

The Search for Lost Authority

The 1960s – Again

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[CYRILLE OFFERMANS]

To be honest, I did not expect that *Les Aveugles*, a one-act play by Maurice Maeterlinck, with its heavy pessimistic symbolism and theatrical minimalism, would ever be performed again. I was wrong. Guy Cassiers staged it in 2014 in a translation by Erwin Mortier. Whether this proves *The Blind* can really be performed remains debatable. Some critics described it with some justification as a *tableau vivant* and an installation. Nevertheless, as an artistic statement about the seemingly hopeless and ungovernable problems of our time, the play undeniably has some contemporary relevance.

A group of blind people, left alone by their priest, wander about aimlessly and hopelessly until they discover that the priest, who was also their guide, is dead. Then there is a blind mad woman with a child who cries but who alone can see. Is that child the new seer, the prophet for whom everyone is yearning? But then the question is: does it cry because of what it sees? Clinical psychologist and psychotherapist Paul Verhaeghe concludes his new book *Autoriteit* (Authority, 2015) with an apposite reference to the play. He sees *The Blind* as 'a metaphor for our time which carries a clear warning: there is no longer a leader; he is dead and his return is pure fantasy. We shall have to do it all ourselves.'

It is scarcely possible that Maeterlinck did not know of Nietzsche's doom-laden pronouncement to the world, eight years earlier, of the death of God. His blind, aimlessly wandering characters are a vivid reminder of Nietzsche's madman in *The Gay Science* (1882) who, in broad daylight, lit a lantern and went into the marketplace crying out incessantly 'I seek God! I seek God!' – although it might strike the modern reader as less of a search than an example of alarmist political street theatre. The public also needed to be persuaded. God may be dead but for Nietzsche, contrary to what is often believed, it was not necessarily something to celebrate. God's death left an immense existential void. 'Where are we moving?.. Are we not plunging continually? Backwards, sideways, forward, in all directions?.. Are we not straying as if through an infinite nothing?'

Flight out of Time

Neither did Nietzsche's readers, it seems, receive the announcement of God's death with unmixed joy. On the contrary, they needed a convincing alternative, a less absolute and dogmatic but nevertheless super- or non-human source of meaning, and this took many forms at around the turn of the century, also attracting many highly educated Europeans. After one and a half millennia of monotheism, a complete metaphysical vacuum was difficult to accept. Particularly in literary and artistic circles, surrogates were sought and found in a new broadly based mysticism that embraced a colourful mixture of (semi) religious and other spiritual and irrational beliefs and practices.

The influential Maeterlinck who published in French was crowned the 'apostle of mysticism' while the even more influential nobleman Leo Tolstoy was known as 'the mystic count'. Following the latter's example, communes were set up in the Netherlands with anti-modernist and puritanical Christian leanings. The new mysticism, fed by an aversion to the prevailing urban, technological and materialistic culture, was so ubiquitous that there was scarcely a single writer who was not influenced in some way, being either inspired by it or driven to oppose it. The most succinct criticism was probably formulated by the Flemish writer Herman Teirlinck (1879-1967) who bluntly dismissed the



A priest opposes the leftist demonstrators against the 'Eenheidswet', 1961, Brussels
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Riots during the wedding of Princess Beatrix and Prince Claus, Muntplein, Amsterdam, 1966
and Provo-Happening against police action at the wedding, Prinsengracht, Amsterdam, 1966
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'strange symbolism' and 'obscure allusions' in Maeterlinck's *Péleas et Mélisande* as a 'great fraud', despite being very impressed by Claude Debussy's operatic adaptation of Maeterlinck's misty fairy tale.

The First World War marks the sharpest break in Western civilisation on all fronts. Never before can there have been such extreme disillusion as when it became apparent that the almost collective enthusiasm for war in Germany and elsewhere had not culminated in a joyful march towards the bliss of nationalist self-determination, but had instead led to total destruction.

In radical circles, God had already been done away with; but now all the alternatives faced the same fate. The Cabaret Voltaire, founded in Zurich by the Dadaists Hugo Ball and his life partner Emmy Hennings, became the stage on which the 'flight out of Time', as Ball called his fascinating autobiographical intellectual exercises in 1927, was given its most radical form. His absurdist performances had no literary pretension ('you can't turn a caprice into an artistic movement'). Rather, they were rituals of exorcism: any elements of language relating to sense, content or communication were discarded; what remained were loose, meaningless, elemental sounds to which any rational reaction was impossible and which therefore could never lead anywhere. Absolute discontinuity and unfathomableness walked hand in hand.

