to Suriname, for instance.

P. Verschure How did this work? May 1940: Germany invades Holland. They wait quite a while before they start to ramp up the process of engineering collaboration. What in your mind were the key steps in that process that led to the auto-destruction of the Jews?

R. van der Laarse The key steps happened very slowly. Looking back, you could ask: "Why were people not immediately leaving the country as of May 1940?" Because everyone must have known, especially those who knew German and Austrian Jewish refugees, what happened in the German Reich—especially after the annexation of Austria when all Jews lost their jobs, their finances, their houses, etc. In that sense, everyone should have known what would happen. And not only Jews, of course. In Germany, the project started with the persecution of political enemies: with socialists and communists, even liberals. In 1933, when von Papen was persecuted, when people from the center were supporting Hitler, everyone should have known what would happen. It was an illusion to think: "We know the Germans. They are a civilized people. They will occupy us and do strange things in their own country, but they won't do that in the Netherlands. We've been at peace with the Germans since Habsburg." This was one big disillusion. What was the mechanism behind it all? Well before the Germans entered the Netherlands, they had already annexed Austria. Seyss-Inquart was the leader of the Austrian Anschluss, after which he was sent in 1939 with Frank to Poland to enable the annexation of parts of Poland, the Reichsgau Wartheland, etc. Then Seyss-Inquart was sent from Poland to the Netherlands and he took with him a very experienced staff—the most experienced in all of Europe. Some people in the Netherlands or England may have witnessed such aggression in the Dutch Indies or India, but in Europe this had never happened before: the annexation of one country after another, step by step, by people of similar backgrounds. Once Seyss-Inquart entered the Netherlands, he knew exactly how to proceed, how to work slowly to create a new juridical structure, change the courts, for instance. All the processes we now see in Hungary and Poland happened in the same way as it did in the Netherlands. At a certain moment, the Nuremberg laws became an official part of the system. Nobody believed it could be so because it deviated completely from what was the norm. Another thing was the use of camps that had already been established in the Netherlands, as we know from the research of Leon Trotsky. All that kind of information, which is always strange to combine. A social security system had been in place since the 1930s unemployment crisis, and especially for people in the cities to work on the land, there was a high demand for reclamation work. Unemployed people, young people, were constantly sent from the cities to these camps, which were taken over by the Germans in 1940. They knew exactly where they were because long before the World War II, the Germans had been in the Netherlands investigating these areas. They had scouted out everyone, every person, everything they could use. The Netherlands was not an unknown country for the Germans. The entire unemployment system, which was administered by Dutch social security officers in all those communities, was completely taken over by the Germans. And soon came new instructions to no longer send Dutch boys to the camps,

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but instead only Jews of all ages. Within a few months, some 20 of these camps around Amsterdam were filled completely with Jews. The second instruction was to change the number of camps, to bring them together: 20 camps were integrated into 5 and then relocated to the middle of the country, or to new lands, new polders, broader and larger projects. The Germans referred to this as the *west politieke* zone [political zone], and in Poland in the east the *ost politieke* zone. The camps became concentrated in the eastern part of the country, near the German border, with Westerbork in between. This happened before the camps were emptied in 1942, and everyone had to be sent to Westerbork. From that moment on, Westerbork was taken over. Up until then, as strange it may seem, this German-Jewish refugee camp was run by a Dutch director. Suddenly new barracks were built and a group of some 8,000 men from the unemployment camps began to arrive. A few weeks later, after the Jewish Council had sent the addresses of the children and the wives of these the men to The Hague, 8,000 men in Westerbork were suddenly joined by their wives and children. If they each had a wife, that's 16,000 people. If they each had one, two, or three children, that's some 20,000 to 30,000 people. That's a third of the Dutch Jewish people who perished in the Holocaust. Mind you, all this happened without any kind of formal pogrom.

P. Verschure It was a large collaborative effort. Was it achieved by smoothly shifting the norms? What is surprising in Holland is that there was a response from the Dutch people especially in Amsterdam—the strike of February 1941—to protest these measures toward the Jews. In some sense, you could argue that Seyss-Inquart misread how easily society would go along with that process, or do you think the Germans saw this as a blip that could easily be suppressed?

