

## ***Paradise lost. Paradise regained?***

### **On drifting citizens and freefloating policy makers**

A politico-philosophical balance with reference to crippled ideals, hope and expectations amidst a cynical (*prefab-*)culture

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**F**or many people life is no picnic and by no means a 'success story'. Nevertheless, the historical development is characterized by alternating 'peaks and troughs'. Peaks of idealism, hope, expectation and progressive-humanitarian ideas that is, as opposed to conservative-reactionary and regressive-restorative developments in which the situation is paused and is being clung to (a supposed) fortunate status quo, or a return is made to (alleged) earlier 'better' times.

'Progressiveness' and 'conservatism' are relative concepts however. In this respect the political-cultural *sixties-Welle* actually turned out rather short-lived (notwithstanding its impact and effects), just like the late 18th-century *Dutch Patriot movement* for example, that preceded the French Revolution and by which radical democratic changes were pursued to deal 'definitively' with feudal relations and structures.

High expectations turn out to be able to turn into their opposite more quickly than they are developed and to be severely thwarted because of massive opposing forces that are always omnipresent in the midst of the unruly (geopolitical) reality and that – unexpectedly, or again and again - appear to emerge. The *scientific revolution*, as well as the aforementioned Patriot movement, The French Revolution, Enlightenment-thinking and the development of human rights all had a long run-up and history, just as the pursued international cooperation within the framework of the League of Nations and the later UN not only came about with acclaim but also with difficulty and opposition. Historical periods of hope and fear alternate constantly, but also run parallel to a large extent.

As mentioned, reactionary headwinds can be massive, however much people embrace concepts such as 'change' and 'progress'. Despite 'other banners', a lot of change appears to contain 'more of the same'. It always comes down to *what change* is being pursued and *for what purpose*. That is the (political) key question in the midst of all masquerades.

Societies are *man-made* and by no means a 'natural phenomenon'. Societies are never 'finished' and issues never definitively 'settled'. Time and again it turns out that what one believes to be 'under control' can reappear as problematic and can therefore never be dismissed as 'passé'. New issues and questions arise, to which people and society have to relate again and again. In other words, structural social imperfections are not 'fates', but the

results of decisions that are often taken over the heads of citizens. However it is not the citizen who is responsible for such 'imperfections' (or inadequacy), but primarily those who, as *representatives*, have taken the wrong paths but often subsequently invoke powerlessness, force majeure or - even more painfully - 'good intentions' in the name of citizen and society to legitimate their actions.

In short, man is constantly looking for the perfection of everything that is lacking in social life and has always imagined and developed associated thoughts. Up to eschatological representations. *Idealism* is therefore an unmistakable human quality that determines and directs historical development. But not all ideals turn out to be as beneficial to people and society as they are presented. Much of what is embraced as 'new' and 'progressive' turns out to boil down to old ideas in different 'packaging'. In other words a repetition of (historical) moves. Especially when there is a lack of basic *historical awareness*, there is a risk of having to 'reinvent' structures that have already been taken up and realized during earlier periods. For example, *Enlightenment ideals* appear to be not nearly as firmly anchored as is generally assumed. This also applies for the construction of the model of the social security state. On top however the assumed *qualities of reason and reasonableness* that underlie the constitutional state show more problematic aspects in 'modern' societies than previously thought. The lucidity that, in addition to a (critical, but also harnessed) political position, was so characteristic of the youthful élan during the 60s and 70s, under the guise of 'self-realization' and determination, turned into a cynical culture of unprecedented *egotism and egomania* that drives exploiting forces and powers more and more (and even further than before). In other words, we have to deal with a (*'prefab'*) *market society* as the apotheosis of the individual 'Self' that has taken on bizarre proportions. With even devastating pathological features. *Deconstructivist* philosophical orientations that are considered 'modern' have not advanced *institutional coherence*, but have resulted in an overall *fragmentation* of ideas. Despite the developed and codified human rights, *human dignity* still (or again) proves to be problematic in many respects.

