

A Country Divided

Of Old and New Boundaries

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[CYRILLE OFFERMANS]

The French Revolution is usually considered to be the political outcome of the 18th century Enlightenment. Without the anti-feudal intellectual firepower of the *philosophes* the surge of popular anger that culminated in the storming of the Bastille is hard to imagine. But perhaps of equal importance for European history were the *negotiations* leading up to the Peace of Utrecht, precisely because they were negotiations. It is true that in 1713 the philosophical enlightenment had not yet begun, outside the Netherlands at any rate. However, the diplomats had already set an example, presumably unconsciously following Montaigne, whose relativism marked an early refuge of intellectual non-violence in the bloody wars between Protestants and Catholics that were tearing the continent apart.

But naturally the end of the religious wars did not mean the end of religious differences. Even in the traditionally tolerant Netherlands they continued to give rise to conflict between, roughly speaking, the Protestant North and the Catholic South, even if they were now fought out on the pulpit or in the press instead of in the street. A stray traveller from Brabant who disturbed the Sunday peace in Staphorst might have hell and damnation called down upon his head but it never led to the type of military violence, that continued to take place on the streets of Belfast until the beginning of the 21st century. Instead, for some time the various confessional groupings found themselves sharing the same goal: they wanted to obtain financial equality with the publicly funded, though strongly Christianized, education system. They did not succeed until 1917.

The prolonged controversy over school funding was therefore not a continuation of the wars of religion with different weapons, but the attempt of different Christian communities to secure a place in a secular, liberal society where, with state assistance, they could enjoy an education and training based on the fundamentals of their faith. It led to the extreme fragmentation of society that went under the name of 'pillarisation', which only came to an end after the 1960s – at least *de facto* – when the explosion of prosperity, faster and more radical than in other European countries, gave rise to an irresistible wave of de-Christianization and mass atheism.

Stubborn resistance to these developments was and still is found only in the string of more or less adjacent municipalities that came to be known as the



'Bible Belt', like an echo of the ultra-conservative Christian fundamentalists in the south-eastern states of America. In this belt of land that stretches from the islands of Zeeland to the west of Overijssel, the word of Calvin is declared with greater self-confidence than ever to be the definitive version of Christianity. Not only is the godless theory of evolution rejected but every area of human-directed endeavour is seen as evidence of inadmissible arrogance and the handiwork of the devil. So there is opposition to abortion, euthanasia, voting rights for women and the separation of sex from reproduction. On the other hand, there is support for reintroducing the death penalty and an apparent unawareness of any contradiction.

However, all in all this is an anachronistic ideological curiosity to which less than one percent of the population adhere. Outside the Bible Belt people rapidly discarded the faith of their fathers. Indeed it was disturbingly rapid, because it is questionable whether the universal Christian morality that was rejected, including the qualities of self-control, self-restraint and moral self-improvement, had been sufficiently replaced by adequate non-metaphysical, empirical equivalents. By now, I think, the answer to that question is unambiguous. But no matter what, the churches became deserted and the religious and philosophical adjectives were replaced by the names of associations of sports, music and broadcasting or disappeared inside cryptic acronyms. The Netherlands, like the entire western world after the Second World War, and more intensively after the collapse of communism in 1989, fell under the spell of full-scale de-ideologization.

The only ideology to remain, though it could not be labelled as such because that would have suggested some ineluctable social necessity, was that of the free market. Virtually all the political parties, including the Christian parties and the social democrats, more or less committed themselves to the free market's technocratic view of politics. Politics was no longer the expression of people's passionate, democratically-inspired involvement in public affairs, but a question of 'minding the shop', to use the weary sounding words, spoken by the Catholic Prime Minister Piet de Jong, which he uttered during the heyday of the cultural revolution in the 1960s (between 1967 and 1971), of all times, to characterize his own administration and that of his successors. Under the 'purple' coalitions of Wim Kok between 1994 and 2002, the social democrats ridged

themselves of their last 'ideological feathers'. The Christian parties were left on the sidelines for the first time in eighty years. However, instead of using that time to strengthen their original religious roots, they were the ones, who seemed to have discovered a new missionary goal in the universal preaching of the neoliberal faith.

Cut from the same cloth

All these developments have created a situation in which little remains of the old religious contrast between the North and South Netherlands. What remain are vague cultural differences which are hardly if at all coloured by religion. Everybody knows the clichés about the near-brutal bluntness, straightforwardness, frugality and efficiency of the northerner in contrast to the near-hypocritical equivocation, long-windedness, generosity and reserve of the southerner, which are the respective legacies of joyless Calvinism and its ascetic iconoclasm on the one hand, and unprincipled Catholicism with its baroque image culture on the other. But without denying these legacies it is quite clear that they are inextricably mixed up with socio-economic differences and differences in power, wealth and degrees of development. And they are more a reflection of the contrast between town and countryside, or rather between the *Randstad* (the conurbation of western Holland between Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht) and the provinces, even though in the Netherlands also that contrast is now relatively small.