However, living permanently without seriousness or meaning proved too much. In 1920 Ball looked for more solid ground in of all places the strict asceticism of the early Christian hermits in the deserts of Syria and Egypt.

Cultural confusion

The 'Sixties'¹ saw a remarkable repetition of the cultural confusion of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, though of course with obvious differences. The most important difference was one of scale. Whereas the initial announcement of the death of God had been heard primarily by a social and cultural elite, now after half a century's delay it reached broader sections of the population. The Catholic Church made frantic efforts to limit the damage. It tried to make contact with doubters by doing away with its traditional Latin and hallowed Gregorian music, but all in vain. Indeed, the very attempt to be progressive did much to undermine its authority.

At best, this dilution of faith contributed to the spread of 'isms', which in all their variants are mainly a compensation for unbelievers who dare not confront their unbelief. We have been witness to an enormous growth of spiritualism, often of oriental origin. Nietzsche's sobering insight that we are wandering through an infinite void is clearly unsettling to many. The escape from one-dimensional materialism has led to the world-renouncing dogmas of Hare Krishna and Timothy Leary, to the artificial paradise of alcohol and drugs, to the idolatry of mass culture and sport, to faith healers and charlatans. The Dutch essayist Rudy Kousbroek (1929-2010) found it all highly entertaining, perhaps too much so, particularly in *Het avondrood der magiërs* (Sunset of the Magicians, 1970). For irrationalism, however amusing it might be, is ultimately more than just irrational; it always contains a diffuse yearning for a different more meaningful life, for something to hold on to, yes, even a longing for authority.

But not in the most radical areas of the visual arts. There, Dadaism made a dramatic comeback in spite of Ball's aversion to the institutionalisation of his symbolic dismantling of the institutions. But its influence on daily life was minimal. The obstinate refusal of the 'neo-Dadaists' to learn anything from Europe's cultural heritage in the second half of the twentieth century led to few, if any, new and possibly fruitful scandals, but rather to utter indifference, and galleries that were even more empty and cold than the churches.

Something of Dada's original vitality did survive in the metropolitan subcultures of hippies, Provos and other 'anarchists', who gave content to their anti-authoritarian attitudes with witty, humorous and often highly practical proposals for improving the social environment. But not surprisingly, their unconventional attitudes created tensions not only with the establishment which often reacted to their light-hearted provocations with an absurd lack of understanding and mindless police violence, but also with the more conventional members of their generation who were often tempted to satisfy their frustrated need for leadership and certainty by surrendering to the doctrines, which were as dogmatic as they were murderous, of Mao, Ho Chi Min and Fidel Castro. In defiance of all the empirical evidence, those self-declared revolutionaries remained blind to the fact that the working classes had a great deal more to lose than their chains.

Farewell to meritocracy

Nowadays the 'Sixties' often find themselves in the dock. The anti-authoritarian youth of those years supposedly paved the way for the ill-mannered citizens of today who refuse to accept any form of authority whether it is that of the

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scientist or the politician, the doctor or the teacher, the social worker or the police. They already know it all and brag noisily about it to the world. Politicians in particular have a tendency to hang on every word of the presumed popular will, which is constantly being enflamed by an alarmist media. They are finding it increasingly difficult to decide whether this manipulated 'will of the people' is also an expression of their own 'popular' convictions or merely useful to their political strategy.

Anyway, we are faced here with a vicious circle. Cowardly and blind conformity on the part of politicians strengthens the irrational, narrow-minded and often xenophobic reactions of the masses to the deep crises of the early twenty-first century – and vice-versa. Ironically, the force by which the popular will becomes the uninhibited and unhindered master of the lines of communication is rarely seen as 're-infantilisation of the masses' which leads to a desire for an omnipotent leader, as Freud analysed so penetratingly in his later writings after fleeing to London from the Nazis. On the contrary, it is described rather as a demonstration of maturity and emancipation, the origins of which should be looked for in of all places the protest culture of the 1960s.

