

An Era of Early Globalisation

The 1960s in the Low Countries

12

[G E E R T B U E L E N S]

Until the 1960s, you might have been forgiven for seeing your home as the entire world. Of course, parts of that world were being colonised in your name, but an ordinary citizen would generally be fairly oblivious to all that. You might repeatedly see war on your territory, as any Belgian knows, but although the most important conflicts were called 'world wars', most Europeans experienced them as regional battles, extremely violent encounters between neighbouring countries. The breakthrough of television as a mass medium and, almost simultaneously, accelerated decolonisation and mass immigration of 'guest workers' brought the world in the 1960s both concretely and symbolically into the lives of many Western Europeans, in the Low Countries as well as elsewhere. This made it possible for matters which were essentially internal American affairs – the civil rights movement and protests against the Vietnam war – to inspire political, social and cultural movements in Europe, and vice versa, with the Provos – speaking terrible English and writing in Dutch – becoming an international media phenomenon, inspiring their contemporaries from Sweden to the United States. Vietnam and the counterculture determined to a large extent the image of this decade, but, all things considered, they occupied only a minority of the population, even among young people. However, the pop culture which broke through in the 1960s – the Beatles, the mini skirt, informal styles of clothing and interaction, in relationships and sex as well as elsewhere – transformed the lives of a whole generation and their descendants.

Times feel open

In the Low Countries, the 1960s probably really began in 1958, in Brussels. The World's Fair catapulted Belgium back to the forefront of modernity, not only through radical infrastructure works, but also by bringing together the new, the exciting, the visionary and in some cases the utopian from almost all of the rest of the world and demonstrating that an era of *possibilities* had begun. Despite the violence and crises – in full swing in the 1960s, in the Low Countries as well as elsewhere – that might be the most important feature of this time: it felt open, a preparation for the future.



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That openness was undoubtedly supported by economic growth and the conspicuous youthfulness of the population after the baby boom, but in retrospect probably also depended on the government having less of a tendency to protect citizens from themselves in their daily lives compared with today. Despite a startling rate of traffic deaths by current standards, car seatbelts were not compulsory. Smoking was so generally accepted that it went on without question in TV studios, offices and cars. Campaigns against alcohol were similarly unheard of. Those freedoms still take a high toll today, but the fact that everything was possible back then undoubtedly contributed to a carefree feel which is largely absent from today's society, with its health and safety obsession.

Glocal

In the carousel of opinions continually doing the rounds today, the story goes that the left (or terms applied synonymously: the 'cultural elite' or '1968') set this early wave of globalisation in motion or at least embraced and encouraged it, and, blinded by cosmopolitan notions, threw the baby out with the bathwater when it came to the culture and individuality of the population. This



Jimi Hendrix,
Brussels, 1964
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Frank Zappa, Palais des Beaux Arts, Brussels, 1974
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Pink Floyd,
Brussels, 1967
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John Lennon, Magical Mystery Tour, Torquay, 1967
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Paul McCartney, Magical Mystery Tour, Torquay, 1967
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misses the simple fact that mass immigration of 'guest workers' happened on the initiative of business, when employers went in search of cheap labourers who would not turn up their noses at dirty, dangerous work. A newspaper such as *De Telegraaf* supported this project and in the summer of 1965 sent a reporter to follow a Turkish labourer on his way from Rotterdam to visit the village where he was born – another sign of globalisation. It was observed with satisfaction that not only was the man delighted with his job, assuring the reporter in broken Dutch that he worked hard and earned lots of money, but that the entire operation was a civilising mission ('What can these two young girls from Çaykent expect from life? [...] Perhaps these girls will be able to benefit from Western European ideas, which the Turks will take home with them.') The European Economic Community was another project of the administrative elite. During the 1960s, no new member states joined, but in 1965 the so-called 'Merger Treaty' was signed, laying the foundation for a number of the central European institutions (the Commission, the Council of Ministers) which come under so much criticism today. The development of popular culture undeniably had internationalist if not cosmopolitan features. That had always been the case in modern times and developments in media and communications technology accelerated that process after World War II. At the same time so-called global trends (in practice almost all Anglo-American, occasionally French) exhibited conspicuously local variants with different emphases, and individual characteristics were not automatically sacrificed for the general or supposed universal.