The paradox is that in spite of (philosophical) deconstructivism, dominant neoliberal policy constructs a society that in many respects clogs up economic market structures in such a way that stable relations hardly exist anymore and in which the *citizen* in particular is being kept after to such an extent that he has increasingly *less* individual and collective socio-economic room to move. Societies have become completely *subordinated* to the economic power interests of financial markets, while governments accept to be dictated by (economic) law as they languidly keep pace with what the market ordains. That is not 'freedom' (let alone 'equality'), but sheer *repression* caused by lethargy, indifference and oblivion towards the interests of society as a whole.

During the aftermath of the Second World War (1945-1980) progressive moves were made towards a sense of solidarity that obliged to focus on common interests over self-interest. That is why — albeit mainly in some Western European countries — welfare systems were established with the aim of securing prosperity, welfare, social security (rights) and development opportunities for all citizens. The international cooperation that has been initiated in a European and UN context also aimed for the same development. In addition, efforts were

made to contain the explosively increased arms race, to control geopolitical conflicts and (eventually) to end the Cold War.

In spite of the fact that the path was clear, the road became bumpy and grimy. Issues related to problematic modernity development such as (national) identity, issues of sovereignty, location and position determination have proved persistent. Restorative reactionary forces hindered the effectiveness of cross-border orientations. Civilian populations as well as national states and their governments appear to have great difficulty in breaking away and freeing themselves from obsolete *Gemeinschaft*-concepts, so that virulent nationalism could re-emerge and thrive. This hinders the development of cosmopolitan orientations to a great extent and gives productive impulses to neither interdependence nor necessary international cooperation. Oligopolistic financial-economic concentration of power can therefore proliferate unbridled.

Moreover, welfare states have come under attack to such an extent that many institutionally regulated securities have been called into question. The democratic constitutional state is also under pressure. The exploitation of people and the environment continues unabated, as a result of which poverty, inequality, exploitation and deprivation continue to exist and citizens literally and figuratively become 'adrift'. In short, in many respects we are back to square one and facing rather pre-war views and models of society. Causal connections are made insufficiently and selectively, as a result of which analyzes of social issues often fail. For example, climate and environmental issues are mostly limited to the *effects* of exploitation, instead of questioning and criticizing the *economic policy causes* of global imbalances. This 'ideological silence' may silence critical opposition for the time being, eventually such fundamental debates are unavoidable.

## Policy cynicism

With the rise of neoliberal orientations and new public management regarded as a 'modern' but regressively focused neo-capitalist governance model, not only has the market free rein, but paradoxically there is also a development towards (forms of) *state capitalism*, in which the *human factor* is completely subordinated to financial and economic return interests.

Companies rely on their entrepreneurial freedom, while the same companies often think that they can appeal to community funds (subsidies; tax rulings) through the government to safeguard their competitive position in times of economic downturn. Citizens as consumers are held up to the importance of market freedom, but can pay for this cherished 'freedom' if it appears that employment - and thus income security - is coming under pressure. The business risk is therefore played out arbitrarily. That is measuring with two standards.

In this way, society is approached as a '*company*', with governments as a *board of directors* and citizens as (exchangeable) employees. Democratically elected representatives of the people stand on the sidelines with their parliaments like a 'works council'. The interests of the true *stakeholders* (the citizens) are therefore subordinate to the whims of *shareholders* who do not care much about the general interest and primarily (if not exclusively) have their own advantage in mind. The (problematic) thinking of progress has degenerated into cynical policy in which false illusions and pretensions are pursued that can hardly be fulfilled. Rather than

realizing and acknowledging this, many a technocratic ideologue of progress pretends that one has a hold of the truth and that any justified skepticism would be suspected (if not querulantist or even 'unpatriotic') in advance. The propaganda machinery is running at full speed to hermetically shield and consolidate selective interests. Citizens are teased and kept under control with false promises and the occasional crumbs. (The old 'bread and games'-mechanism still proves to be an extremely effective method to calm unwanted emotions and opposition). It would be preferable for citizens to join forces and to counterbalance the unbridled exercise of power through greater solidarity. No (cultivation of) victimization — which for example characterizes the MeToo-movement — but joint advocacy as befits politically free citizens. However, this requires a loosening of conformist structures that put the citizen on hold and of which it is still very questionable whether people are willing and able to do so.