'The aim of the state is freedom' Spinoza

A good indicator of cultural levelling between north and south is the culture of popular festivals which was imbued in earlier times with specific local and religious elements and played an important 'purifying' role in maintaining and strengthening the local community. It was especially true of the Carnival festival in the south. Nowadays there are few who know that carnival was part of the Catholic festival calendar, that it was the last opportunity for excess, particularly of food and drink, before giving oneself over inexorably to a strict regime of fasting for forty days in a form of a collective *Imitatio Christi*. After being baptized, Christ spent forty days fasting in the wilderness before he embarked on his epoch-making preaching mission. According to the Carnival-experts, the true 'carnivalist' has become a solitary figure. And that is the consequence of two developments: an invasion from people from the north to the southern carnival centres, and an exodus of southerners to the winter sport centres. Nothing is left of the authentic, moralizing street carnival. In the cafés one only hears schmaltzy Dutch *schlagers* while the standard carnival outfit comes from the same clothing factory that dresses the supporters of the Dutch football team or followers of the Friesian skating marathon.

Developments like this don't take place without difficulties. Just as earlier stages of modernization provoked a counter-reaction to the levelling process, the same is happening again. We are witnessing numerous attempts to change the image of regional culture. In every province, whether Friesland, Gelderland or Limburg, serious efforts are being made to persuade Brussels to promote their dialects to the status of an official regional language. A curious desire, by the way, as dialects exist in practice at village level and a genuine regional language is an abstraction that nobody actually speaks. Dialect societies are



popular, place-name signs in virtually all the provinces outside the *Randstad* are bilingual. However it is a form of museumization, a greenhouse cultivation of traditions outside the daily context in which they originally functioned. In the wild, dialects are unmistakably in decline.

Schilderswijk. The Hague

Town and Province

Not only has globalization lessened the importance of the contrast between north and south but it has also affected all bipolar contrasts including that between town and countryside. This has always been relatively small in the Netherlands, thanks in particular to its century-old decentralized political culture, the short distances, and the easy accessibility of even the far corners of the country. And recent revolutionary developments in information and communications technology have made the differences even smaller. At least, in a number of important respects.

For example, the assumption that juvenile delinquency is specifically a problem in the larger cities is less and less true. To be sure, Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague do continue to score high statistically, but not much if at all higher than provincial cities like Vlissingen, Delfzijl or Appingedam. Featuring in the top ten 'child-unfriendly' municipalities measured by child mortality, poverty, school drop-outs, delinquency and youth unemployment one also finds Heerlen and Kerkrade (in the far south) and Leeuwarden and Pekela (in the extreme north). But more striking than a slight overall improvement in these figures is the growing division along ethnic lines: there is a stubborn group of derailed, mainly immigrant youth who are proving difficult to draw into integration programmes. These young people, both in the *Randstad* and in the provincial towns, live in disadvantaged districts.

Nevertheless, in a number of respects the differences between the big cities in the West and the peripheral areas of the North, South and East Netherlands seem to be increasing in recent years. A shrinking population and lack of work have caused a steady flow, particularly among the better-qualified, from the provinces to the *Randstad* where the opportunities are far greater. And this



Almere

process further strengthens the demographic imbalance and the economic and cultural impoverishment of the provinces, even though the impact has been far less than the dramatic desertion of the countryside in countries like France and Spain. In the end, it is primarily global economic and demographic developments that are redefining the relationship between the *Randstad* and the provinces. This can best be illustrated by the recent history of Amsterdam.

Consumerism as self-expression

Thirty years ago Amsterdam was a city in decline. Housing and living conditions in the older working class districts like the Jordaan and the Pijp were poor, squatters and junkies were a problem and the result was a massive exodus to new housing estates in the suburbs and new commuter towns like Almere and Lelystad. Between 1963 and 1984 the population of the city fell spectacularly from 870,000 to 680,000. Demolition and rebuilding projects took no notice of traditional proportions, the intricate network of pre-automobile streets and the historic architecture.

This lack of historical awareness became painfully obvious in the demolition of the extensive Jewish quarter, which dates back to the sixteenth century. Large nondescript blocks appeared on the Jodenbreestraat and the Weesperstraat. A large part of the development of the Waterlooplein suffered a similar fate. A statue of Spinoza looks out over the now unrecognizably changed district in which he lived before being expelled from the Sephardic community in 1656. In that area the new town hall was built and, adjacent to it, an Opera house, an ugly colossus defying all sense of historical proportion and which has met with a great deal of local opposition - though to no avail.

But the Amsterdammers did not resign themselves to this wilful destruction, which was changing historic places into what the Parisian anthropologist Marc Augé would later call *non-lieux* or 'non-places', lacking any particular identity

and creating only loneliness and uniformity. In 1975 their resistance had more success. Although the notorious Nieuwmarkt riots were unable to halt demolition for a metro tunnel, they did prevent the building of a highway straight through the neighbourhood. Slowly but surely, changes came about that made the city once again residentially attractive. Parallel to a renewed historical awareness of *lieux de mémoire* (a term used by the French historian Pierre Nora to indicate places that embody the folk memory), the guiding principles of urban renewal became restoration, renovation and a discrete architectonic focus.