Lange Houtstraat, Amsterdam, ca. 1965 © Ed van der Elsken / Nederlands Fotomuseum



Against uniformity

Folk music appears to be a genre which reflects individual roots and community by definition. The fact that it suddenly flourished in the Low Countries in the 1960s, however, was due to international trends; specifically its exceptional success in the United States, with new voices (Joan Baez, Odetta, Judy Collins) and new songs (by Phil Ochs, Tom Paxton and particularly Bob Dylan) giving this music an unprecedented boost. Flanders and the Netherlands also had their protest singers (Armand, Ferre Grignard, Fabien Collin), but they did not just refer to local events (like Miek & Roel in 'Te Leuven'); in Flanders in particular dialect variants flourished. In the various provinces musicians sought to establish a connection with the language and heritage of the region and with local concerns. In Antwerp Wannes Van de Velde was involved in early 'happenings' to make parts of the city centre free of traffic; in his songs he also protested against the mindless destruction of the medieval core of the city. To the elite of that time (promoters of the construction industry and politicians) this certainly came across as anti-modern, perhaps even reactionary contrariness, but in retrospect it is as clear as day that Van de Velde with his ecological and urban concerns was ahead of his time in one of the most important public debates of the past decades, internationally too: that of town planning and keeping vulnerable local communities liveable. The choice of dialect was also loaded with significance: singers such as Van de Velde used this to counter the impersonal uniformity which seemed to be paired with this latest phase of modernity, whether it was American, European or Dutch.





Demolition of the *Galerij* on Frederiksplein, former site of the *Paleis voor Volkslijft*, now *De Nederlandsche bank*, Amsterdam, 1961 © Ed van der Elsken / Nederlands Fotomuseum

Oppressed peoples

Another aspect of globalisation which seems very topical is the conspicuous revival of nationalism in the 1960s. Unlike today, it was a largely left-wing (sometimes even left-revolutionary) variety. From Quebec to the Basque Country and from Scotland to Flanders, nationalist movements weighed on the political and social climate, in the former two cases through bombings and other violence, in the latter predominantly by marches and political writing. Significantly, the way these movements flourished among young people was often seen in the light of decolonisation and the battle against big business. A progressive Flemish radical newspaper such as *De Nieuwe* (1964-1984) argued that the Flemish people should be emancipated both in spirit and politically, but they wanted the same thing for the people of Angola, Vietnam and other oppressed nations. During the notorious student protests in Leuven people first shouted 'Out with the Walloons!' (directed at the francophone elite in the Flemish university city), but soon added, 'Out with the bourgeois!' In that climate the University of Leuven eventually split (with construction starting on Louvain-la-Neuve in 1969) and the federalisation of Belgium was also formally placed on the political agenda – 1970 brought an end to the unitary state.

Adieu to the smell of boiled sprouts

For the Netherlands, the 1960s almost appear to be the beginning of contemporary history. Of course, the Golden Age is an endless source of national pride and for many ethical and political discussions World War II remains the refer-

ence point, but for the country's self-image as a liberal, progressive nation we largely draw on the 1960s. That was when, tradition has it, the nation of hard-working, pragmatic tradesmen finally took a step back from the 'smell of boiled sprouts' which had always defined the atmosphere of the Netherlands and the world was embraced as a magic globe full of possibilities. The core of the transformation took place in Amsterdam, which described itself at the time as the 'magical centre' of the country and the world. Of course, that was very much a relative matter. Liverpool, London, San Francisco and Paris in fact exhibited slightly stronger powers of attraction, and for the vast majority of Amsterdammers (not to mention the rest of the country) the new washing machine, first television or car, and for young people the latest Beatles record, were rather more important than what a group of crazy Provos were getting up to on the Spui square. Moreover, in this version of the facts it is conveniently forgotten how the 1950s with CoBrA and the Vijftigers had already caused a profound revolution in high culture.



