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Netherlands

Dutch Socialist Party from Sect to Mass Party

- Debate - Building new parties of the left -

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In many Western countries, the far left remains dominated by groups rooted in the radicalization of the 1960s. Most never became more than propaganda outfits of a few hundred members. The Socialist Party (SP) in the Netherlands is an exception. What started as just another left splinter developed into a mass party that seems poised to become the largest left of center force in the country. The Dutch Socialist Party went from fringe force to national contender. But lost its soul along the way.

The May 2014 municipal elections saw a dramatic change in the politics of the Dutch capital of Amsterdam: for the first time since its foundation in 1946, the social-democratic Labour Party (PvdA) disappeared from the municipal executive. Instead, two right-wing parties formed a coalition with the SP. So far, the Socialist Party's attempts to overtake the PvdA nationally have failed, but it's on the more established party's heels.

The development is remarkable, all the more so because the Dutch left has historically been weak. The industrial working class, often the backbone of leftist parties in Europe, was relatively small in the Netherlands. And workers were long divided between Protestants and Catholics. Large parts of the disadvantaged Catholic working class were until the 1960s organized along religious lines. Social movements remain weak. Despite this, the SP has grown into the third largest party in the country.

The SP has its origins as a small pro-China split from the Communist Party of the Netherlands in 1965. This group was based in the port city of Rotterdam, where it was one of many left grouplets. But the Maoists managed to find support during the radicalization of the sixties, especially in parts of the Catholic south of the country as religious organizations disintegrated. There, they didn't have much competition from larger left-wing organizations.

While many left-wing groups were active in the trade unions, the SP kept its distance from them. National campaigns were another priority for many leftists, but here also the SP had different concerns. It focused instead on local campaigns in municipalities. These campaigns were an important way for the party to gain recognition and create an initial base of support.

Faithful to the Maoist slogan "serve the people," the SP organized medical and juridical support for people in need. In many places, SP branches still coordinate assistance for people who have a conflict with their landlord or need help applying for social security. This approach was successful in building local support in several cities.

But there were setbacks. The party's official "Marxist-Leninist" ideology had little to say about the SP's daily activities around local issues like traffic safety, soil pollution, or housing. The party remained aloof from international developments — its infatuation with China faded in the early seventies — and it engaged little with other currents.

The local support didn't automatically translate into success on a national level. Many people who felt sympathy for the party's work, as well as dedicated activists, didn't feel the SP could represent them on a national level. Since the late seventies, the party participated without success in the parliamentary elections, often scoring less votes in those elections than the total of its local votes.

Breaking with old ideas

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Yet in the late eighties, the SP wasn't unaffected by the worldwide crisis of the radical left. To escape stagnation, a group of party leaders forced through a reorganization to focus on finally making a national breakthrough. Together with the last Maoist references, the incumbent chairperson was pushed aside.

The "old" SP was a cadre formation that put high demands on activists, but now anybody who paid dues could be a member. From around 750 members in the early eighties, the party grew to 15,000 in 1992. The SP also became more active in national campaigns and more willing to cooperate with other left-wing groups. In 1988 the party drafted a new charter, without references to revolution or overthrowing the state and a few years later it dropped its description as Marxist.

The new leadership consisted largely of people who were already prominent members, and often they still play central roles in the party. The most important one of them is Jan Marijnissen. In 1975 he became a councilor for the SP in Oss, a small industrial city in the Catholic south, and in 1988 he became party chair, a position he still holds. From 1994 to 2008, he was also chair of its parliamentary group. Ideas that would later be part of the SP's programmatic documents can be found almost verbatim in his books.

Last left standing?

In the meantime, Dutch politics transformed. During the eighties, all parties to the left of the Labour Party lost their seats in the parliament. The Right went on the offensive while the economy went through a recession. Many rallied behind the Labour Party, hoping it would be strong enough to stop the attacks. Their expectations weren't met.

After returning to government in 1989 the social democrats started to implement austerity measures. In power throughout the nineties, the Labour Party embraced "Third Way" neoliberal policies. They helped privatize public companies like the railroads and mail, cut social services, and deregulated the housing and labor markets. PvdA membership declined rapidly: between 1989 and 1994, over a quarter of its members left.

The Left was in crisis. In the eighties, the trade unions had accepted wage moderation and lost credibility. In ten years, the percentage of workers unionized dropped from over 35 percent to less than 25.

The eighties did see large social mobilizations, but none of these movements won clear victories. The old Communist Party and several other left-wing parties fused after 1990 into GroenLinks (GreenLeft), a formation that quickly oriented towards highly educated professionals. After the disintegration of the far left and the neoliberal turn of the Labour Party, the SP became, by default almost, the sole left-wing opposition.

The SP picked up some of the pieces of the old left. Disappointed Labour Party voters joined the "new" SP, as did some Communists and other leftists who were unhappy with the development of GroenLinks. Among the new members were activists with valuable experience – for example, in national election campaigns.

With the Labour Party in government and losing support, and only GroenLinks to compete with on the Left, the elections of 1994 provided the SP with a precious window of opportunity. It tripled its score, winning 1.32 percent of the vote. In the Dutch electoral system, this was enough for two of the 150 seats in parliament.

The SP's first two parliamentarians, one of whom was Jan Marijnissen, became prominent voices of the Left. The party grew rapidly. In 1998 it won five seats, in 2002 nine, and in 2003 nine again – this time becoming the largest party to the left of the Labour Party. Membership peaked around 50,000 between 2007 and 2010, and slightly declined and stabilized to 45,000 after that. Around 10 percent of those volunteer regularly for the party.

