

## Revolt of the Students

1969 versus 2015

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[ CASPER THOMAS ]

'The university has become a difficult element in our society. The students have risen up. They demand democratization of higher education and society. The antiquated university edifice is about to collapse. The rest of society looks on in fright. The Minister of Education takes action.' If you asked someone to pinpoint this quotation to an era, the answer would be more than likely 'the present one'. At universities all over the world a wave of protest has arisen, driven by students and lecturers united by a common agenda: against cuts in research and education, against a culture of management that has been copied from the business world and against their lack of influence on the future direction of their institutions.

Yet the quotation with which this article opens comes from an earlier period in history. Describing a turbulent academic world, the above statements are taken from *De lastige universiteit. Over democratisering en politisering van onderwijs en wetenschap* (The Difficult University. About Democratization and Politicization), published in 1970 by Universitaire Pers Rotterdam, and written by a pair of sociologists – Bram Peper, the later PvdA-politician and mayor of Rotterdam, and the academic Willem Wolters – to interpret 'current and controversial issues around the university' which had already 'for quite some time' been at 'the centre of attention'.

*De lastige universiteit* (The Difficult University) contains a wonderful portrait of the era. When it was published, the Netherlands was only just saying goodbye to the decade which the authors, even then, described as 'the Roaring Sixties'. In the opening chapter the young sociologists shower us with words that were fashionable at the time (today they would be turned into a word cloud): 'Participation, democratization, autonomy, teach-in, hearing, grassroots support, joint management, right of consultation, are probably the terms most often used during the second half of the 1960s', Wolters and Peper write. A decade that reacted against 'the Boring Fifties' when only the 'Rock-and-Roll explosion' livened things up a bit. Through books like this, the image of the 1960s, which due to a generation of articulate young people has come to be seen as a watershed in history, was immediately provided with a solid foundation.

I came across *De lastige universiteit* on my father's bookshelves, which, like so many personal libraries, reflected that the desire to buy something new was always stronger than the need to get rid of old stuff.

In the early 1970s, my father was active in Amsterdam student politics and was inspired by books such as this one, and others on his bookshelf like *Studentenprotest en universiteit* (Student Protest and the University) in which the Tilburg 'social ecology' professor R.A. De Moor asserted that the student protest of the 1960s was a symptom of the 'political alienation of the younger generation'. This discovery made it possible to compare the university revolt of the 1960s and '70s with the present one: it also served as a lesson that history to a certain extent will repeat itself.

### In the name of the 99 percent

As for lessons learnt, a few months before I emptied my father's bookshelves, I had published a book myself: *Competente Rebellen. Hoe de universiteit in opstand kwam tegen het marktdenken* (Competent Rebels. How the University Revolted against the Ideology of the Market). In it, I reconstruct how for six weeks in the spring of 2015, the Maagdenhuis, the administrative centre of the University of Amsterdam was occupied by angry students. They were motivated by the precarious financial situation in which the university found itself. Because



Occupation of the Maagdenhuis, 1969 © Ed van der Elsken / Nederlands Fotomuseum



Occupiers of the Maagdenhuis, 2015

of real estate investments, the university was heavily in debt. At the same time there had to be cuts both in staff and in research funding, while whole degree programmes were threatened with closure for being 'uneconomic', according to the administration.

During the occupation, the Maagdenhuis became an open platform for a debate about the purpose of the university as institution and about how it could be won back from its administrators who, according to the demonstrators, were in the grip of 'efficiency thinking', that is, in terms of numbers, quantification, supply and demand, cost-benefit analysis. This market ideology, according to the demonstrators, was the wrong starting point for a public institution that is there for the acquiring of knowledge.

I wrote *Competente Rebellen* (Competent Rebels) in the conviction that the 2015 university protests were a symbol of a broader societal discussion. The collision at the University of Amsterdam fitted in with the ideological divide of our time regarding the foundations on which institutions are based, be it the health care, banking or university system. That was the most important reason to take the Maagdenhuis occupation seriously: the dissatisfaction with the market ideology in the public sector runs deep, but the debate about an alternative model was still in the beginning stage. At the Maagdenhuis, this discussion had begun in earnest. I suspected that the 2015 student protests could become a benchmark of a broader revolt against the market ideology of public institutions.

