The roots of contemporary populism in the Netherlands

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COUNTERPOINT

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1

A culture of equality

To condone rather than command

The Dutch rarely dwell on the fact that their country is a small paradise for children. According to new research by the World Health Organisation (WHO), Dutch children are the happiest of all countries in the West. They are the most healthy, enjoy going to school and have a good rapport with their parents.

This remarkable international result does not evoke special pride in the Dutch. It goes without saying that children are happy and perform well; it is part and parcel of the Dutch culture. Parents are expected to provide as carefree a youth as possible for their children, preferably with little duties. Responsibilities will enter their lives eventually, when they have reached adulthood.

In raising children, the Dutch consider one aspect crucial: the bond of trust between parent and child. The Dutch consider their children to have individual personalities from an early age. They have 'an interest in the soul of the Dutch child', as journalist Greta Riemersma puts it. Parents do not instruct their children often, nor do they forbid much. Compared to children in other countries, the Dutch youth enjoy many freedoms. Raising children is a matter of example and condonance, the practice of letting children explore the world on their own initiative, while keeping a watchful eye. Parents are not absent; they stick around in order to intervene when necessary, but they try to keep this to a limit. Preferably, children teach themselves to control their impulses, so as

to internalise good behaviour – Dutch education is an exercise in civilisation. In this process parents behave as loving counsellors, rather than exercising clear authority. They try to shield their children from conflict. Even if they give their children a clear assignment, the purpose is for them to be happy.

The obvious consequences are visible, for instance, in public spaces. The Dutch cultural critic Michael Zeeman once said: 'If, on the service stations adjacent to the European highways, one sees children jumping on the tables and benches, one can be certain: these people are Dutch.' Indeed, Dutch parents will not easily get their children to behave; and even then usually only after a while. Hence the blatantly unaware behaviour of youngsters. One can not count on young people to yield their seats for older passengers on buses or trams, certainly not in cities. They may not even allow all passengers off the bus before boarding. The national airport, Schiphol, has adjusted to this behaviour. Electronic signposts explicitly state walking on the conveyor belts is prohibited, an announcement I have never seen at any other airport.

The Dutch way is essentially about condoning, so that children will gradually learn how to behave themselves. This explains a lot about Dutch culture and it clarifies much about the social behaviour of the Dutch. This approach is not limited to raising children, of course. It manifests itself in the social mores of the country. The Dutch tolerate a lot and do not immediately address each other about unwanted behaviour. Ideally, people are meant to become civilised by learning from surrounding examples. Authorities are supposed to interfere as little as possible. Clear attempts to exert authority often evoke jeering reactions. The Dutch treat each other as equals, even when in fact they are not – just as parents and children actually are not.

No breaking rank

Equality is an important concept in Dutch culture; the country is seeped in it. This is also well-recognised abroad: 'going Dutch' is generally known as an equal split of the bill by all participants. The characteristic Dutch landscape is a fitting background for this mentality. The word 'the Netherlands' literally means the 'nether lands': low lying lands. The territory has been known as the low lands, or *Pays-Bas,* across the world for many centuries. Indeed, large parts of the landscape consist of flat land as far as the eye can see. Even from a distance one can observe what the neighbours are doing. No hills or mountains obscure the view. The landscape does not change its appearance in twilight. No mysteries here: the Dutch landscape is open, clear, light, spacious and flat.

Folk wisdoms, expressed in idioms, reflect this. A typical Dutch saying goes 'behave normally, that's weird enough already'. This saying conveys two ideas: the Dutch must behave 'normally' – they are expected to live modestly and not brag or show off. At the same time, they should not deviate from common practice. All are equal and woe be unto those who depart from this: the consequences will be dear. Another popular saying refers to this danger explicitly: 'one is not supposed to stick one's head above the hedge'. Anyone who does risks losing it to the hedge trimmer.

Behaving normally is an internalised code. The magnificent Dutch paintings of the Seventeenth century exhibit the most beautiful examples. Rembrandt, Vermeer and Pieter de Hoogh became world famous for their focus on humans and their depictions of scenes at the home: no kings in all their splendour and glory, but instead hand-scrubbed streets in Delft, lonely old men, or a mother playing with her child. Art historians have indicated that women are depicted benignly in these paintings as they fulfil normal daily chores around the house. This is also

an aspect of Dutch culture. The famed Dutch sociologist Geert Hofstede demonstrated with a self-developed index that the Netherlands enjoys a feminine culture. Brute force is seldom applied and is rarely effective. Dutch men are not known to be bursting with testosterone. Police and army are service-oriented rather than aggressive. In Afghanistan 'the Dutch approach' is known as a method of winning trust from the local population by helping them with their daily practical problems instead of simply cruising around in tanks.

The virtues of modesty

This is all very nice, but it does have a downside. Feminine-value patterns do not always stimulate people to bring out their best. The inclination to constantly judge each other can be stifling. One could make a comparison to the way crabs prevent each other from climbing out of a basket. As soon as one of them tries to escape, all crabs join forces to pull her down. Feminists may be familiar with this example, but it applies to other cultures too, especially in the Netherlands. Shared misery is preferred to one or two escaping their fate; one is not supposed to elevate oneself above the group.

This feeling is deeply rooted in the Dutch mentality. If one were to wander along the Amsterdam canals – the historical city centre classified as world heritage by Unesco – one would not expect them to have belonged to the wealthiest parts of the world during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries. In an interview with *De Groene Amsterdammer* magazine, professor Giselinde Kuipers was quoted as saying, 'Modesty has long been a persistent attribute in Dutch society. One was not supposed to show that one was doing quite well. This principle is represented in the architecture of the *grachtengordel* buildings. Only by looking very hard could one perhaps

discover a tiny ornament on the top floor of these houses. This, of course, stems from culture.'

One will search in vain for expensive palaces full of mirrored rooms in the Netherlands; they simply have not been built. While kings and emperors ruled in surrounding countries, the Netherlands was a Republic in which burghers enjoyed far-reaching rights and freedoms. Only much later did the Netherlands become a kingdom. Since the end of the Nineteenth century, a line of queens has led the royal house of Orange. The royals are now quite popular, provided that they behave according to the norm. For instance, the Crown Prince's three daughters travel to school by bike every day, rain or shine, just like everybody else. The family sold the expensive villa they had bought in Mozambique due to the ruckus it provoked in society. Those complaints were typically Dutch. Even the royal family would not dare to assume airs.