But that is fundamentally wrong. That kind of maturity is an affront to maturity in the Kantian sense of courageously relying on one's own power of reason. The avant-garde of that culture of protest – Provos and artists, students and intellectuals – were distinguished by a highly developed sensitivity to any form of illegitimate authority. They knocked every authority off its pedestal which they regarded as a living, at times grotesque, proof that it was only there thanks to the dubious privilege of birth or tradition, and not on the basis of indisputable and continuous excellence in parliament or the lecture theatre. Meritocracy, an early bourgeois, primarily Dutch, principle directed against the arbitrary powers of church and nobility, had long been showing signs of wear. The economic and demographic developments of the 1960s laid this bare for all to see.

This is not the place to explore in detail the complex contradictions and relationships between the diverse anti-authoritarian subcultures of the past and the much more homogeneous commercial mass culture of the present. However, it is fairly safe to conclude that the latter is exercising an unprecedented degree of coercion and conformity on all sectors of society. Where that influence is weaker, the voice of the people, echoing through the mass media, can give the impression of genuinely having a say. At the same time, it illustrates more clearly than anything else how far the meritocratic principle, which Europe has so much to be grateful for, has fallen into decay. It is not talent, apart from a talent for self-promotion, but a combination of networking and luck which decides a person's success and status. Nietzsche's fear that with the death of God all vertical tension would disappear from society, removing the desire for self-improvement, has proved completely justified.

The limits to growth

It is dangerous to speak of *the* protest culture of the 1960s, considering how diverse groups were in their methods, motives and direction. Nevertheless, there is a discernible common thread, whether it involves anti-authoritarian poets, students, conservationists, antimilitarists, feminists or urban dwellers.

In all cases, they were reacting to socio-economic developments which in a short space of time had changed the whole face of the Low Countries and the developed world in general.

In the early decades after the Second World War, Western Europe enjoyed unprecedented economic growth of around 5% per annum. It was accompanied by an equally unprecedented growth in prosperity: a car, TV, contraception, washing machine, fridge, holidays, cameras (still and movie). All these luxuries were now within everybody's reach and the challenge was to outdo the neighbours. Furthermore, the post-war population explosion led to a stampede to set up educational establishments, especially from the middle classes. The welfare state was built up, churches emptied, and the class struggle continued only in the dreams of stubborn students.

But that is only the success side of the story. Consumerism and economic modernisation went hand in hand with large-scale reorganisation which brought demolition, dislocation, deforestation and social coercion. Consolidation of landholdings, increasing mobility, urban expansion and shopping centres changed the urban and rural landscape – drawing protests from students, women's organisations, urban residents and farmers.

It is not surprising that the Netherlands, Amsterdam in particular, became the centre for protest and progressive reform, and also for peaceful cooperation and toleration. The seafaring Hollanders have an anti-authoritarian streak in their blood. On their voyages to unknown and hostile regions, often lasting several years, they had to fall back on their own courage and resourcefulness. There was little need to stand on ceremony let alone indulge in the lengthy rituals of courtly manners (which Norbert Elias rather one-sidedly interpreted as the origin of Europe's culture of modesty and etiquette). Later anti-authoritarian movements could therefore, even if not always consciously, draw on a centuries-old tradition which reached back to the illustrious maritime past of the Dutch Republic in its revolt against corrupt Catholicism and the feudal Spaniards. And it surely goes without saying that the bluntness of the Dutch which foreigners often find so off-putting can to some extent be attributed to their ruthless brutality during the colonising years of the Dutch East India Company (VOC)?

At the time, protest culture became identified with its most spectacular forms: in the Netherlands, these were in particular the Provos and the musical underground. But there was also social experimentation and the 'liberation' of sexuality, the euphoria of democratisation and solidarity, the student protests and their sit-ins, the anti-imperialist and disarmament demonstrations, and in particular the violent and criminal offshoots in Germany and Italy.

But viewed from a later perspective, when it is more difficult for media coverage to be exciting, inflammatory or shocking to bourgeois sensibilities, the most important effect of the 1960s by far was the emergence across the globe of environmental awareness. The importance of the Club of Rome which was set up in 1968 and its report in 1972, *The Limits to Growth*, in which for the first time a plausible link was established between economic growth and its disastrous effects on the environment, cannot be overestimated. Its clear message, despite later criticisms, was that planet Earth does not have infinite resources and requires sensible management, which will have inescapable consequences for our whole way of living.