I saw the Maagdenhuis occupation as an expression of a new political phenomenon, that the world had already had a glimpse of with the Occupy movement which, in 2011, had occupied ('appropriated' as they preferred to call it themselves) squares all over the world in the name of 'the 99 percent'. Occupy started as a reaction to the 2008 financial crisis and demonstrated against 'su-

percapitalism'. Just like in Occupy, the heart of the Maagdenhuis occupation was the general assembly, a 'horizontal' meeting without leaders, that would only come to an end when there was complete agreement between all participants.

One source of inspiration for *Competente Rebellen* was Moisés Naim. This Venezuelan economist had already written the book *The End of Power* in which he describes the erosion of traditional power as a result of technological progress, increased mobility and changing opinions about politics. According to Naim, the way in which we make political decisions is changing, after staying the same for more than a hundred years. Social movements and NGOs are much more successful, he thinks, in bringing up issues and engaging the public.

The Maagdenhuis occupation is a perfect illustration of this theory. It knew how to put issues on the table, both in and outside the university. In their distaste of a financial economy, efficiency thinking and the desire to make everything quantifiable, the university protests are a mirror of a society in which at least some part of the population hopes to end a phase in the history of capitalism and to be able to start a new one.

### **First as tragedy, then as farce**

When I wrote all this, in the summer of 2015 shortly after the riot police had put an end to the Maagdenhuis occupation, these insights seemed extremely relevant and topical. Then the doubt came: was this really all so very new? Restless students complaining about the debasement of the university and demanding more participation, isn't this a constant in academic history? In an article related to my book, *De Groene Amsterdammer*, the weekly I work for as an editor, printed photographs of the first 1969 Maagdenhuis occupation, underneath photos of the recent one. The old photographs were in black and white, the new ones in colour, but for the rest they appeared identical: groups of students, debating in a circle.

Permanent dissatisfaction at universities even turned out to be the subject of an academic study. Shortly after I finished my book, I came across *The Question of Morale: Managing Happiness and Unhappiness in University Life* by historian of ideas David Watson, who spent the last part of his career at Oxford. According to Watson, deep dissatisfaction is an ineradicable facet of university life. Showing dissatisfaction is, he thinks, a 'rhetorical instrument' that strengthens the solidarity between the students and puts pressure on management. And this instrument, Watson showed, has been used as long as universities exist.

Opening *De lastige universiteit*, which appeared nearly half a century ago, the penny dropped. Here too, a university revolt was presented as a symptom of discontent with the dominant societal logic. Where I wrote about market ideology, Peper and Wolters talked about the 'neo-capitalist system' that had penetrated every capillary of society and against which the universities were protesting. Their observation that business and the university become interwoven because 'next to capital, knowledge has also become an important production factor' could easily have been recorded during a meeting at the Maagdenhuis last year. Moisés Naim's theory, that power is challenged from below, is also

Occupation of the Maagdenhuis, 1969



Occupiers of the  
Maagdenhuis, 2015



noted, in slightly different wording, in *De lastige universiteit*. Peper en Wolters described how the new student unions and action groups succeeded in firing up the debate about management culture in universities among the burgeoning student population. It made me think of Marx's pronouncement that history always repeats itself, first as tragedy and then as farce.

The similarity in how the student protests of the 1960s and the present ones are interpreted show how history can cling to people. Ideas and frameworks

for getting a grip on the world around us are mostly ready to be let loose on unexpected events. And as long as they apply, there doesn't seem to be an urgent need to come up with a new vocabulary. The student protests of the last half century illustrate this. Apparently, the language about democratization and economic values versus academic values was just as applicable in 2015 as it was in 1969.

And as it is with thinking, so it is with acting. Everyone who has ever occupied the Maagdenhuis is in fact referring to their recent past. The angry students who broke open its heavy wooden door in 2015 were aware that they were treading in the path of earlier Maagdenhuis occupations, eleven in total since 1969. If the walls of the building on the Spui in Amsterdam could talk, they would tell of identical scenes: noisy students congregating in the main hall, turning the offices into bedrooms and covering the walls with banners.

Does the recent Maagdenhuis occupation, as a symbol of academic discontent for the present time, therefore inevitably stand in the shadow of the very first occupation, a symbol of the legendary 1960s when young people provided society with a new foundation? Perhaps for the moment. Although the 2015 Maagdenhuis occupation lasted a month and a half, compared to not even a week in 1969, so far no big changes can be discerned in the Dutch university system as a result of the protests. Despite almost everyone in the administration of the University of Amsterdam having by now stepped down after sustained pressure for the university to change course. Nor have politics and society suddenly distanced themselves from a market ideology.