Particularly the young, progressive intelligentsia felt comfortable in this environment. The well-educated no longer automatically moved to the suburbs as soon as their children were born. The disadvantages of often dreadful living conditions were more than compensated for by urban vitality, especially in the artistic and cultural fields. The city became an experimental laboratory for new future-oriented social and ecological life styles. Nowhere was so much creative energy invested in alternative initiatives and projects. No place else was so richly endowed with specialized museums, galleries, theatres, cinemas, concert halls, educational institutions, research and debating centres, editorial offices, exotic shops and restaurants, bookshops, political, philosophical and literary cafés. This informal and ever-evolving environment seemed to be the ideal biotope for a flexible, cosmopolitan, and creative class.

For several decades now, Amsterdam has again been booming, just like London, Berlin, Copenhagen, Hamburg and, on a smaller scale, Utrecht and Maastricht. Its present population is (again) nearly 800,000 and it is expected to continue to grow. It exercises a huge attraction on newcomers who can find few opportunities elsewhere in the country, especially in the declining regions. It also attracts tourists and day-trippers from all over the world who are keen to look or to buy, in spite of the fact that the biggest museums have been in scaffolding for years and the centre of the city, because of the construction of the new metro, is an enormous building site.

The city is also the stage for new forms of leisure activities in which shopping merges with going out and cultural activities. Indeed, particularly for young people who communicate incessantly, consumption itself has become an important form of self-expression and therefore a cultural activity. Similarly, in much contemporary visual art, now largely absorbed by film, photography, design and advertising, people are very ready to pay for names, labels and symbols that create the feeling of belonging to the avant-garde of a cosmopolitan mass culture. Lack of depth has the advantage for both producers and consumers of making it all easily and smoothly interchangeable.

International concerns like Nike, Adidas, Apple, Levi's, Vodafone, Starbucks and Taschen take advantage of it. In prominent places around the city, they open their own shops which focus on creating a total, almost religious, identification with the brand (or 'experience' as the collaborative trend watchers like to call it). Producers of cosmetics, lingerie and accessories colonize the chic department stores like the Bijenkorf, creating shops within shops, comparable in some ways to nineteenth-century arcades, Walter Benjamin's 'dream houses'. The main difference is that parading in front of the show-off branches of Gucci, Vuitton and Versace are grim-looking guards who are supposed to enhance the sense of exclusivity for their *nouveaux riche* clientele, who often come from Russia or China.



A divided country

New differences were inevitable. The make-up of the population in the big cities has changed drastically, while in the provinces it has remained more or less stable. The *Randstad* is home to every conceivable nationality. About fifty percent of the population are immigrants, of whom roughly half come from Surinam, the Antilles, Turkey and Morocco. Although Amsterdam in particular has always been a hospitable, cosmopolitan metropolis - in 1650 it was estimated that between a third and a half of the population had been born outside the Republic - the integration of non-Western, Muslim and partially illiterate immigrants has not been without its problems, although they have been considerably smaller than those faced by Paris, London or Brussels.

The big cities in the Netherlands are multicultural, also in the negative sense of the word. Different population groups tend to live in separate districts, and the children attend different schools. In some districts, such as the Painters' District (*Schilderswijk*) and the Transvaal Quarter (*Transvaalkwartier*) in The Hague, segregation is practically total. But segregation in the Netherlands is mainly a result of socioeconomic circumstances and not a deliberate population policy - for at least the last ten years, it has been more like the opposite. Talk of 'gated communities' is only metaphorical and despite a few serious incidents invariably fanned by anti-Islamist alarmism in the popular press, there is nothing that suggests a revival of the religious or racist warfare of the past.

Nevertheless, for a long time populist parties were not only successful in the cities (Rotterdam and The Hague) but also in the rural areas. The 'Ring of Canals', referring to the wealthy centre of Amsterdam, became a populist term of abuse for the 'left-wing elite' who, while they personally were not involved in the problem of the 'Moroccan street-rabble', were full of understanding for their behaviour. Yet the electoral success of populism was due less to conscious Islamophobia than to a painfully direct experience of the destruction of the original homogeneous social environment of the working-class districts in the *Randstad* and a vague but not unjustified fear of social and economic decline in the mono-cultural provinces.

The future is uncertain. After the parliamentary elections of September 2012 it seems as if political populism, at least temporarily, is in retreat. Whether it also represents a turning point in the long-discredited neoliberal faith in the optimizing effect of treating the world as a market place and consequently in the measures being adopted to combat the economic crisis remains to be seen. The essential thing is to prevent a growing 'bulge' of - mainly - immigrant youth, both poorly educated *and* highly qualified, who have no social prospects. After a fairly hysterical decade, the Netherlands is a divided country, not explosively divided and torn apart, but without a heartfelt concern for the public interest in general, and new, ambitious programmes of integration and pacification in particular, the pressures of the economic crisis could yet make those divisions explosive and deeper. ■

Translated by Chris Emery