Among equals

Globalisation has certainly left its mark in the Netherlands, yet the egalitarian mentality persists. An Air France board member, whose company merged with the Dutch national carrier KLM a few years ago, recently supplied two illuminating examples in an interview with the Dutch business daily *Het Financieele Dagblad*. In France, he said, if a manager happens to have lunch with his subordinates, he speaks while the employees listen. But in the Netherlands it is the other way around. The manager is expected to listen, which he or she usually does, while staff blatantly express their opinions.

Bluntness is a typical Dutch manner, indeed. Dutch managers working abroad often learn this the hard way. Suddenly they have to give clear assignments as staff are waiting for instructions, not being used

to voicing their opinions – let alone blatantly expressing their views – as the Dutch do.

All this voicing of opinions has a cause, as the Air France board member shrewdly remarked. The Dutch attempt to reach consent. It is their ultimate goal. If in Italy or France eight out of ten team members are in favour of a certain course of action, the matter is settled: majority rules. Not so in the Netherlands. Here, people discuss the matter until all ten team members agree and are convinced. Even if this process takes time, it must be done. The Dutch conscientiously work toward mutual agreement; only then will they move forward. As long as overall consensus is lacking, they feel free to abstain. For people with a non-Dutch background, this is often difficult to grasp.

The social polder

This urge toward universal consent is expressed in a nearly untranslatable, specifically Dutch concept: 'to polder'. It means: discussing, giving and taking, until everybody has agreed. The concept 'to polder' refers directly to the specific Dutch custom of winning land from the sea. It made the Netherlands famous across the world. More than one third of Dutch territory lies below sea level. High, self-made dykes protect the land against the sea. Much land was extracted from the sea, sometimes by natural causes, but more often by human labour. Over a thousand years ago the first dykes were built to protect the inhabitants against the rising tides. The Dutch also built dykes around lakes or other bodies of water, which they slowly milled dry, using the iconic windmills.

This procedure resulted in flat and level lands that the Dutch call polders. The soil consists of wet clay, fertile for grass, making it excellently suited for livestock that produce the Dutch milk used for making

cheese. For the Dutch, the iconic picture of their country consists of a polder meadow with cows grazing, rather than a picture of windmills or tulips. The polders were even used to offer protection against enemies. When their armies approached, the Dutch would puncture the dykes, causing the polders to flood and the armies to drown, keeping the burghers in their small cities out of reach.

The battle against the sea and the subsequent winning of the polderlands resulted from intensive collaboration between farmers, burghers and the aristocracy. All had an interest in keeping their feet dry, and all needed to put in an effort to reach this goal. Lacking a central authority to enforce action, the Dutch needed to solve the problem amongst themselves. That was why it was essential that everybody agreed and actually participated.

This last aspect has often been ignored by critics of the practice of 'poldering'. Indeed, it takes time to get everyone involved, and surely a decision-making process would be faster if decided by majority vote. But once an agreement is reached, this implies all participants are bound to execution. All share responsibility. Time lost in the initial phase often gets regained in execution. The open and flat polder offers no place to evade responsibility, to hold one's ground, to say 'yes' but to do the opposite. This goes towards explaining Dutch economic successes. Although minimal authority has been excercised, quite a lot has been achieved.

2

Consensus unmasked

The informalities of professional interaction

Or should we say: *used* to be achieved? In recent years the polder model has lost nearly all of its lustre. Whereas in the Nineties the Netherlands was lauded worldwide for its excellent economic results and the social welfare it developed, the Dutch themselves developed serious doubts. Public opinion regarding 'polderen' has dwindled considerably in the last few years. To polder still represents lengthy discussion, but without the striking results. Nor do people feel it it be a joint effort any more. For a country that holds discussion and consent to be crucial to the national identity, this is quite a dramatic outcome. Its development coincides with the rise of populism.

In recent years 'to polder' has become synonymous with a single aspect of Dutch society: the socio-economic infrastructure. The underlying cultural connotations of the age-old dyke-builders from the Middle Ages have been lost. Now the polder symbolises the regulated discussion between unions and organisations of employers, who have struck deals on lots of topics, ranging from pensions to vocational training. This socio-economic polder has gained power since the Fifties. Any deal between employers and unions regarding workers' pay automatically receives legal force – a measure of the polders' weight in Dutch politics.

But the climate has been changing. In the Seventies and Eighties the unions could enforce improvements by means of action. Gradually, however, the polder model

became a culture in itself, serving professionals from both sides, who, with the best intent, nevertheless slowly lost sight of their constituencies. High-level stakeholders would meet and discuss conflicting interests; but in fact they had turned into similar kinds of people, who were supposed to be adversaries, yet had lots in common and spoke the same language.

Backroom politics

The populists were the first to criticise this development. They certainly succeeded in damaging the polder model image. Today, the Dutch think of poldering as almost equivalent to discussions amongst insiders who eventually reach incomprehensible compromises. According to recent research conducted by The Netherlands Institute for Social Research, half of the Dutch population consider aiming for compromise to be unsatisfactory politics.

Populism has been present in the Netherlands for more than ten years now, and it shows. Ideas have been discussed, considered and debated between strong proponents and opponents for many years. Simple statements against 'those hideous' populists have given way to intelligent criticism, not only regarding populist views but also regarding some of their complaints. Many Dutch people still dislike the populists and the majority of the Dutch electorate could hardly be considered supportive. But populism has not been a whim and it has proven not to be a mere hobby of a specific interest group. Its rise signals a changing equilibrium in Dutch society and must be understood as such.

The mystery of Pim Fortuyn

Who, for example, would be able to put a finger on the first Dutch populist Pim Fortuyn? He proved difficult

to pinpoint, even for the Dutch. Fortuyn, who was murdered ten years ago, was a frivolous character, openly homosexual, who let himself be driven around in a Daimler by his butler. He provided a unique spectacle in the Netherlands. Fortuyn argued for putting a hold on immigration. Many regular Dutch people supported this idea but others thought it outrageous, and elites were horrified. They accused him of racism, but whether this was true is open for debate. Fortuyn judged Islam for being a backward culture, not for its religious values, although many failed to see the difference.

At the same time, Fortuyn attacked the management culture in large parts of public services. He accused managers of promoting their own interests; of awarding themselves ever more pay, while forcing teachers, nurses and housing staff into all kinds of anonymous and bureaucratic management schemes. This critique struck a note not only with the staff involved but also with many Dutch people who worried about public services being taken over by technocratic management. Fortuyn wrote: 'We have become lost'. He touched a nerve with many.