R. van der Laarse The February strike has been very politicized in history. We all know that members of the communist party organized it, but after the war, we questioned how they could they have organized it, given the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The Germans and the Soviet Union were working together so it's impossible that the communists were doing this. But, of course, the communists organized it. They were the only ones who could do it because they were the only group that was underground. They were in command and had control of the Amsterdam tramlines, and the harbor, for instance. Those who were actively organizing were supported by students, all other kinds of groups, and Jews themselves against what you could call the first pogrom. There is another element which is not widely known: in February 1941, Amsterdam contained not only Jews from Amsterdam but also Jews from neighboring cities like Edam or the Zaanse, the northern part of the Netherlands. They had already been brought to Amsterdam and settled into "ghettoes"; officially in German the *Juden Quartier*. Two ghettoes were planned: one in the south and one in the center of the city. The most well-known was in the city center, the oldest Jewish part of the city. You could get in but you could not get as a Jew. That was already taking place before 1941. National socialist youth organizations marched there and teased the Jews and made jokes. Particularly left-wing Jews who were trained in karate, in fighting sports, etc. fought back before the pogrom. At a certain point in time, one of these racists was killed by a Jewish boxer, and that was when the fascists started to raid this neighborhood. The Germans had brought in Jews from a Zionist training camp in the north of the country. They were Zionist and militant, not communist. This created an explosive atmosphere. This riot was a testing ground for the Germans to find out what would happen if they rounded up Jews, which they already had plenty of experience after two years in Poland. They were sent to a new camp in northern Holland—an obscure camp that had existed for only one year and was originally intended for communists and the first group of Jews. This riot was the first strike in Europe against a Jewish pogrom and it had an enormous impact. The Nazis were very irritated as well as shocked because the national socialists had this strange idea that the Dutch would accept the pogrom because they too were an Aryan people. During the Habsburg period, the Germans and Dutch people had belonged to one imperial state. They had high respect for the Dutch people. Then came the riot in

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the capital, which had support from the communists as well as broad support from Amsterdam citizens. “Don’t do anything to our Jews or we will fight back,” was their message. That sent a strong signal and prompted the Germans to operate very systematically because the Dutch resistance was much stronger than anticipated—a different type of resistance unlike what was present in other countries, where they shoot back and all that. The Dutch took a community approach.

It was very important for the Germans to use the mechanism of collaboration to identify Dutch people to implement their plan: use the Dutch police to find the Jews, use Dutch organizations, create the Jewish Council and an illusion of self-control. In Poland, by contrast, in ghettos such as Łódź, the system functioned differently. It was based on pillarization: there were the socialists, Christians, Catholics, so now the Jews got their own organization. In The Hague, the Dutch rejected these differences; that was the spirit behind the riot, and it worked.

- P. Verschure That also means that Seyss-Inquart and his lieutenants had two models to manage: (a) at the community level, how to shape the societal response, and (b) at the individual level, how to make certain that the Jewish Council members would keep going, settling all sorts of very conflicting challenges between their own survival and that of other people. Were these two models there? Was this formalized in a rule book? How did they play that out?
- R. van der Laarse There are two interpretations for these two models. One is conciliation, moderation, tempering, being in contact, negotiations. The other is what happened directly after the February strike: operate in an aggressive, terrorizing way by using a different kind of instrument, such as the SS, an organization not normally found on the streets. Perhaps the same people used both models. I am quite sure that it works this way. But Dutch historians in general have a friendlier interpretation. They would say “you had good guys and bad guys.” I’m not certain about that. I think good guys are very good at also being bad guys, but this has to do a lot also with the Dutch trials. Gemmeker, the commander of Westerbork, sent 60,000 Jews to Auschwitz, yet he was sentenced to only six years, because he behaved like a gentleman, like a kind of Albert Speer. This is the way Dutch people generally prefer to view the situation.
- P. Verschure That’s very ironic because it means current historians still believe the image that the Germans purposefully created. This is astonishing.
- R. van der Laarse It was a very effective image and it has had a big impact on that history. It is difficult to understand that the same person can be a Jekyll and Hyde. But it is completely understandable. Colonial regimes also work with collaboration by creating elites like the Dutch: the Indo-elites, the mixed-race people. They collaborate; they work in the Dutch Royal Army. On the other hand, the same people are used to send people to camps or to fight terrible wars but are invisible to the others. That’s how it works. For Jews and communists, the system was quite harsh from the beginning, but for the normal Dutch person, it wasn’t bad at all. Of course, there were bad situations: the final years of the war were not nice, because of the war events and the way the regime worked in double ways. One of my family members (I was born in Aalsmeer) was sent to one of the Neuengamme subcamps for doing no more than some illegal journalism. They were caught in October 1943, sent at a bad time during the war to this camp, and then had to work on the Atlantic Wall project near Denmark. The entire system was based on capturing people in the Netherlands, a friendly interrogation, and then sending them to work in the labor camp, with the promise they would be back within a few years. They arrived at the camp and within three months were dead. The village of Putten is another example. This whole village was set on fire—nobody knows why—and the men were sent to the Neuengamme subcamps and worked in the same way in the same period. They all died within a few months. These camps were extermination camps, death camps, and little is known about them. Nobody has described the history of these camps because

