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Netherlands

The Netherlands lurches towards elections: Islamophobia, austerity and crisis of the left

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On March 15, there will be general elections in the Netherlands - and it seems the country will not escape the trend of a rising radical-right and the crisis of the centre-left. But left-wing political parties as well are having difficulties, and social movements are struggling to find their way. A radicalising far-right with a virulent Islamophobia at its core has succeeded in altering the political and social landscape.

It is no use denying that for the Left, the situation is bleak. How did we get here?

The Model Capitalist Nation

Once described by Karl Marx as the model capitalist nation of seventeenth century capitalism, the Netherlands always had a relatively small left and workers' movement. Geographically small, but located in a commercially strategic position, the Dutch republic enjoyed a head-start as a merchant-capitalist country in the seventeenth century. But this head-start became a disadvantage with the onset of the industrial revolution.

Only in the late nineteenth century, during the long expansive wave before the First World War, did industrialization begin to take off, and with this the creation of a modern working class. For a long time, this working class was divided along confessional lines. Alongside a Protestant workers movement grew in the late nineteenth, early twentieth century a movement of the disadvantaged Catholic minority .

The confessional workers organisations were part of extensive multi-class milieus that included economic, cultural, social and political organisations. These currents formed what sociologists have called 'pillars', veritable parallel societies. However, the leaders of these pillars were always in contact with each-other, developing a culture of consensus and mutual give-and-take that defused potential conflicts. Dutch socialism was late to develop with the foundation of the Sociaal-Democratische Arbeiders Partij (SDAP) in 1893. This party and its associated unions and networks were quickly integrated into the 'pillar system'. In the absence of serious challenges from below, the Dutch bourgeoisie could allow itself the luxury of relatively liberal rule.

As industrialization was delayed, the relative importance of Dutch colonial possessions, especially Indonesia, increased. The importance of trade, from the colonies or from the port of Rotterdam to the new industries in Germany, meant many people worked in the service-sector, instead of in the kind of large-scale industries that in neighbouring countries became bulwarks of the workers movement. Before the Second World War, the social-democratic union organized not nearly half of all trade-union members, while the SDAP did not win a quarter of the vote.

After the war the Dutch political system changed drastically. A second wave of industrialization completed the process of industrialization. The churches lost their influence on the generation born after the war. The 'cultural revolution' of the sixties deeply changed Dutch society as the Dutch bourgeoisie proved itself flexible and accommodating. In universities and workplaces, old hierarchies were altered to give students and workers more autonomy. Much of the new leftist ferment was channelled into the social-democratic Partij van de Arbeid (PvdA, the re-foundation of the SDAP after the war). With some years delay, women and gays and lesbians were given increasing rights.

The old nationalist mythology of the Netherlands as a country of brave explorers and seamen was replaced by a new one of the country as a liberal 'merchant-nation' whose involvement in world-trade had supposedly made it exceptionally humanitarian, peaceful and broad-minded. This idea, captured in the saying 'Nederland, gidsland' ('the Netherlands, a model country') ignored its long colonizing past as well as its important role in the slave-trade but fused elements of the new liberal hegemony into a new nationalist ideal.

One upshot of this effective 'repressive tolerance' was that the country never saw anything like the social unrest that occurred in neighbouring countries. Neither did the sixties produce a durable radical left.

End of an era

Writing in 1977, PvdA prime-minister Joop den Uyl recognized that the end of the post-war expansive wave meant the end of an era. He predicted either a 'hard fight for obtained positions, existing rights and threatened privileges' or 'a clear choice for those most vulnerable in society, nationally and and a world scale'.

History went a different route as the workers movement and the new left had been successfully integrated. As unemployment approached one million on a total population of 14 million, instead of a hard fight, the trade-union movement committed itself in 1982 in the 'Wassenaar agreement' to a policy of wage moderation and 'shared responsibility' for economic growth and profitability. Already in 1982, Den Uyl admitted that the crisis and unemployment were used to 'diminish the power of the trade-unions, restore old privileges, increase inequality, and demolish the welfare state'. The same decade, the far left disappeared from parliament.