Fortuyn actually led the polls during the 2002 election campaign. He might have been prime minister. But his party LPF soon became a magnet for discontent of all sorts, even more so after Fortuyn himself was assassinated.

The murder of Fortuyn in May 2002 – committed by a lone animal activist who had lost his bearings – proved to be a watershed. Politics lost its innocence in a single blast, no matter what one thought about Fortuyn and his approach. For a while, LPF took part in a haphazard coalition government, but soon decay set in. The party disappeared from the stage. However, it did prepare the road for others to sow – and harvest – populist sentiment.

Since then, populism has grown in the Netherlands. Gradually, it has become clear that the movement is not solely targeted at the multicultural society. Populists have

tried to grasp any topic that might bother common citizens: bankers and their bonuses, a failing EU, Greek national debt, young criminals from Moroccan descent. Still, the attitude towards immigrants has become quite nasty in the Netherlands. Unemployment rates among youths from non-Dutch origin are astoundingly high. Discrimination persists, but this causes considerably less disapproval than it did, for instance, ten years ago. The populists' style has left its mark; Fortuyn's phrase 'I say what I think' has become a pretext for easily hurting people's feelings. Over the past ten years the Netherlands has not been a comfortable place to live in for immigrants, not even for those who were born there. Still, one could argue this to be a consequence of the populists' style, heartily embraced by a fascinated media, than being their actual goal. Professor of national history James Kennedy, said: 'In the end, populists are far angrier with the elites than with the immigrants.' The elites have only started to learn this lesson.

3

Elites under fire

Repressive tolerance

Why has populism become so popular in a prosperous and egalitarian country like the Netherlands? There are several answers to this interesting question, and they each have a point. First, simply because it can. The Dutch political system is very open to newcomers. It is an easy job to start a new political movement. The voting threshold is low and parties, instead of voters, decide who their members of parliament will be. Since the decline of the pillar system, many Dutch people are in search of their political identity. Newcomers often get the benefit of the doubt. So for years political movements have come and gone in the Dutch Parliament. Some have disappeared as quickly as they emerged. In the Nineties, for instance, three different political parties representing the elderly participated in parliamentary elections. One of them actually occupied six of the 150 seats. But only five years later, none of those parties still existed.

The low voting threshold conforms to the old Dutch polder tradition. Polder management used to be in the hands of coalitions of parties who had little in common except for their communal worries. Historically, the Netherlands was home to all sorts of church communities, each one a little different from the other. They all sought representation. The polder tradition supported this. Parties would not dwell on their differences but focus on what could be achieved together. Conflicting views simply would not be

debated, but rather were taken for granted – otherwise nothing would be accomplished.

The Dutch Parliament offers a similar picture. Over the years many parties have been represented, sometimes with only a handful of seats, while at the same time the larger factions have led the way. As a consequence, a party has had to last one or preferably two elections before being taken seriously by the Dutch voter. The populists have withstood this test easily, albeit in different forms. So today they are part of the political landscape.

But the rise of the populists is also connected to the attitude of the Dutch elites. In his rather brilliant book *New Babylon Under Construction*, historian James Kennedy argued that the Dutch elites are not inclined to defend their positions and interests as a matter of principle, unlike the elites in surrounding countries. They react in the usual Dutch way: using a form of repressive tolerance, such as condoning the new movement, while hoping it eventually becomes civilised. There is an analogy with Dutch upbringing: when possible, one tries to avoid conflict, while also allowing room for change.

Only when a new movement persists – as for instance in the case of the '68 youth movement – does the elite come around and compromise. This is how politicians and governors behaved during the student uprisings. By occupying the Catholic University of Tilburg and renaming it the Karl Marx University, students achieved a fundamental democratisation of the governing board, winning an important vote for the student factions.

Something similar has happened with regard to the populists. Instead of fighting Pim Fortuyn and his successor Geert Wilders, the governing elites absorbed part of the criticism until the populist view slowly became mainstream. Now, for example, almost all political parties support a strict immigration policy, thanks to the

populists. Watching television, one might almost become convinced that Dutch voters fiercely object to policies regarding the European Union, when in fact a large majority favour continued membership. To a certain extent it actually would take some courage to admit that one thought the populists' views to be absolute nonsense. If one admitted this openly, one would immediately be accused of fostering elitist attitudes.

A social system under strain

Immigration policies have undoubtedly contributed to the rise of populism. However, one could argue that the populists' critique has not primarily been directed against the immigrants who resided in the Netherlands, but rather against the politicians for allowing society to develop in this way. Some assume that the fear of immigration is related to workers' fears of losing their jobs to cheaper labour. This aspect, however, does not apply to the Netherlands. Most immigrants were never competitors in the labour market; quite the opposite, in fact. Often they came to the Netherlands to do the kind of labour for which the original Dutchmen considered themselves too good, like factory labour or working in greenhouses. *Allochtonen*, as the Dutch call their non-native inhabitants (from the Greek for strangers), often have a hard time finding good jobs.

Populists more commonly objected to the cultural aspects of immigration. They complained about immigrants not mastering the Dutch language, different ways of dressing, conflicting attitudes regarding sexual equality, people misbehaving in public. Immigrants were accused of not adapting to the Dutch way of doing things, of visibly holding on to their own identity while living in the Netherlands.

Some socio-economic factors were also related to this concern. The Netherlands keeps a generous welfare state from which immigrants could possibly reap benefits. At least, some feared they might. Obviously, most immigrants came to the Netherlands to earn money from working hard. But one has to admit that mistakes were made in previous decades, including by those who bore political responsibilities.

These mistakes regarded the welfare state, which in the Netherlands was built on the idea that all participate and all contribute. This idea is similar to the old polder model. The system works fine as long as everyone who is able does actually participate. All who work are supposed to pay social premiums. Only the sick and the old should apply to welfare, which is paid for by the social premiums of the workers. However, no one mentioned this to the newcomers who fled to the Netherlands in the Eighties and the Nineties. In fact, amongst the Dutch themselves it also became morally acceptable to lean on easy social provisions. Social benefits were viewed as a right, not as a provision. Nobody seemed to care much about who contributed and who benefitted. The logic behind the system was lost. This is how the social system itself came under severe stress.

In the Eighties and Nineties, the figures clearly indicated that a relatively large number of immigrants had fallen back upon social security – for whatever reasons. However, little was done to address this problem. It reeked of racism – or so many thought, the elites included. They missed their chance to actually address the problem and look for good solutions, such as better guidance for immigrants on the labour market, in combination with the clear message that social benefits are related to social duties. Immigrants, many of whom were hard workers, gradually gained a stigma of being looters.