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they do not fit the image: you think of Jews being killed in these camps, but nobody speaks about Dutch people being killed in comparable ways, or Russians, for instance.

P. Verschure Returning to collaboration, you gave a clear sketch of how this played slowly out in the Netherlands, and how the German occupier gained control using collaboration with these older nation-state roots. Would you say that's also a recipe they followed within Germany itself and other Western European states? Was it a generic approach that they took?

R. van der Laarse Yes, you could say that, generally. In Eastern Europe there was a lot of ideological collaboration. You could call this "collaborationism." And there was a lot of terror. The combination of collaborationism on the part of Catholic nationalists in the Balkan states or Ukrainian nationalists in Ukraine, who are very anti-communist, works together with an extreme amount of terror: communists to Jews, to minority groups, ethnical terror. In the West, ethnical terror was not part of the system. It happened, of course, to Jews, but they were not killed in the West; they were killed in the East. They were first sent to where terror had already been normalized. In the West, the only terror they knew was some bombings during the first part of the war; for example, the battle of Grebbeberg in the Netherlands, or the bombing of Rotterdam, one of the first cities to be completely bombed by the Axis, by the Germans. Of course, the first was Guernica in the Spanish Civil War, or what happened in England, which was officially not occupied, but experienced a lot of bombings. Also the battle of Arnhem in the second part of the war, the liberation war. You could say this is the experience for normal people in the West. But the pogroms and the deportations of the Jews were very specific. These people were isolated; taken from their neighborhoods, cities, and towns; concentrated in ghettos in big towns like Rotterdam and Amsterdam. I live in a small town where around 50 Jews were killed in Auschwitz and Sobibór, but a memorial was not erected for them until the mid-1960s. There was, however, a monument for the people killed in resistance, around 10 people, but not for the Jews. Why, I asked, had this not happened? The explanation was that the Jews were killed but not while living in this place. They had already been sent to Amsterdam, then from the ghetto to a camp, which means that the original place where they lived did not regard them as their own victims.

P. Verschure They didn't belong.

R. van der Laarse There were no survivors left in the town. No family.

P. Verschure But if you look at the system in the Netherlands, what could have been the response of Dutch society to disrupt this plan?

R. van der Laarse The problem is when you don't have terror against the total population, as in Poland, for instance. The Poles were not very friendly to Jews, but they suffered the same kind of occupying terror as the Jews themselves, or the Ukrainians. They shared this terror, which meant that all of them were in a certain way in resistance. In the Netherlands, there was resistance only as of 1942. By then, most of the Jews had already been sent to the camps. It was based partly on finding hiding places for Jews, and later, for Dutch boys under threat to be sent to the Eastern Front. That situation was indirect terror—terror that was invisible. Being in the resistance was risky but it was also contradicted their sense of being a brave people and very civilized people willing to do what the government says. Even if the government is an occupying government, it's still a government. It's not easy to resist when the consequences of your action will be the complete terrorization of the neighboring village. One would expect the entire population to go into the resistance mode but that didn't happen. Only a few civilians, some young radicals, or some communists were removed. It wasn't because people didn't care. They did care, but they believed that things would not happen to them because they were "normal." "I'm doing my job; I've never been in politics." Thus the resistance movement became associated to underground political parties.