In the light of the later history of the country and of the current climate of intellectual debate in the Netherlands, what happened in the 1960s around the Provo movement was nevertheless of great importance. The international image of Amsterdam changed so radically that in early 1969 *The New York Times* was able to describe the city as a spot for hippies, Provos, rebels, homosexuals, drugs and tolerance. A year later, a reporter for *Rolling Stone* incredulously related how the prices of various sorts of drugs were read out on VPRO radio as if they were stock market results. It all seemed so natural in the new Netherlands, but of course it was not. Even if, as James Kennedy convincingly showed, the Dutch elite went along remarkably comfortably with this cultural revolution, beneath it all something raged which today we would call a culture war. Broadcasting companies such as VARA and VPRO intentionally sought out the boundaries of decency and the consequent commotion was expertly exploited in consultation with prominent intellectuals and publishers. While this was certainly about religion and sex, perhaps the more important point was the tone with which the new media elite distanced itself in these discussions from what was tellingly referred to as the 'klootjesvolk' or 'hoi polloi'. In the apparently so-tolerant Netherlands, people with different views were sidelined as stupid or dangerous. In *Bericht aan de rattenkoning* (Message to the Rat King, 1966), a book-length analysis and insider history of the Provo movement, Harry Mulisch did not hesitate to contrast cosmopolitan Amsterdam, radiating freedom, with 'the province, where the feudal spirit of AUTHORITY rules', a spirit which was politically interpreted as the Boerenpartij or Farmers' Party of Farmer Koekoek, the first clearly Poujadist party in the country. Koekoek led a campaign with the slogan 'For Right, Freedom and Authority' and the fact that he succeeded in gaining considerable parliamentary success shows that the regular parties were no longer seen as defenders of those values. Above all, of course, it shows that even in the large cities, where many of the party's voters resided, contrary to expectations raised by its name, a substantial proportion of the population really did want to see these values defended and wanted nothing to do with the radical liberalisation of the Netherlands. The fact that the party still never succeeded in achieving more than seven seats in the House of Representatives illustrates the extent to which Mulisch exaggerated when he suggested that Koekoek spoke for more or less everyone outside the sanctuary of Amsterdam. By making the enemy out to be bigger than it really was, he may well have made the Provos more heroic, but of course, that did not change the fact that there was indeed an enemy; besides Farmer Koekoek, the popular newspaper *De Telegraaf* in particular convincingly adopted that role.

In Dutch history it is rarely pointed out how much rhetorical violence was involved in all this and how much the heralds of the cultural revolution presented the actual use of violence as an obvious option in their writing. Mulisch compared Koekoek's supporters with the Ku Klux Klan, and, based explicitly on the translation of Mao's *On Guerrilla Warfare*, published in 1965 and much read at the time, he also saw the Provos as the shock troops which introduced the urban guerrilla into the Dutch political establishment. The fact that the German Red Army Faction later found both sympathisers and actual support in the Netherlands is in that light less remarkable than the fact that there was



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no native domestic terrorist movement in the country itself. Although Koekoek is seen today with good reason as a forerunner to Pim Fortuyn and Geert Wilders, opponents of the Provo movement continue generally to be represented as the losers, as reactionaries and neo-fascists who for that very reason found themselves on the wrong side of history. As long as that is the case, the Provo movement appears to have won the culture war, but it is by no means certain that it will remain in the lead.

Globalisation of culture under the influence of mass media can also be illustrated by the relative ease with which this in fact rather limited group of miscreants of the Provo movement reached the world press with their ideas and happenings. Vincent van Gogh and Piet Mondrian also succeeded in reaching the top of the international avant-garde, although they did so from France. The members of CoBrA and Vijftig had already given the scene a thorough shake-up, but Appel, Corneille and Vinkenoog too had built up their networks and much of their wisdom in Paris. Thanks to the speed of the television and their own media savvy, however, the Provos succeed, albeit very briefly, in becoming world famous from Amsterdam. Indeed, they quite innocently put into practice an idea which terrorists would later perfect: the quickest way into the news is throwing a bomb. The Provos' bombs were minor affairs: a pineapple bomb in one of their



Near the Waterlooplein, Amsterdam, ca. 1965 © Ed van der Elsken / Nederlands Fotomuseum

magazines and in 1966, at the wedding of Princess Beatrix to the German Claus von Amsberg, smoke bombs. Those images went around the world, as did the White Bicycle Plan, as mediagenic as it was original, if not visionary.