Some Dutch people are still angry because in those days they were not able to voice their criticism due to the risk of being branded as racists. This anger has been fermenting, and has directed itself at the governing elites who let this all happen while the ‘common men’ were not taken seriously.

Distributive justice

The Netherlands has always suffered a difficult relationship with its elites. Often one would pretend they simply did not exist, believing that all were equal. Both lower and higher classes would adhere to this mentality. It goes to explain why the Dutch nobility has had little influence in politics. The Dutch kept no court to speak of, no centre of power; they did not even have a single obvious capital. The government was located in The Hague, trade and culture flourished in Amsterdam, and the most important seaport was developing in Rotterdam, which in the Twentieth century grew into the largest seaport in the world.

This is how the balance of power has been kept until this very day. Every Dutch city boasts its own museum with its own collection. Not a soul would consider changing this. Distributive justice prevails. Just imagine the repulsion over a building were it to raise itself above the so-called hedge!

The Dutch elite – which of course exists – used to be primarily an elite of burghers, coming from well-off Calvinist families for whom modesty was a prime virtue. They would hardly distinguish themselves from the common people, and only then by language rather than by their possessions. It would simply not be done to flaunt these too obviously, just like their predecessors who lived on the Amsterdam canals. The elite, largely consisting of a small group of privileged and wealthy

families, would mostly confer with each other. They would support the public cause out of their sense of duty. *Noblesse oblige* was – and still is – strongly felt.

The famous Dutch pillar system has been quite supportive of this. A self-made system, this system has been characteristic of Dutch society. Different religious groups would each have their own public services, paid for by the state. Catholics, Protestants, socialists and liberals would each host their own sphere. Pillars provided an identity; one was born into a club. Members would go to their own schools, would be sent to their own hospitals and would frequent their own baker or butcher. The elites within these pillars would run church administration, govern the orphanage or attend the school board. All would meet in church – each in their own row, but still... People knew each other, greeted each other; there was a bond of community. This universal pillar system also explains why the Netherlands experienced little social unrest, even during the years of economic crisis in the Thirties. All over Europe, the crisis provoked masses of workers to go out onto the streets, but in the Netherlands the socialists kept their own social strata with their own newspaper, broadcasting service and sports clubs. It was a matter of mutual adaptation; the socialists molded themselves to the civil society of burghers whilst society ensured that the contradictions remained manageable. Child labour was made illegal and general voting rights were introduced; but this did not take a revolution. A simple threat of the masses rising made elites jump into action – just as Tilburg's university board would do fifty years later. Compliance and compromise – it was all part of the deal.

From vertical to horizontal

Today, the pillar system has nearly vanished. A few remnants remain – for instance in the organisation of education. Any religious group still has the right to start its own school, subsidised by the state. This is a bit of a relic, as the system of organised vertical compartments is quickly disappearing. The new liberal/social-democratic government decided to do away with the old broadcasting system, built on the pillar system, in favour of a more neutral national broadcasting system, like the BBC.
Over the years the vertical compartmentalisation system has made way for a system of horizontal connections. Economically and socially like-minded people share the same neighbourhoods, have their children attend the same schools, shop at the same supermarkets. Rather than living among the (religious) group they were born into, they choose to live among people who share their status and lifestyles. Today a new form of compartmentalisation is developing in the Netherlands. Horizontal, not vertical divisions prevail. This is an unforeseen but important consequence of the rise of meritocracy.

4

Our kind of people

Measuring by merit

The term ‘meritocracy’ as a concept is not familiar to many people. This is remarkable, as the idea behind the term has had a huge influence in the Western world, and the same goes for the Netherlands. The term was coined by British sociologist and freethinker Michael Young. Along with colleagues, he established the Open University. Young had a prescient mind. In the mid-Fifties he wrote a biting satire regarding the latest ideas in Britain. His point would only be noticed many years later, perhaps even more so in the Netherlands than in the United Kingdom. Young continued a line of thought that was quite popular at the time: rather than having the country run by the British upper classes, government and management should be handed to the smartest people with the best qualities – regardless of heritage. This was a leftist emancipatory idea, hailed by Labour. Not one’s status at birth, but rather one’s personal achievements would define one’s place in society. Society would be best served by putting the best people in the best positions. Meritocracy was not a plea for personal development but a concept instrumental for the improvement of society. Society would be best off if the smartest, hardest working people held key positions.

Michael Young’s achievement was that, without hesitation, he pointed to where this well-meaning logic would lead: to a top layer of self-congratulating individuals who, just like other administrators and

politicians, would ultimately attempt to secure their power base for as long as possible. His satire, *The Rise of the Meritocracy,* describes how putting too much value on intelligence and merit undermines the self-respect of those who are less smart or less industrious. Appreciation for human qualities like courage, imagination and caring for others diminishes. Those who do not stand out intellectually are simply not able to excel. In Young's satire a large part of the population eventually reverts to this mode of thinking. Its protest movement calls itself 'The Populists'. By brute force they acquire power from a surprised and defenceless elite.

The UK in the Fifties was obviously a different society from the Netherlands' today; still, the similarities between Young's descriptions and now are striking. Social bonding based on common beliefs has made way for social bonding based on socio-economic status. The effects are most noticeable in the behaviour of the ever-growing league of well-educated Dutch people. Populists object to these consequences.

The end of the old boys' network

It should not come as a surprise that the concept of meritocracy made headway in the Netherlands easily. The idea presents itself as a prime example of egalitarian thought: effort and talent – instead of right of birth – should decide one's success. It sounds like true equality of opportunity. This view was part of the *zeitgeist* of the Fifties, advocated by a generation that were young during the Great Depression and the Second World War, and who vowed to deliver to their own children a better youth and a better future than they had experienced themselves. This is how the baby-boom generation was formed: a large group of wanted, blessed children with a shining future ahead of them. They benefitted

significantly from a booming economy. A welfare state was being built. Money became available for better education. On the wings of the *zeitgeist,* all sorts of youngsters flocked to university, the institution that had previously been reserved for the long-standing elite. Radicalisation flourished: students demanded change. They occupied universities in Tilburg and Amsterdam. The '68 generation clearly made their mark, only to become even more influential in Dutch society. In politics, in government, in civil society and even in business they would establish a new mentality.