### Remedies?

**A**s a 'remedy' against human imperfection (or human nature or la condition humaine), many mainly look for (collateral) security, 'belonging', comfort, hope, safety and/or oblivion. But most of them turn out to be illusory. Actual remedies for the burdens of life are mainly in the field of solidarity, development possibilities and (general) conditions of existence. This concerns social issues that each individual has to deal with. 'Hope and expectation' will therefore always have to be given hands and feet if one is to be able to give reasonable meaning to existence.

Now that, in addition to ongoing technological 'solutions' for fundamental societal issues, some advocate a '*reorientation to Enlightenment values*', one may wonder how far modern societies have strayed from the rule of law principles and foundations. The 'economic rationale' so much talked about appears to comprise mainly an amalgam of management ideas that have little to do with 'ratio', 'reason' and 'reasonableness'. Moreover, there are many economic schools of thought that certainly cannot be swept into one heap. In contrast to Hayek, Von Mises and Friedman, the analyzes of Marx and Keynes, for example, still stand up, even if they are wrongly dismissed as 'outdated'. It is therefore arrogance and self-righteousness to think that there is only one economic 'truth' that would render all others 'redundant'. It is not possible to achieve progress there with mere reminiscences of Enlightenment orientations as public administration has become too corrupted for that. However, consideration could be given (again) to what (economic) *freedom*, (social) *equality*, *solidarity* and *welfare-sharing* could actually mean if one really wants to make progress that will benefit citizens *in the broader* sense. However, it is not necessary to reinvent 'the wheel', but rather to value progressive developments that have been taken in hand and not to dismiss them as 'irrelevant' (or as 'historical aberrations') any longer. Whether this will come to pass is very much the question, given the persistent (political) unwillingness to learn from lessons.

## From multiform simplicity to uniform multiplicity

**A**lthough in the old (feudal) days social inequality was even more manifest than in the present day and living conditions were often minimal, forms of life were multiform. As a result of an emerging (industrial) *massculture* multiformity is nowadays merely transformed and replaced by more of the same (uniform multiplicity) in many aspects of life. Progress is made due to idealistic — be it pragmatic — concepts concerning the *institutionalization of life chances and conditions*, but this advancement was accompanied at the expense of quite some individual autonomy and authenticity in spite of all the advocated individualism. Citizens have again had to give up their hard-won political status and position as *citoyen* for diffuse concepts of citizenship in which 'participation' is the keyword. In this way, citizens are systematically and effectively kept in line with the desired uniform (market)line and also often kept away from their (political and social) rights. In addition, for many the basic living conditions are still not properly regulated and the boundless exploitation of people and the environment continues unabated. 'Progress' therefore has a rather ambiguous meaning and is less rosy for many than it is suggested. This applies not only to populations in poor countries, but also to many in the rich western industrialized world. The poverty issue is broad and is certainly not limited to the 'socially weaker' or the less educated, as is often believed.

If one really wants to realize a more humane world, the task of finding an overall balance between goals and means, wishes, interests and possibilities, as well as in words and actions, is not a (theoretical) 'luxury' but a bitter necessity. This requires a profound ideological shift of orientations and attitudes in order to meet the expectations that were raised with the emerging social security states during earlier decades.

Although both phenomena are an extension of each other in the realization of ideals, a distinction must be made between what citizens *could do* (with the right means) and what governments *should do* for the benefit of all. Most of the time, however, the focus is on what citizens 'must' and what governments do not consider themselves 'bound' or 'capable of'. This turns things upside down and obscures a clear view on to what end states and governments have been created and, in many cases, are also structured and equipped to do.

Institutional degeneration, on the other hand, is the order of the day amidst all policy rhetoric. Many people believe that with 'institutional reform' — which in many cases amounts to a neglect, or rather a (whole)sale of the rule of law — they can even make a good impression in the assumption that institutions are 'passé' and can therefore be closed down. They would only 'hinder' the market in its beneficial work. The disdain for socially relevant issues such as employment, social security, health care and wealth sharing is often shocking. The modern manager thinks himself superior as a technocrat and does not care much about the 'liberal mice' of people who have no eye for the 'challenges of the modern age'. After all, one has to take advantage of 'opportunities' and thus a rigorous clear up of superfluous 'ballast' is the advocated credo.