Another reorientation

In 2006, the SP reached a peak of twenty-five seats in parliament. (That number is now fifteen.) Looking back, the period between 1999, when it adopted its current charter *Heel de Mens* ("The Whole Human Being"), and 2006 is comparable with that of the late eighties, early nineties as a period of profound change for the party. In its 1999 charter, the SP abandoned its earlier doubts about the democratic viability of parliament, instead declaring it to be "the most important means to voice and implement the will of the population."

Its socialism also underwent a metamorphosis. The party no longer considered itself Marxist, but in its charter the Marxist idea that socialism implies democratic control over the means of production was still recognizable. But with *Heel de Mens*, the SP adopted an ethical socialism that it summarizes as "human dignity, equality between people and solidarity between people." The driving force behind their attempt to achieve these ideals is "moral indignation."

According to SP leader and veteran Tiny Kox, "in the seventies we were all a bit crazy." But the early SP was an especially unlikely candidate to make a breakthrough. Its ideological pragmatism and moral appeals have been successful in gaining size and representation, but there's also growing unease about the party's evolution.

The SP attempts to organize around issues on which people's lived experience clash with the hegemonic idea that the Netherlands is a society that values honesty, equality, democracy, and justice. Take its campaigns to protect healthcare, care for the elderly, or, until 2012, maintaining the pension age at sixty-five. The SP often uses terms like "morality" and "civilization" as the motivation for its demands. Instead of winning over people to new ideas, this strategy uses accepted values to gather support.

Its former "Marxism-Leninism" had little to do with the SP's practice. The SP's programmatic statements talked in broad terms about nationalizing major companies and resources, and vaguely described government policies that would guarantee work and housing for everybody. The documents didn't discuss how the party's local work could be a stepping stone towards such changes. The early SP's theory was to a large degree rhetorical, sometimes with apocalyptic themes, such as its 1974 charter that declared that capitalism "threatened the existence of the Dutch people."

But the SP's current ethical socialism is not without consequences for its daily practice. Using moral arguments, the party tries to appeal to everybody, assuming the motivation to support the SP is not class interests or the desire for emancipation but morality. The relative weakness of the SP's theoretical framework and analysis is often seen as a remnant of its earlier workerism, but it also has a different source: for a party that considers itself motivated by "moral indignation," theory and analysis play a secondary role.

This strategy means the SP has little experience recruiting people on the basis of ideas or in ideological struggles in which different conceptions of the world clash. This avoidance of ideological struggle has caused the SP difficulties in its competition with the PvdA. Neoliberal thought is deeply ingrained in the Netherlands, and the same "common sense" assumptions that the SP appeals to can prevent voters from accepting the SP's anti-neoliberalism as a credible alternative.

Time after time, in pre-election polls many say they are planning to vote for the SP but end up voting PvdA, a more "credible" governing force. For such a large party, the SP has little influence in the media and among public intellectuals, especially relative to the PvdA. This means the PvdA is often still able to paint the SP as irresponsible radicals who offer no solutions. Many people agree morally with the SP but are still not convinced that its proposals are feasible. This was especially clear in the run-up to the 2012 elections: in a few weeks, support for the SP in the polls dwindled from thirty-five seats to fifteen, while the PvdA grew from thirty to thirty-eight.

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The SP tries to win over existing constituencies that have been abandoned by the other parties, such as supporters of the old far left and social democrats who are unhappy with the PvdA's neoliberal course. For the last decade, the party has also tried to win over people who are upset with the rightward shift of Christian Democracy. This orientation and the prioritizing of parliament means that the SP focuses on campaigns that it is certain will find mass support.

Leading SP member Ronald van Raak summed up the SP's approach towards social mobilizations by saying actions are "an important addition to the representation in city-council and parliament." The expected visibility and response of the media are major factors in deciding whether the party will participate in a demonstration or campaign. For example, the SP played an important role in the protests against the 2003 Iraq invasion. But after the invasion, as attention for Iraq declined, the SP dialed back its involvement.

The SP avoids issues that it expects will less quickly attract mass support or that would be controversial among its own supporters. The most important of these is anti-racism. Since the turn of the century, racist and especially Islamophobic views have become pronounced in the Netherlands and play an important role in the political debate. However, the SP keeps its distance from anti-racist initiatives. It seems to consider racism to be a mere side effect of socioeconomic hardship.

For a roughly a decade, the SP has placed itself in the tradition of the Labour Party before its neoliberal turn. The SP is now trying to contest the position of the PvdA as the major left party, and position itself as part of a future ruling coalition. After the elections of 2006, the PvdA refused the SP as a coalition partner for government. However, it managed to place the responsibility for this choice on the SP, which it portrayed as rigid and unrealistic. This experience rankled the SP, which since then has tried to prove itself as a party of government.

The choice of the SP to make a coalition with the Right in the executive of several cities and on a regional level is part of this. The party hopes that through its participation in executives it can prove its usefulnesses to future national coalition partners and convince voters of its legitimacy. It considers participation in implementing austerity measures inevitable.

Since 2006, the SP has also dropped a number of demands that were perceived to be "too radical" and preventing its acceptance into a coalition government, such as leaving NATO, abolishing the monarchy, or opposing raising the pension age to sixty-seven. With a few exceptions, the party also remained aloof from protests against the recent Israeli attacks on Gaza – part of its avoidance of anything too radical or controversial.

In August, former SP senator and feminist icon Anja Meulenbelt left the party, disappointed over its lack of attention to antiracism and international solidarity. She warned the SP that it was risking falling in the same trap as "that other party" that gave up its ideological principles in a shortcut to power. Every day that the SP prioritizes its dream of government participation over militant organizing, it looks a little bit more like PvdA.

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