Dutch social scientists Meindert Fennema and Eelke Heemskerk published an extensive and insightful study a few years ago on the development of Dutch corporate governance in the Seventies. In the first few years, managers from proper families with the right connections and a decent, modest background made up most of the boards. Only five years later, this old boys' network had been largely wiped out. Leadership had been taken over by a talented, ambitious generation of newcomers who had flooded in on the waves of the meritocracy. They might not have originated from wealthy families, but what they lacked in upbringing they made up for with ambition.

Fennema's and Heemskerk's study provides an example of a determined and self-assured generation that changed the way the Netherlands was governed – not only in business but everywhere in Dutch society. They were greeted warmly, as many believed the brightest should be in control, rather than the best connected. The elites quickly and quietly made way – as always during big societal changes in the Netherlands. But while a lot was gained, something was also lost – in this case the *noblesse oblige,* common to the old families. The meritocratic newcomers assumed their success was of their own making. This was hailed as a democratic

revolution. But one could also regard it as a coup by a generation that subsequently hardly ever doubted its claim to power.

In the Eighties and Nineties the influence of this often left-leaning generation of baby boomers gradually increased. These were the years when the government decided to limit itself. Privatisation became the new magic word – the market was supposed to provide what government had failed to deliver: growth and jobs. All over the Western world, neo-liberals gained influence. And even though the Netherlands never had a Thatcher or a Reagan, and even though changes were not as extreme as in the UK or in the US, the meritocratic movement thrived. The idea grew, especially among the governing elite, that public services would perform better when distanced from the central government. And who would secure themselves a leading position in these newly independent housing corporations, educational institutions, cultural organisations and so forth? Indeed, the same baby boomers who, in the Seventies, had been preaching revolution, but had now moved with the spirit of the times.

5

The crisis of the left (and the right)

A purple revolution

History may well look back on the Nineties as 'the roaring decade'. After a slow start, the world economy nearly burst from its seams. Stock exchanges rose intermittantly; housing prices followed suit. On a large scale, Dutch women started to participate in the labour force, causing family income to rise drastically. Many felt the free market had prevailed. The Berlin Wall had not been brought down for nothing: it felt like a moral victory.

But what did all this mean for the ideology of the Left? In previous years, many lower qualified jobs had been lost due to early forms of outsourcing, such as in Enschede's textile industry. Furthermore, many jobs had been sacrificed for efficiency, as in the case of the Rotterdam harbour, where manual stevedores had been replaced with high-skilled machine control. Historically, the Netherlands had not had much factory labour, but now the proletariat was nearly dissolved. Surveys by The Netherlands Institute for Social Reseach (SCP) showed that low wage labour in itself had not disappeared; rather, it had changed in appearance. Heavy manual labour for working class and uneducated men became obsolete. Instead, many service jobs like waiting tables became available. But this 'service' work required a very different mentality from unskilled, hard physical labour like carrying or mining, for instance.

At the same time, skilled labourers such as plumbers and construction workers did quite well. As housing

prices rose, so did their salaries. Some of them actually took part in day trading at the stock exchange, while having a beer in front of their caravan at the camping site. Newspapers were eager to report on this. Hence, the continuing stock rally became known as the 'camping rally', a development common people could benefit from. But that can hardly be considered as leftist.

In a speech in the mid-Nineties, the then Prime Minister and leader of the Social Democrats, Wim Kok, declared the end of the class struggle. He was later accused of disregarding his ideological heritage, but it was a clear fact that at the time hardly anybody felt close to the old ideology. The Netherlands was ruled by a 'purple' coalition of Social Democrats and Conservative Liberals, a combination that would have been unheard of only ten years before. Its policies gave rise to a certain political confusion that remains until this day. The Social Democrats lost much of their elderly base. Lower educated classes found solace in other parties like leftist and rightist populists – though such a distinction between these two parties is in fact inadequate.

Nowadays, the 'purple' years of Wim Kok and his peers are considered to be an era dominated by technocracy. Differing ideological viewpoints made way for a pragmatic debate about how best to achieve certain goals. This debate did not reach most voters; it was mainly interesting for those who were involved with policy questions. Because of the rising wealth of the nation, boosted by a general sense of optimism, few foresaw that a serious political crisis was looming. The first indication of a new populism came in the form of the rising star Pim Fortuyn. For a large part of the governing elites, he came as a complete surprise.

You've failed? Blame yourself!

Looking back one must conclude that in the years of growth, the seeds of populism were sown. Demographic research shows that during these years the better educated created a class of their own. To this effect, a new Professor of Demographics, Jan Latten, in his commencement speech gave a striking example of how in the old days a Catholic doctor would marry a Catholic nurse, whereas in more recent times a male doctor would marry a female doctor. Perhaps they would meet at university, where women were now clearly catching up. These highly educated people, earning double incomes, would move to certain neighbourhoods. They would stay and live in the city, even when they had children. These children would all go to the same (Montessori or Jenaplan) schools and visit the same day care. Furthermore, they would meet at the same hockey and pony clubs. While their parents had grown up in the later years of the pillar system and so had visited mixed-class activities, these children did not know any better than to spend the entire day amongst their ilk. Social mobility, typical of the Sixties and Seventies, gradually came to a halt, even though it took many years until the effects were recognised. Nobody had foreseen this and probably nobody wanted it to happen, but the laws of the meritocracy so sharply defined by Michael Young manifested themselves unremittingly. An ever larger group of higher educated people was slowly shielding themselves from the rest of society.

This phenomenon also manifested itself in the economy. Board members would raise their own salaries with a single stroke, first in the corporate sector, then soon followed by the top layers in semi-public services. Surely they were working hard? Were they not doing a good job? Had they not risen by their own efforts? The logic of meritocracy was relentless; these were the

successful people who genuinely believed that their successes were of their own making and that they should earn a good reward. Even though they would never say so in public – only some rightist intellectuals would – this reasoning also had its flipside. If one's success was by one's own merit, one's failure was one's own fault. Those who were lower class could start to assume that they should blame themselves for a lack of success. And even if they did not think this, the lack of appreciation for their contribution to society was remarkable. A survey of ten to twelve year-olds demonstrated what the Dutch youth aspired to be when they grew up: not astronauts, police officers or teachers, but simply famous, for whatever activity. It is an illustration of how the culture of success penetrated everything. This has provoked a new question: how can the lower class or uneducated people get respect when their work changes or disappears, when the better off pretend success is a matter of choice? In that case, resentment is not a strange reaction at all, even more so when society keeps pretending that equality is paramount.