In the nineties, neo-liberal policies became hegemonic. The PvdA, after years in opposition, formed in 1994 a government coalition with the traditional party of the Right, the pro-business, secular VVD (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie, Peoples Party for Freedom and Democracy). The PvdA converted to Blairite 'third way' politics. With the former social-democrats as frontrunners, in this decade the labour and housing markets were liberalized, important parts of social security, healthcare and the pension system as well as public companies split up and privatized.

But economic growth rates were higher than they had been since the early seventies. The 'Wassenaar agreement' and the voluntary policy of wage moderation, products of the culture of intra-elite negation and pacification that was inherited from the 'pillar system', were celebrated as an uniquely 'Dutch characteristic' that supposedly allowed the country to avoid 'needless' and 'damaging' conflicts like strikes and other social struggles.

Much of this new economic growth was thanks to the financial services sector. Today, over a quarter of Dutch 'exports' are financial services. Although the financial sector creates relatively few jobs, it plays a crucial role in the Dutch economy and Dutch companies play an important role in the international banking and financial sectors.

Concomitant with this is the strongly pro-European Union orientation of much of the Dutch bourgeoisie. The country 'has always been a small but driving force behind European economic integration. If anything, its economic interest in the continued expansion of the EU has grown rather than diminished. The Netherlands is the second largest exporter in the EU, and more than 50 percent of its exports and re-exports remain in the EU.' The ardour with which Jeroen Dijsselbloem, finance minister, temporary chair of the Euro-group and leading member of the PvdA, devoted himself to destroying the fabric of Greek society to the benefit of the financial sector is a fitting illustration of the Dutch politics that was born in the nineties.

New political forces

Since the turn of the century, this establishment has come under pressure. The first challenge came from the left in the late nineties and early 2000's. The SP (Socialist Party – although the party no longer uses its full name) has its roots in a small Maoist party, the product of the youth radicalization of the sixties. The weakness of the Dutch left opened a window for a small group of Maoist activists to win a foothold among unorganized, mostly Catholic, workers.

In the nineties, the SP was able to reinvent itself as a parliamentary social-democratic party while the Communist Party and the far-left dissolved themselves in a new Green party and the PvdA embraced social-liberalism. Thanks to the Dutch system of proportional representation, 118,738 votes (1.3 per cent) brought the party two seats in 1994. In 1998 the SP won 5 seats. Around the turn of the century, the party underwent a further ideological shift, dropping its Marxist references, embracing an ethical socialism and declaring electoral contests to be its focus. In 2002 the party won nine seats and since then it has tried to position itself as a future ruling party and alternative for the PvdA.

In the meantime, the other side of the political spectrum also saw the rise of an insurgent current. Pim Fortuyn, a former social-democrat who had worked as an academic and public servant, became increasingly well known in the nineties as a right-wing columnist and public speaker. He connected with the new neo-liberal common sense by arguing for further liberalization and deep cuts in social services. However, he combined this right-wing economic liberalism with a nationalist populism that decried the loss of community and the erosion of social norms and values. Increasingly, something called 'Islamic culture', supposedly uniform and resistant to historical change, was framed as a threat to Dutch society.

Since Fortuyn claimed to be criticizing 'culture', not attacking people for their ethnicity as such, he avoided the taboo on the old biological racism of the extreme-right. Another way he set himself apart from the old extreme-right, while simultaneously gathering more ammunition for his fight against 'Islamic culture', was his incorporation of elements of the hegemonic liberal ideology.

Fortuyn assimilated concepts as the separation of church and state or equal rights for women and homosexuals into the 'Dutch culture' that was supposedly under threat. Cultural othering replaced racial othering.

The chauvinism of 'Nederland, gidsland' proved to be a highly effective weapon and dissociated this new, populist right from the old fascist extreme-right. It fed what anti-racist thinker Gloria Wekker later called 'white innocence' – the ideology that Dutch society simply can not be racist because it is supposedly inherently egalitarian.