Happenings

In fact, the Provo movement was far from the only one to touch a sensitive note abroad. The world of free jazz and modern classical music retains a very special place in the Netherlands (and Belgium too thanks to Fred Van Hove). 'Jazz + Classical Music + Absurdism', states the cover of Kevin Whitehead's book *New Dutch Swing* (1999), and along with the title of Robert Adlington's *Composing Dissent* (2013) that nicely sums up the unique contribution of Misha Mengelberg, Willem Breuker, Han Bennink, Louis Andriessen and co. They proved how exciting freedom and crossing boundaries could be; how jazz, classical music, theatre and poetry could overlap and how democratic and artistic engagement could touch folk and pop music as well as the avant-garde.

Avant-garde movements had also often been extremely mediagenic in the first half of the twentieth century, but due to a lack of moving images most citizens only became acquainted with their ideas and exhibitions through the written word. In the era of television that changed in two ways. Artists and musicians increasingly sought out their audiences and art came out of the museum or gallery. Happenings in public places also often led to spectacular images, raising eyebrows among some sectors of the public, which was ideal for news or current

affairs programmes. This method reached millions of viewers who would never go to happenings or similar activities themselves. The effect was not limited to dissemination of culture. Since these were also the years in which art subsidies were substantially expanded, this mass confrontation with extreme art must certainly have increased feelings of aversion and alienation among many viewers towards what the so-called silent majority saw as an overly permissive society.

The 1960s can therefore be seen as an early moment in post-war globalisation, but the Low Countries themselves performed rather awkwardly on the world stage. The decade marked the final moment in history when the foreign policy of both Belgium and the Netherlands really carried weight and formed the subject of continuous international attention, sometimes even irritation. The overly hasty decolonisation of Congo, the remaining troubles in resource-rich Katanga, and the transfer of New Guinea to Indonesia, forced by the United States, led to scepticism and criticism abroad. However, the Low Countries only came to a political and public examination of conscience long after events such as Hugo Claus's analysis of colonial ideology in his play *The Life and Works of Leopold II* (1970), or psychologist and war veteran Joop Hueting being forced into hiding following his 1969 television revelations about Dutch war crimes during the Indonesian war for independence.

The '70s are the real '60s

It might be a cliché to say that the 1960s really took place in the 1970s, but there is some truth to it. It was only then that the Netherlands gained a real left-wing cabinet (Den Uyl, 1973–1977), the country became known internationally for its policy of tolerance for abortion and soft drugs, and a generous budget became available for development cooperation, including support to Cuba and liberation movements in Angola and Mozambique. Here the government manifestly attempted to stand on the right side of history. At the same time these were also the years in which the wagging left-wing finger of caution, later so much criticised, came not only from activists in anoraks but also from members of government. Ministers joined in marching in protests against Franco (which mattered little if at all to the average Dutch citizen), as well as making motor-bike helmets compulsory and introducing breathalyser tests.

Left-wing philosophy, however, was more deeply anchored in society than might have been suspected purely on the basis of election results. In Flanders, too, in the course of the 1970s it became clear how much the social movement and the movements for peace, women, youth, ecology and the Third World were communicating channels, in which the significance and weight of Christian-inspired civil society was not to be underestimated. Yes, in Flanders too the churches were quietly emptying, but spirituality and a deep sense of connection with the underprivileged nearby and far away created a generation which perhaps experienced the ideals of Christian charity more deeply than their devout forebears. Even when the economic crisis of the 1970s and 1980s hit hard, these movements kept the ideas of the 1960s alive. There was plenty of narcissism and ego-tripping in the 'Golden Sixties', but this period also introduced a feeling of solidarity from which twenty-first-century advocates of a new sense of community still have a great deal to learn. ■