The hotchpotch neighbourhood

While the highly educated were increasingly seeking each others' company, living in neighbourhoods full of similar people, lower educated classes experienced something quite different. Their neighbourhoods grew more and more diverse. As early as 2001 Godfried Engbersen, professor of Sociology in Rotterdam, described how the culturally homogenous city boroughs, formerly inhabited by working class and middle class families, transformed into multicultural neighbourhoods full of dropouts, petty and organised crime, and growing unemployment. He wrote: 'The social fabric of these neighbourhoods has been infringed upon and the old

codes of conduct for the interactions between residents have lost their validity. The current borough has become a kind of hotchpotch. One can distinguish between several social groups and connections, of which some are close and others are shallow. Each of these groups – who hardly interact with each other any more – has its own set of rules and informal modes of communion. Because of this, mutual distrust and misunderstanding could grow, especially during times of economic hardship. Such an atmosphere can enhance cultural misunderstanding, encourage the appointment of scapegoats, and above all lead every group to a process of withdrawal from social life.'[1]

The change from a vertical to a horizontal social division has proven much worse for the lower educated than for the higher educated. It might look like the Dutch have turned into a class society such as the UK, but that is not really the case. The highly educated may well be recognised as a distinct class, but the lower educated are certainly not. They live amid very different neighbours, with whom they have little in common and may not even be able to communicate with. This is another argument that populists have tried to address. They want old social relations restored.

6

A stubborn divide

Shame as motive

The new demarcation line between higher and lower educated people in Dutch society has become quite obvious in recent years. In the old days upper and lower classes would meet in church, but these have mainly been abandoned. School populations have become a reflection of the city borough's inhabitants, divided by socio-economic status. This is not a specifically Dutch development. The American political philosopher Michael Sandel stated in an interview: 'Nowadays only in the shopping mall do people of various backgrounds meet.' He made a clear-cut criticism of two simultaneous developments: shopping and consuming have become more important and large shopping streets have become meeting grounds, while other forms of social interaction have lost importance.

In the meantime, the demarcation between higher and lower educated Dutch has grown to be quite persistent. Research demonstrates that children of the highly educated perform better at school. This allows them to advance to university where they meet the same people all over again. In the once-so-egalitarian Netherlands, a social structure is developing which essentially resembles a class system – never mind the official denials. True meritocracy no longer rules.

Last summer, *NRC Handelsblad*, a Dutch quality daily, published an illuminating series from the fifth largest city in the Netherlands, Eindhoven. The reporters

described daily life in two adjacent neighbourhoods: one decent and middle class; the other a neighbourhood with lower educated inhabitants. How would the middle class neighbourhood address problems caused by a noisy neighbour? Reporters described how the complainant would deliver a note to the mailbox of the person who caused the disturbance, who would then respond with a bouquet of flowers and abundant apologies, after which everybody would know that the problem was solved. But in the poorer neighbourhood the complainant did not even know how to attract the attention of his upstairs neighbour because the door had no bell, the curtains remained closed and it was not certain whether the stranger scurrying by was indeed the neighbour.

The series painfully demonstrates how difficult it has become to find a political answer to these kinds of problems. The lower educated population in big cities live in a fractured environment in which neighbours hardly know each other and where inhabitants could have radically different lifestyles and backgrounds. For the middle and top layers, the world has not really changed so much. In fact, they have explicitly been confirmed in their identity.

The lower classes in the Netherlands have felt increasingly abandoned over the past several years. This feeds the indignation that is an undeniable part of populism. There is an elite which takes excellent care of itself and which does not have a clue about the kinds of problems lower educated people face. Giselinde Kuipers suggested in the aforementioned interview that these highly educated people actually feel ashamed, as this situation is obviously not in line with the egalitarian, meritocratic ideology. ‘Shame is both the motive and the problem’, wrote Kuipers. ‘It leads to evasion and denial. People find it difficult to cope with the idea of a power difference. Evasion of contact with the lower classes becomes a solution.’

The idea that serious power differences exist between social groups is still a taboo in the Netherlands. Kuipers cites as an example research among higher educated women and their domestic workers. The bosses find it very hard to give clear instructions about what exactly must be cleaned. They act in an extremely friendly way, as if the worker really is a friend happening to drop by. Otherwise they may put the guilt-ridden wages in a corner as if they were not honestly earned. The workers, on the other hand, prefer clear assignments. They are well aware of the difference in power and they are especially annoyed by its denial. This evasion and denial contains an important clue to understanding the discontent between the upper and lower classes.

The reign of middle class morality

Yet the facts speak for themselves. After thorough research, The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) last year mentioned ‘stubborn’ differences, not only in terms of socio-economic position but also in terms of contentment. ‘Lower educated people, in general, are more pessimistic about society, more negative about politics and more concerned about crime and material affairs. Those with a higher education are distinguished by higher levels of optimism, trust and tolerance.’ The difference in levels of trust is especially meaningful. When asked whether they trust other people, eighty per cent of highly educated people answered ‘yes, I do’, whereas only forty per cent of lower educated people gave the same answer. According to the SCP, this directly relates to the manner in which people feel they have a grip on their own lives.

Differences in health are also remarkable. The Royal Institute for National Health and Environment (RIVM) raised the alarm bells on this in 2011. The lower one’s

education, the higher one's chance of a chronic illness. The higher one's education, the longer one's life expectancy and the longer the years spent in good health. The RIVM found direct correlations with differences in lifestyle. Smoking and bad eating habits – practised more often by lower educated people – increase the risk of heart and vascular diseases, lung cancer and diabetes.

Of course, in the old days of the pillar system there were differences too. But then it was still common for the pastor or priest to tell people how to live. The schoolmaster still had the authority to teach children in a certain way. This structure has disappeared. We have been liberated from the old constraining structures, but now the elites hesitate to take people by the hand and educate them. It is not considered the done thing. People are free to choose how to fulfil their own lives and, as long as they do not damage their surroundings, others are not supposed to interfere.

This middle class morality now dominates the public domain. Even social workers who specialise in helping with childrearing in the old multicultural Rotterdam neighbourhoods find it hard to express clearly to parents what the recommended behaviour towards their children is, as shown in research conducted by Marguerite van den Berg. During a course, these parents often learn more from each other about their children's bedtime than from the course leaders. They prefer to ask the parents: 'what do you yourself think about these issues?', convinced that self-reflection is the way to civilisation. Here again we see the analogy with old-fashioned Dutch childrearing.