After entering the political arena in 2001, Pim Fortuyn became very popular. Compared with the bland, technocratic politicians produced by the neo-liberal consensus, Fortuyn, a skilled showman, stood out. Whereas other politicians competed with each-other in trying to convince people that they were the right candidate to manage the status-quo, Fortuyn said he would change the status-quo. This enabled him to tap into the support of people who for different reasons felt ignored by the political establishment.

Fortuyn was murdered in 2002, and his party fell apart. But he became a kind of prophet-figure for a new, nationalist current that in the last decade-and-a-half was incarnated by several parties. The current Dutch far-right is the offspring of Fortuyn, and the PVV of Geert Wilders is the newest incarnation of this nationalist, populist right. It is also the most radical one.

Geert Wilders is a career politician who started out as a parliamentarian on the right-wing of the VVD. In the nineties, Wilders was a protégé of future European Commissioner for Internal Market and Services Frits Bolkestein. Even before Fortuyn, Bolkestein introduced the idea of a clash of civilizations between 'the West' and 'Islam' into the Dutch

political mainstream. Later he would tell the writer Ian Buruma; 'You should never underestimate how deeply Moroccan and Turkish immigrants are hated by the Dutch. My political success rests upon the fact that I have listened to these feelings'. [1]

In 2004, Wilders left the VVD and two years later organized his own party, the Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV, Freedom Party). Like for Bolkestein and Fortuyn, hostility towards Muslims was central for the new party. In 2004, the country was shocked by another murder as film-maker and columnist Theo van Gogh was killed by an Islamic fundamentalist. After the murder, dozens of mosques and scores of people were attacked. Riding this wave in 2006, in the first elections it participated in, the PVV won 9 out of 150 seats in the parliament.

Since then, the PVV has developed in two ways. One is that where before it presented a hard-line neo-liberal economic program, it now presents itself as a defender of the Dutch welfare state. Like other gains such as women's rights, social services are presented as products of 'Dutch culture' and hence under threat from alien cultures, especially from Islam. In deals the PVV has made with right-wing parties in parliament, it has shown that its 'welfare-chauvinism' is secondary to its anti-Islam and anti-immigrant agenda. On these issues, the party has steadily radicalised.

Today, PVV positions include making social security dependent on length of citizenship and language skills, denying social security to people wearing a burqa or niqab, banning the Quran, closing the borders for refugees while shuttering all refugee centres, closing all mosques, banning people with a double nationality from fulfilling public positions, banning the Islamic headscarf for public servants, preventive arrests of 'radical Muslims', and completely banning immigration from Islamic countries.

For the PVV, its welfare-chauvinism and Islamophobia are intimately connected. The welfare state is under pressure, it claims, because of immigration. Dutch Muslims, Islamic migrants and refugees, who in the PVV's discourse are all part of the same Islamic menace, are supposedly parasitizing on a system build by 'the real Dutch' and are allowed to do this by the 'leftist elite' that supposedly controls the country. The PVV presents its racist proposals as means to save the remains of the welfare-system. This is partly why PVV-support for austerity measures does not automatically lead to a decline in support; austerity after all is supposedly made necessary because of Muslims and can only be stopped by radical, racist measures that would deprive countless Dutch citizens and immigrants from human rights.

Today

The current Dutch government is, like in the nineties, a coalition of the PvdA and the VVD. In this coalition, the PvdA is the junior party. On social-economic policies but also issues such as refugees, the right-wing VVD is dominant. The government has implemented austerity measures that among others things meant the disappearance of thousands of jobs in the public and healthcare sector, cut support for chronically ill people and abolished student grants. In fact, the government has been so diligent in implementing austerity that even a report of the ING Bank concluded its policies 'needlessly' cost hundreds of thousands of jobs. And yet, the PvdA entered this government after it had tacked left in the campaign for the parliamentary elections of 2012 to stave of the threat of growing support for SP. Current polls spell little good news for the PvdA, predicting a loss of two-thirds of its seats. The VVD looks set to lose seats as well, but less dramatically.

Today, other political parties are often reduced to responding to the PVV. The VVD has entered a kind of symbiosis with the PVV, presenting itself as the 'reasonable' version of the radical PVV. The undiluted original meanwhile also attracts support, polls predicting that the party could double to about a fifth of the vote – possibly even becoming the

largest party in parliament.