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Even the social democrats were not generally part of the resistance. Some groups belonged to the resistance, but did not trust each other because the largest trade union was collaborating with the Germans.

P. Verschure What could they have done? More strikes, more people in hiding...

R. van der Laarse It would have made a big difference if the trade unions (as in some other countries) had supported the resistance. That would have changed a lot of things. But many former political parties and party members were not openly engaged in the resistance. Some were not able to because they were taken as hostages to the camps. That happened in many countries. The political elite were put into a camp so they could no longer lead their own parties; then the parties fragment. It also happened to the communists. The communists were working together, even with liberals, etc., in the underground. Everyone had to find new kinds of collaboration in the resistance and had to use the same term for the resistance movement. And it was difficult because you never knew who you could trust. You could end up working together with people who were secret agents for the Germans, and many of them were. Even if they weren't, they could be arrested, interrogated, and martyred. If a person wanted to stay alive, you almost had to be a kind of spy. This happened on a massive scale. German intelligence was quite good because local police cooperated with it. In Amsterdam resistance was almost impossible because the police were on every corner throughout the entire day. The police were trained at Avegoor, an SS training center, which even had a Jewish camp. When those Jews were later sent to Westerbork, its camp commander, Gemmeker, remarked that he had never seen people in such poor condition. So he first sent them to the hospital at Westerbork before sending them on to Auschwitz. The irony of this just crazy. This was a training camp for the Amsterdam police to become Jew hunters. Don't forget that these same Amsterdam police were not tried after the war, and many were still on the police force during the 1960s Provo movement. This is one explanation why Provo provoked the police because these were military- and SS-trained police.

P. Verschure It's amazing.

R. van der Laarse Even after the war.

P. Verschure What you're describing is that collaboration isn't an automatic consequence of the relationship between a nation-state and its citizens. That means that, given the structure in which we exist, we all collaborate continuously out of necessity. It also shows the vulnerability of a system because the citizen is collaborative with the abstract construct of a nation-state based on trust, a trust in that system, like the system is well-intentioned toward us and the common good. In a way, the German occupier took advantage of this because people could not break out of that assumed relationship of trust between themselves and the nation-state. Would that be a correct interpretation?

R. van der Laarse Yes, exactly. And it's not only the camp system that we are describing here which, don't forget, were not guarded by Germans. Inside these camps there were Jewish *kapos* who sent other Jews into the trains. But outside, in Westerbork for example, there were two police commands or battalions. One was a reserve battalion from Bremen that had already fought on the Eastern Front and had experience in the Russian war. The other was an Amsterdam Battalion, which probably had some eastern experience and was trained at Avegoor. Only 40 Germans were active who did the whole job of sending 107,000 people to the extermination camps. This explains everything about the term collaboration.

Then again, there is also a positive type of collaboration. Not positive in the moral sense. The Germans did a lot of things. Not only did they occupy territories, stealing and loot everything from the Jews, they sent their political enemies and intellectuals to the camps. These intellectuals, architects, and engineers worked with them and were very happy. Look, for instance, at the restoration of Amsterdam. If I look out of my window here, if I changed my screen, you would see all these buildings which were rebuilt during wartime

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in Amsterdam, which was not destroyed because this was the golden period of the heritage business, of what the Germans call *Denkmalschutz* [preservation of sites of historic interest]. All these people collaborated to this end; this was their escape route after the war. In some trial investigations, it was said, “OK, you collaborated with the Germans. You’ve worked on the rebuilding of architectural works.” The problem was that the Germans loved Rembrandt; the Germans loved the Dutch golden age. So all these architects said: “No, we were actually playing with them because the Germans didn’t see that we actually Dutch nationalists. We were patriots. We were building in an old Dutch style.” That was their escape route. They didn’t say, of course, that the Germans loved this old Dutch style, that it was especially what they wanted them to do.

P. Verschure Given the model of collaboration and the history behind it that you sketch out, are we now, in the European context, shifting partially away from a nation-state concept to one of a federated Europe? If so, what would be the consequence then for the meaning of collaboration? Does it mean people’s loyalties need to align around an even more abstract entity—the European Union? Will forms of collaboration change as a result?