Noise as politics

According to Mark Bovens, professor of Public Administration in Utrecht, the differences between

higher and lower educated people have stabilised in recent years. This may be one of the reasons that populism as a political movement seems to have come to a halt. It has taken about ten years, but now people in the Netherlands indeed recognise problems that could not be mentioned in earlier years. Moreover, many different methods are being used to try to tackle the problems.

That is exactly what Geert Wilders' supporters hoped for. At least, that is the impression of Erasmus University professor of political communication Chris Aalberts. He conducted interviews with PVV voters about what they expected from Geert Wilders. The PVV leader has in recent years frequently advocated extreme proposals, often deliberately formulated in offensive language. For example, he proposed a 'head-rag tax', a tax specifically designed for women who wear a head scarf. Also, he advocated the Dutch exit from the Euro, using the motto 'let the Greeks pay for their own problems'. According to Aalberts, many PVV voters knew that these kinds of policies were unexecutable, but that was not the point. 'By voting for a politician who wields extreme, sometimes unexecutable policies, PVV voters ensure that policy is ultimately pushed a little in their direction..' This is what the majority of PVV followers aim for, Aalberts wrote on the op-ed pages of the daily *De Volkskrant*. Its headline was: 'Geert simply needs to make noise'.

This considered, the Dutch political system is doing its job as usual: to allow, to adapt, to encapsulate and to thereby file off the sharp edges. Perhaps this is even more visible regarding the Socialist Party (SP). Whether this party should be considered part of the populist movement is debatable, but the fact is that the base of its followers – just like the PVV – mostly consists of the lower socio-economic classes. Once a radical splinter group, the SP developed into a classical leftist alternative for those voters who thought the social democratic PvdA had bowed too

much in the direction of the meritocratic trend. The SP unequivocally represented those workers who suffered from the disadvantages of privatisation and forms of competition in the public domain, like home assistants, nurses and cleaners. While management grew and earned higher wages, workers had to deal with zero-hour contracts, temporary engagements and increased insecurity. The SP made this an issue and demanded counter measures. In this respect, it was Pim Fortuyn's heir. In 2006, this critical position delivered the SP a huge victory at the ballot box and the party grew from nine to twenty-five seats in parliament, out of 150 seats. But its victory did not lead to government participation, and the SP dwindled back down to fifteen seats. Again, this year it made a lot of headway with its strong criticisms, a new leader and a rise in the polls. Some even thought that the SP would become the largest political party at the September 2012 election, but this expectation was not realised. The party got entangled between the choice of being a protest movement and opting for governing responsibility. Eventually all virtual winnings evaporated and on election day the SP won exactly the same number of seats as it had two years earlier – no losses, but no gains, either.

This result has been widely explained as the end of the rise of populism. The SP did not realise its predicted growth, and Wilders' PVV visibly faded also. His seats in Parliament shrunk from twenty-four to fifteen. This decline was larger than the polls had indicated. Geert Wilders paid the price for being the cause of the fall of the government that he supported since 2010. He was also – in his own way – caught between the burden of shared responsibility and vocally protesting on the sidelines. The PVV chose the latter, as the SP had chosen the former during the election campaign. But both paid a price. Now they are, respectively, the third

and fourth most powerful parties in the country, each with the support of about ten per cent of the electorate.

7

The pacification of populism

Part of the picture

With the undeniable victory of both the traditional left party (PvdA) and the traditional right party (VVD), people are now saying that 'the middle' has returned to Dutch politics. The relief is significant. Populism from both wings seems to have been neutralised. The movement has been pacified, to use the term with which the famous political scientist Arend Lijphart once labelled the Dutch pillar system. Pacification means to sign a peace treaty. The parties, fully realising that they are widely separated and hold fundamentally different opinions, meet each other on practical grounds in order to keep unity.

This is what was done in the Fifties between the Protestants and Catholics, and now it seems to be the approach between populist and mainstream Netherlands. A few key complaints of the populists over the last couple of years have been acknowledged. Immigration has been limited and made more difficult, to such an extent that Poles eager to find work now prefer to earn their money in other countries. Excesses in the semi-public sector have gradually been dealt with; all board members of housing corporations, hospitals and public broadcasting services are forced to limit their salaries to a maximum of two hundred thousand euros, the so-called Balkenende-norm. In the EU, the Netherlands cannot always be counted on as a supporter; to the contrary, the Dutch are very hard-pressed to appease the Southern Europeans.

The lower educated have shown their fists, politics has listened, and the process of upbringing and civilising is ending. Geert Wilders has become part of the picture; he resembles a fading pop star, no longer a fierce attacker of Dutch society. The Socialist Party of the Netherlands may be the most leftist party in parliament, but it advocates a maximum budget deficit of only three per cent of GDP. The country can breathe freely again; all sharp edges have been expertly removed.

Opting out becomes the norm

Or is this all an illusion? Now that the populist movement has been encapsulated in Dutch politics, two important questions remain and the answers are far from clear. The first is about representation. Does the parliamentary democracy properly reflect the citizenry? In 2012, more than twenty-six per cent of the electorate did not vote, almost the same percentage of people who voted for the largest victor, the VVD. The discontent amongst the population is demonstrated by the growing group of 'quitters'. Lower educated people, youngsters and immigrants make up most of the non-voting population, as National Election Studies have shown. If the non-voters had voted, the benefiting parties would have been left- and right-wing populists.

Political scientist Kees Aarts of Twente University has been studying non-voters for years. In *De Groene Amsterdammer* he was quoted saying that 'voters who thought they had a voice in The Hague now say to themselves: it's not true at all, I've been fooled again. The attraction has waned.'

Disillusioned by the PVV and the SP not being able to govern, they disengage. Non-voters are more often unsatisfied with their lives. Many of them are single or widowed. They may be loners, feeling left out.

But some actually decide to be non-voters; it is their subtle protest. Sociologist Godfried Engbersen has remarked on this. By not voting, people who live in drastically changed neighbourhoods convey the message: 'I will not participate in your bargaining.' They evade direct confrontation but enhance their own self-respect in this way, according to anthropological research. Engbersen says: 'They are very suspicious of politics. They will say: politicians will overlook us anyway. That is why they pass up the vote.'[2] Non-voting becomes a matter of dignity.