Apart from the fact that there are no (living)paradises, a paradisiacal condition can never be based on absolutist ideas. Neither of feudal, theological or ideological cuts. As long as a

nuanced perception of a complex reality is central and one does not get lost in nihilism as a paradoxical variant of absolutism, there is hope for progress. One may believe that everything concerns (interchangeable) 'perception', that does not mean that nuanced *distinction* is not possible (or desirable). Because in that case one is back to square one, or the starting point of *closed awareness* that is being declared fought so much.

Paradisiacal vistas may seem enticing, the true progressive knows however what it takes for the conservative to be able to (continue to) count his blessings. It would be quite something if the conditions of existence of many were no longer the plaything of opportunistic arbitrariness, but an integral part of consistent political policy that manages to distance itself sufficiently from ever-changing fashionable phenomena and views. However, this requires a keen eye and a straight back. Two things that politics appears to be structurally lacking.

## Conclusion

# We the People

Wanting to change beacons is commendable, but it is still the hubris in many guises that keeps man from realistic approaches or solutions to fundamental human issues, just as hubris already played tricks on man when he was chased out of the mythical *Garden of Eden*. Longing back for such an eldorado, or wanting to establish a 'paradise on earth' is therefore impossible and doomed to fail, even though many 'Alice's in Wonderland' — and many future gurus with them — dream of such beckoning (or reassuringly dampening) perspectives. Wanting to strive for salvation for all people can never be done with a simple blueprint, but involves trial and error. Therefore, the motto 'we have no other option but to continue' (Mandela) applies, with which failure is equally inextricably and often unnecessarily linked. Man is able to achieve a lot, provided he comes to his senses and knows how to use his powers effectively. Thinking that one can leave it at (fashionable) rhetoric is a weakness that conceals a lack of decisiveness - and especially *political will*. The critical focus should be primarily aimed at this. But as long as one only tries to realize those ideals for which one is unwilling to make (personal) sacrifices or for which no concessions need to be made, it will usually remain lip service. In addition to nationalistic orientations, this 'nimby' phenomenon ('not in my backyard') plays a not to be underestimated obstructing role for many citizens as well as for national states. There are indeed alternatives to all kinds of greedy exploitation, but then we will have to join forces. 'We' that is to say citizens, but especially and foremost policymakers and their advisers.

To begin with, there is indeed 'such a thing as society' that encompasses more than just market mechanisms. Secondly, citizens are not employees of a 'private limited company' and a handful of supervisory directors, and they do not have to voluntarily comply with the fancies of this group of advocates. Third, the *res publica* embodies the political primacy of which all citizens belong. The *social contract* between citizens and government is not an 'optional matter', but entails binding responsibilities that the government must fully fulfill. In case of violation of this contract, the citizen is entitled to revolt and to withdraw confidence in the

state and/or government. 'We the people' may sound populist, but the sovereignty of the people (which is clearly different from 'the will of the people') is a historical fact that has a broader impact than (merely) the (formal) opening lines of the American Constitution. Wanting to be a 'guide country' — be it the United States, the Netherlands, or any other country for that matter — in any case does not tolerate the abuse or marginalization of citizens. This applies not only to one's 'own people', but certainly not to any other either. Wherever they may be. This creates far-reaching (cross-border) obligations. The *Luciferic* derailments of *hubris and temptation*, described by Milton in his extensive poems of 1667 and 1671, against which spiritfult resistance must be raised to achieve the overcoming of darkness by promoting realism and providing *clarity of thought and morals* (early *Enlightenment* - see Jonathan Israel), are still relevant to the present day. Ideals are too often shattered by expectations that cannot be fulfilled, while realism turns out to be both over- and undervalued. In this respect a lot of (*reconstructing*) work has to be done before such clarity really can be pursued to the full.

One may count oneself rich, the true richness lies in fellow humanity and not in selfish greed. In this regard, the egomaniac adage of the anti-society neoliberal ideology has completely disqualified itself.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For further reading see: Van der Kooij, H. *The dead-end pathways of neoliberal thought* (forthcoming)