R. van der Laarse This is the same process as what happened in the nineteenth century with the invention of the nation-state. In the first instance, you could say this was a cultural process. For some countries like Germany, there is the idea that there was a kind of German people starting, as exemplified from the late 18th century onward in music, poetry, and philosophy; after that the national German Empire State emerged slowly. But this was, of course, not how it really happened. There is always a combination of political power and culture because we all know culture is used on the microlevel. You don’t build an opera hall because people like it. Opera puts you in a kind of mood; it creates power and projects the image of those people who are creating it, of the elite sitting there on the balcony, etc. This is also going on in Europe.

For a long time, Europe believed in the myth of a Europe of different cultures, of different nations, of different regions. The idea was that the nation-state would slow down what comes up in a regional context. For example, people in Germany would share some things with countries close to its borders (e.g., in France regions like Alsace Lorraine or Limburg in the Netherlands). These groups would share some sort of historical comparative, a culture, even a dialect, as in northern Italy and Austria. Now we all know that this is a big misconception because if ethnic war breaks out, it does so exactly in such regions. In the Balkan wars in the 1990s, for example, neighbors killed each other—the very same people who shared the same culture, the same language, but differed only in their religious identity. So, it’s not that simple. As culture is shared, it becomes divisive. It’s not a base to build something on. You have to start from the structure itself. In Europe, you could say that this has been a complete failure. You could say there although many cultures are working together in Europe, there is a greater affinity to the positions of Geert Wilders (i.e., populists in Western European countries) and Viktor Orbán in Hungary than to their own prime minister. The culture of trust is being completely lost in a certain way. Take the COVID-19 situation: people create a new identity by being anti-vaccine. What existed before Brexit in England? Look at northern Italy: when the Lega Nord became a national party, suddenly people in Sicily started to support it, even though five years earlier the Lega Nord hated the Sicilians. This cultural element is a fixing, floating thing. It’s not something that reaches far back into the past. These pasts are invented; everything that people believe—“I’m really Dutch” or “I’m really French”—is all very nice but it can change just as state borders can change. That is the big issue for Europe, of course. Europe is based on a flimsy program: it brings together very different nation-states, many of which are still their nation-state. In Western Europe you might say the nation-state is fatigued; it’s slowing down. The nation-state is an old concept which people don’t believe in anymore. Western Europeans were probably right after the Second World War to start together and create something new. But Eastern Europe, after the fall of communism, is only now reinventing its nation-state. It’s using 19th-century models as if they were

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completely new. For people like Orbán, or other small dictators, their models follow dictators from the 1920s and 1930s, who became dictators because they were fighting the outcome of the First World War. The Trianon Treaty, for instance, in Hungary: leaders wanted Hungary to become a really big again. Or the Poles, who probably want to regain Lithuania, to reestablish their old borders. They probably want to reclaim Odessa as well. The craziness of this nationalism is anchored in people's perceptions, but do they truly want to be part of Europe? I mean, the Hungarians are part of Europe because they know that they will get a lot of money from Europe. And Europe is simply giving it to them without insisting on democratic norms, e.g., any kind of free speech.

P. Verschure How could Europe and the European Commission guide this process in a constructive way? What do you see as the three most important measures to be taken?

R. van der Laarse This is a complex question because in our programs, our aim is to highlight many of these cultural conflictive processes. I'm a historian and a cultural scientist; most people think I love history and culture. In many of the debates over the past decades, people have said to me: "But you wanted to have more of these things in education, for instance, at school." I remember it once being said that it's better to stop history and no longer talk about culture because there's nothing more divisive than when people start to define themselves in those terms. If I belong to this culture and you belong to another one, it means we don't share heritage. How do you start a European project? You know how it works in Europe. They really believe in a community that's not only an economic community, but also a value community. That is beautiful, but how can you start a value community when you have politicians who focus on their cultural agendas? The churches which still exist, all the national organizations, all the national histories, all the national culture projects and broadcasting companies, etc., are mostly owned by national politicians. It is a complete nonstarter because every politician knows you have to create competition, as in sports, to win. You start by making clear what the difference is between your party and the others. In the U.S. and Europe, of course, we all know there is no difference at all—not, at least, between a Christian democrat, a social democrat, and whatever else you can imagine. It's simply the same. When they govern, they do the same thing; there is no difference. Even in the United States you could say, in the end, in geopolitics, there is hardly any difference even between Trump and Biden. In the end, the way they treat Russia, China, or Europe may be different in tone and style, but not in interest, not in long-term policy. That is lacking in Europe. Europe does not have any debate in a geopolitical sense because Europe is a weak, soft community of people with idealized ideas. No more Second World War. Believing in culture and history. They have this idea that they have a rich history; they forget that they have a rich history based on war and on terror. Every European country has been in a war together or been in a civil war. That's where all this art comes from. They loot it. Every museum in Europe contains looted art. In that sense, they don't have to give all of the artworks back to Africa, e.g., they can also give it back to each other. Take the famous Hieronymus Bosch paintings in Spain, El Bosco. It's all looted art. It was looted from the palaces of the Orange family. Well, the Orange family is still there; they are monarchs. If they had courage, they would go to their Spanish friends and say: "Give me my paintings back."