The SP meanwhile seems to benefit little from the predicted implosion of the PvdA. One reason for this is the large role of the PVV in the public debate. The SP has had most success when it could present its social-economic proposals but the Islamophobic and anti-immigrant noise of the PVV, echoed by the VVD, drowns out discussion of social-economic issues.

The SP has never been very interested in anti-racist campaigns. It sees racism as a secondary effect, produced by social-economic misery and competition between workers: improve people's social-economic prospects, and racism will quasi-automatically disappear. To talk about racism is to be divert from supposedly real issues. This means the SP's election programme barely mentions 'racism' while the issue is everywhere. Polls show a considerable part of the new PVV-voters come from previous SP-voters.

Its neglect of racism also means the SP it is unable to bring together people who are victimized by it and want to fight it. The coming elections will see the participation of small new parties that, with some success, have made anti-racism central to their program. Likewise, the Greens are predicted to win substantially, possibly becoming larger than the SP. The Dutch Greens, Groenlinks, are traditionally seen as anti-racist and there is no doubt many people will vote for it because they want to oppose the PVV.

The SP's orientation to government participation is another dilemma. So far, the PvdA has staved off the threat of the SP by successfully tarrying the party as 'inexperienced' and 'unrealistic', and hence unable to deliver real benefits to people. The SP responded to this by moderating its demands, accepting for example the raising of the retirement age from 65 to 67 and the European Stability Mechanism. To prove its capacities as a governing party, the SP joined several executives, such as in the capital Amsterdam where it has formed a coalition with right-wing parties. But this approach has also meant the party is seen less as the party of the opposition, and as too tame for many. The SP tried to overcome this with offensive demands like the increase of minimum-wages, taking up again the demand of retirement at 65, increasing pensions and lowering rents. The party has gone into the election campaign with the slogan 'take the power' - but in polls it barely comes above the ten per cent it gained in 2012, or is even predicted to decline.

The SP is struggling with a contradiction: is it the party of social protest – or a government party in waiting, a 'improved' version of the PvdA? Electorally, the second prospect just doesn't seem to be in reach – unlike in 2006 when the party won 26 seats. But neither can the party position itself as the leader of social dissatisfaction as it neglects one of the core issues – racism.

But the problems of the Dutch left are more fundamental than the approach of the SP. Simply put, the country sees high levels of anger and dissatisfaction that are captured by the populist right while social mobilizations are at a very low level. Social movements are extremely weak. One domain that has seen some dynamism is anti-racism which is attracting new activists, often young people of colour. But this is still far from being a mass movement.

The main trade-union federation, the FNV, in the meantime is going through difficult changes. Since the eighties, the unionisation has dropped from 35 per cent to less than twenty per cent. Even more worrying is the deterioration of the union-structures. There is a lack of activists and often of elementary know-how. In the words of one trade-unionist, decades of voluntary wage-moderation meant that the FNV went from a situation in which it did not want to fight, to one which it no longer knows how to fight. When a few years ago the FNV, for the first time in decades, again decided to organize a First of May event, the organisation was contracted out to an event agency that put blackened fences around the terrain so passers-by could hardly see what was going on.

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In recent years however some progress has been made. The structure of the federation was reformed to make it more democratic and activists are trying to orient the unions to a more activist approach, one that can also appeal to younger and more precarious workers than the traditional base of older, white, male workers. But this is still a slow and difficult process.

The difficult but real changes in the unions and the beginnings of new anti-racist initiatives and structures point to possible ramparts against the current right-wing drift of the country. Although far from as radical as its sometimes presented, both by right-wing opponents who want to denounce it as unrealistic and by international anti-capitalists looking for success-stories, the continued support for a party like the SP shows that many people want to see a different Netherlands. Bringing these points of hope, sometimes composed of very different people, together will be a difficult and long-term project. But it is the only way forward.

PS:

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[1] Mepschen, P.J.H., '[Everyday autochthony: Difference, discontent and the politics of home in Amsterdam](#)'.