## **A post-crisis generation**

Still, comparing the 1960s' protests with those of the present is a bit of a stretch. One only has to look at the way the 1969 Maagdenhuis occupation made its way into the history books. For nearly six decades people have been referring to this event and it has become synonymous with every memory, cliché and analysis of the 1960s. In left-wing circles, the Maagdenhuis still symbolizes the moment when the Netherlands had it out with its 'regents'. The right is still of the opinion that the Maagdenhuis occupation marks the moment when the Netherlands capitulated to a generation of hedonistic pseudo-revolutionaries. It's like a screw that keeps getting turned and gets more and more stuck all the time. Every referral to the 1969 Maagdenhuis occupation in a debate or the media, every historian who mentions it, adds to the importance of this event. The recent past simply hasn't had enough time to become that stuck in the collective memory.

And although the student protests of the 1960s and the present ones are similar in form, rhetoric and symbolism, they definitely have a different context. Historian James Kennedy put it aptly in an interview in *De Groene Amsterdammer*. 'The demonstrations of the 1960s were in line with rising expectations: there was more money, students had more time, they had more freedom and they wanted to extend that freedom. Now the demonstrations are taking place amid lowering expectations: the present students and lecturers do not want to break open the university, they want a recovery, a restoration, they have the feeling that all the lights are going out and that some should be left on.'



Indeed, the present discontent among students is one of a generation that came to adulthood in the world after the 2008 economic crisis. The generation with the experience that more and more money had to be borrowed in order to study, since the underlying idea was that study was of specific benefit to the individual who therefore had to invest as well (and run the risk that the investment wouldn't pay off). The generation that enrolled at universities judged on economic performance rather than the degrees they offered in which they stimulated critical, independent thinking, with the result that the humanities in particular have become hard pressed.

Once we take this difference between the 1960s and the present into account, we get a totally different picture. In the 1960s, the Netherlands was a thriving welfare state with endless possibilities to climb the social ladder. The Maagdenhuis occupiers of that time were a product of it: mostly first generation students with social backgrounds to which the ivory tower had been closed for a long time. In 2015, it was a post-crisis generation that occupied the Maagdenhuis, the product of a society that had become uncertain after a severe economic crisis. In this light, there is now much more at stake than during the mythical 1960s.

One who dismisses the 2015 student protests in advance as an event of less societal importance than the one of the 1960s, also underestimates the fundamental uncertainty about how the past will be ordered in the future. Once sufficient time has passed, it is quite possible that an era of regularly occurring university protests will be drawn up, in which the 1960s are perhaps presented as a warm-up exercise and the 2010s as its climax.

### **A public sector playing the market**

We must not forget that the myth around the 1960s has been mainly driven by the generation that was young itself in those days and that later, due to its social influence, had the opportunity to shape our view of the past. And now that this generation is slowly losing its grip on society, making way for younger generations, the interpretation of the past is also opening up. A lot as well depends on which societal changes will occur, either suddenly or gradually, of which we have as yet no clear picture and in how far the recent Maagdenhuis occupation will be the obvious choice as a symbol encapsulating those changes.

In this light, the recent student protests raise the question of how far the present is aided by the past or actually hampered by it. The answer, as usual, is both. Because the 2015 Maagdenhuis occupiers stepped into a framework that had already been shaped by the 1960s, there was little they had to explain. Everybody understood that an occupied Maagdenhuis was the equivalent of a demand for more participation. But at the same time there is the risk that we forget that this is a new group of students who have reinterpreted the role of demonstrator for the present. In any case, the academic discontent, that boiled over in the 2015 Maagdenhuis occupation, has enough points in common with a societal undercurrent that is important *now*. These protests occurred at a moment when not only at universities, but also in health care and education as a whole, aversion to the market ideology is growing.

This administrative logic, that became dominant in the 1980s and 1990s, is based on quantification, numbers, costs and profits. It was supposed to be an answer to the cumbersome, expensive and bureaucratic public service in governmental hands. Meanwhile, the conviction is growing that this has not led to less bureaucracy, less intricate procedures or fewer rules in the public service. Let alone that it would be cheaper. Many hospitals, schools and universities struggle with debts and spend a big part of their budget on secondary activities like management, real estate dealings and communication. The central task (in the case of universities: doing research and providing education) is losing out this way. If in the coming years the public sector gradually distances itself from playing the market and behaving like a business, the 2015 Maagdenhuis occupation will be eligible, for the Netherlands at least, as the event that marks the turning point. ■

*Translated by Pleuke Boyce*