P. Verschure Good suggestion. But Rob, within this European meta nation-state, which is what people are pursuing now, do you believe that European citizens are able and willing to collaborate in a sustainable and constructive way? Is this possible?

R. van der Laarse You could make a difference between culture and collaboration on a citizen level and on a national state level. On the national state level, the fixing or connecting of nation-state cultures is clearly doomed to fail. At the individual level, if you can get people to shift the focus away from this toward the common goals that they share—to make Europe safe, sustainable, politically, economically, environmentally, etc.—then I think the European project will be a big success, just as the European economic project, the EEG, was successful after the World War II with its agrarian reconstruction. A continent completely

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devastated by war became, in two to three decades, one of the richest in the world. No one expected that. The ending of the enmity between Germany and France had a lot to do with that. How to deal with sharing coal and mine all these resources. I remember we discussed some years ago how strange it is that we no longer discuss such things. Instead, conflicts play out between China, the U.S., Australia, the Saudi states, Indonesia, and they are all based on resources and trade systems, like the Silk Road. Yet in Europe, for example, the harbor of Athens was bought up by the Chinese. Why did the European states allow this? Such big mistakes and no discussion about it. People like us are not hired only to compete with research foundations, etc. Ask us to be on an advisory board to discuss these things and to think about long-term developments—not to push a particular political viewpoint but to consider the one truly crucial question: How can we ensure that Europe will survive in the twenty-first century. Because at the moment, we are not going in the right direction.

P. Verschure Correct. One final question: If you could change one thing by magic to make this project sustainable and successful, what would you change?

R. van der Laarse The answer is: collaboration. What we have in Europe is a system of cooperation. Countries cooperate, but that is not collaboration. Collaboration, if done in the right way, is like what we do in fieldwork: we work on the same site, we think about it, and we discuss things constantly. Of course, we always need more time and funding to make it successful.

It is essential to bring people together from all the different parts of Europe; in this collective (e.g., parliament), do not let them speak their own language or be part of these fictive parties. (People from former communist countries, Romania, for example, being part of the social democratic faction in the European Parliament, when we have little understanding of their background, when they speak different languages. This is a guarantee for failure.) The only way to exact success is to enable these people to collaborate on every European level. If it's a school system—a secondary school, maybe even the primary schools—you could create these kinds of collaborations. Not fictive cooperation (e.g., between a Dutch town and a French town, or between Eastern European towns). This is nonsense. Create a collaboration where expertise can be shared to address and fix real problems. Environmental sustainability could be very practical: sustainability of buildings, or natural resources, or forests. How do you do that in Romania? What do you do in Poland? A student of mine is doing an internship there in forestry. Absolutely fabulous. This is what you want to have in a very keen way in geopolitics. This kind of collaboration should be reinvented into what is really meant by collaboration. If you're a company, for instance, you don't want to have people in different departments unaware of what they do for each other, like the university, which still works with this craziness of disciplines. But what happens when you bring people together? You let them share this information, that is what I mean. I think the nice thing about the European research project is that there you see a glimpse of what it could be. But as scientists, we even have difficulty explaining to our colleagues in our own university what we're actually doing. We are maybe the only Europeans, Paul.

P. Verschure Rob van der Laarse, thank you very much for this conversation.

R. van der Laarse It was my pleasure, Paul.