In political circles this problem is not typically addressed. Most parties know that a higher voter turnout will only cost them seats. But if the recent history of populism demonstrates at least one thing, it is that a problem will not be solved simply by ignoring it. 'An increasing number of people consider politics to be one big joke. This concerns a large but very diverse group, who are defined by their increasing indifference to politics,' Kees Aarts says. Whether it is a young person who cannot find a job, an immigrant who will not become a part of Dutch society, or somebody living in an old neighbourhood, deprived of social welfare, they all are in danger of losing faith in the political system.

What if this group goes off the radar? What will the consequences be for Dutch politics? This is a relevant question, as experience tells us that two out of three non-voters will stick to their habit. Will divisions between the haves and the have-nots grow, as in some surrounding countries? Will the Netherlands become the stage for revolts in banlieues or for arson and robbery of convenience stores? Until now this image has not fitted the Netherlands because the inclination toward consent was too large. Also, the welfare state provided some sort of protection, a social cushion of sorts, for the less fortunate. Will this remain intact if

a growing group of dissatisfied people do not have any political representation?

Who knows? It may not get that far. Some of the governing elites are beginning to realise what is at stake. This is especially relevant for the representatives of what used to be the polder model. They are worried about the second urgent question that remains after the pacification of populism, which coincides with the first question about representative politics: how can the Netherlands keep its polder tradition?

The polder model at wits' end

If populism has damaged one thing, it is the old Dutch polder model. The rise of Pim Fortuyn, the SP and the PVV made it painfully clear that this model was not representing the issues and interests of the lower educated any longer. Conference rooms were too often occupied by professional administrators who had lost contact with their backers. They tried to ensure the best arrangements for their members, but often failed to convince them of their results. Fortuyn and especially Wilders objected that in backrooms shady compromises were reached that damaged the interests of the people. This rhetoric was so convincing that half of the Dutch public in mid-2012 rejected all practice of compromising in politics.

The Dutch labour unions have not really survived this. The FNV, a federation of labour unions, used to be the prime representative of employees. In 2012 it decided to terminate its own existence. It had become torn between radicals and moderates, between associates who wanted to strike a deal with employers and the government, and associates who wanted to enforce concessions by means of strong action. They could not reach a compromise, and the power struggle within the

FNV had exhausted both parties. The unions have felt the loss of many higher educated workers in recent years – if they ever were members. Now only twenty per cent of the Dutch work force are union members. A new generation of self-assured, ambitious thirty-somethings and forty-somethings hardly feel at home with what they consider to be the losers of the labour movement. They deal with their own affairs, without the mediation of professional unions.

The decline of the FNV is illustrative of the old governing system that has shaped the Netherlands for so long. By 'poldering' with different kinds of interest groups, Dutch institutions used to secure their base. Whether it concerned the planning of the countryside, housing policies or socio-economic policies, all concerned would gather around the table and debate until they reached an agreement and generated consent. All this would be done according to the old tradition that all were eventually bound by the outcome.

But which of the interest groups can still rely on its fixed base, let alone speak in its name? Smart, involved, higher educated civilians collaborate nowadays to establish their own energy corporations that produce 'green' energy themselves, instead of buying energy from large companies. New, loose networks of ZZPs – independents working for themelves – share their risks on Medicare, without the help of a union or an insurance company. The ANWB, which with its two million members is one of the largest associations in the Netherlands, supplies a road emergency service and also assists with emergencies outside the country. But when the president, in the name of the association's core, wanted to strike a deal with the government about its policy plan for taxing car mileage, this stirred up trouble. Members no longer allowed him to take a stand in their name; they wanted to decide for themselves.

A clear majority of the Dutch now feel in charge of their own lives. They want to make their own choices and feel at ease with the consequences. They support the idea of meritocracy: one does one's best and one reaps the benefits of one's efforts. At the same time, a large, diverse group of Dutch people have difficulties succeeding economically and socially. They shy away from politics and opt out mentally. How can these two groups confer? Who will represent the interest of the lower classes? Will the Netherlands still be a country based on seeking consent? And if so, how can this be achieved, given the crisis in the Dutch governing system?

Now the labour movement really seems to be losing ground, employers and politicians are starting to realise that this crisis affects them too. How will they reach workers and lower educated people now? In fact, employers are sheepishly trying to support the FNV. This may be too little, too late. Also, it doesn't address the underlying crisis in representation. There is only one conclusion: the polder model will have to reinvent itself.

All aboard?

While populism might be contained, important questions remain. One of the most important questions according to political scientist Kees Aarts is: 'How do we make sure that everybody is included?' Traditionally, the Netherlands focussed on consensus. The Dutch shared the values of equality and of tolerating differences in worldview. Systems of representation ensured that distinctions remained manageable, so the idea of equality would not be damaged. But the old systems have lost their usefulness and new methods have not become available yet. Several experiments are being conducted regarding new forms of civil consulting. People are invited to share considerations on an issue that is close to them, before decisions are

made. But these developments are still in their infancy and will not likely replace the old discussion models. One of their problems concerns the fact that the exchange of ideas by means of argument is a tool for higher educated people. As a consequence, lower educated Dutch will only feel more left out.

In short, a new structure and new forms to 'polder' are fundamentally necessary to keep the Dutch tradition alive while also modernising it. Only if the Dutch find a solution for everyone will the problem of populism be truly solved.

Notes

1 Engbersen, Godfried (2001), Geheime nummers. De oude stadswijk als commedia dell'arte.

2 Engbersen, Godfried (2001), Geheime nummers. De oude stadswijk als commedia dell'arte.

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Engbersen, Godfried (2001). 'Geheime nummers. De oude stadswijk als commedia dell'arte'. In Godfried Engbersen en Jack Burgers (ed.). De verborgen stad. De zeven gezichten van Rotterdam. Amsterdan: AUP, pp. 127–36.

After ten years of agonising and soul-searching debate, the Netherlands finally seems at ease with the rise of populism. Fear and anger have made way for acceptance. Today, populist parties are considered to be part of the national political landscape. They have been integrated into Dutch society through the typical Dutch strategy of pacification. By embracing some populist ideas, the Dutch have removed the 'sharp edges' of populist sentiment. As a result, Dutch populist parties attracted far fewer voters at the last election.

How could a happy and wealthy country like the Netherlands become susceptible to the lure of a range of populist politicians? Dutch journalist Yvonne Zonderop reports on how Dutch society has changed more profoundly over the last 20 years than many higher educated Dutch people would care to admit. New divisions in society fuelled the populist movement. The populists have succeeded in addressing this problem. But since this has been recognised, their importance has faded. Still, one more question remains: how can the Netherlands regain the egalitarian spirit it is famous for?

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