That message was formulated most concisely in the Netherlands by Prime Minister Joop den Uyl in 1973, the year of the oil crisis and the year in which the sharp and still ongoing decline of the Western economies began. 'Seen in that light, the world of before the oil crisis will never return.' That had been foreseen much earlier by Provo which was discontinued in 1967 for fear of paralysis in becoming too institutionalised. Roel van Duijn (a founder of the Provo movement) and his fellow activists directed their energies in theory and practice against 'the consumer society' with all its 'addictions', no matter how much the '*plebs*' might delight in them as luxuries. The most spectacular in this respect was the absurdist street theatre – at the time, referred to as 'happenings' – of the anti-smoking magician Robert Jasper Grootveld on the Spui in Amsterdam. After the fiasco of communism, which had signally failed to achieve its original goal of a life freed from the domination of alienated labour but on the contrary had everywhere become bogged down in bloody dictator-



Sit-in on the Old Market in Louvain: students fighting for a 'Flemish' (i.e. Dutch-speaking) University but also for left-wing ideals, 1968

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ship, Van Duijn argued, as had the non-violent and pragmatic Peter Kropotkin before him, for the small-scale, for horizontal networks of cooperation, for a sober life style which respected nature, and a morality that would also include the lives of animals.

New forms of authority

It is one of the ironic quirks of history that some of the core concepts of the anti-authoritarian movements of the 1960s should re-emerge unchanged a couple of decades later, though pointing in the opposite direction, in the publicity and command centres of deterritorialised, supranational concerns. The artistic *avant-garde* of the time directed its repertoire of critical concepts – flexibility, mobility, without limits, without identity – against relationships in which people seemed to be permanently defined by the circumstances in which they had first entered the world. Their goal was liberation from the rigidity of indefensible conventions and hierarchies, and a vision of new unknown worlds. But they also described unwittingly and with great clarity a postmodern world in the making which had broken free from its historical social and cultural ties and its traditional sources of meaning and motivation, with fatal consequences.

This receives its clearest statement in the grandiose and visionary 'unitary urbanism' that the visual artist Constant Nieuwenhuis developed in *New Babylon* (1956-1974). In numerous sketches, drawings, watercolours, graphics, texts, films and particularly architectural models, Constant's by definition unfinished project provides a tangible picture, not of buildings, houses, dwellings, which have become outdated in his futuristic world of the contented unemployed, but of permanently changing neighbourhoods, of an artist's colony that spreads in all directions, in which people drift constantly without ties or obligations. Life is completely decentralised and dematerialised; just as in Ball's *Cabaret Voltaire*, deeds have neither cause nor consequence. There is an obvious relationship with Guy Debord's *Situationist International* and the later anti-oedipal, rhizomatic philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari, which became so popular in arts faculties. There too we can see, broadly speaking, the hyper-romanticism of a permanent revolution of nomads in mobile undefinable spaces.

Meanwhile, the neoliberals' adopted concept of the immensely flexible human being has been as convincingly falsified in the psychiatrist's chair as in numerous philosophical works such as Richard Sennett's *Authority* (1980) and *The Corrosion of Character* (1998), Paul Verhaeghe's *Autoriteit* and the colossal *Sphären trilogy* (1998-2004) by Peter Sloterdijk. Architects, in their scarce free time, may still freely float around dreaming of a New Babylon but in their actual work they are experiencing more than ever the gravitational force of their employers' strict, profit-oriented programmes. There is no need for more flexibility, discontinuity and extravagance; there is, however, a need for non-paternalist forms of authority, based on a deep, confidence-inspiring knowledge of affairs and the power to delegate them to others.

The word authority comes from the Latin *auctoritas* which does not indicate power but moral force, dignity, reputation, influence. An authority is someone who in uncertain situations can offer certainty, protection and direction to all those who, because of their age, development or position, desire them. Its ab-

sence in childhood can create a painful lack of self-confidence, ego weakness, a gnawing dissatisfaction which can lead one later, like Maeterlinck's group of blind people, to search for a saviour. But we know that such a saviour embodies the authoritarian principle in its most shameless, irrational and repressive form. To prevent that, depending on circumstances, learning and work processes must be long-term and as horizontally structured as possible in order to encourage the full development of that authority which already resides within every human being. ■



Pupils of a Catholic college demonstrating for a 'Flemish' University, 1968

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