

Seven plagues of the 'Permanent State of Unrest and Disintegration'

—*State Regulations and Governance : an increasingly counterproductive pair*—

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Contrary to what has been advocated over time in terms of 'good governance', the so-called 'regulatory state' and its governance have become a burden to many citizens and their living conditions. Regulations are not so much 'effective' and 'efficient' (according to their ends), but predominantly *moralistic and coercive* according to their means. Grounded institutions have been eroded and many another *disruptive* development can be attributed to this 'modern' mode of political decision making and state governance. In this article, we take a closer look and will elaborate on some of these developments and their consequences. The paper consists of three parts: an overview of some key-developments concerning *consequences of (current) regressive policies* (1. *Discomforting societal realism*); an outline of the way *political debates and decision-making* are being blurred and locked up (2. *The continuing and ever-expanding 'Tower of Babel'*); and a discussion on some perspectives that are offered in the way *governments* could – or should – operate more effectively to the *full* benefit of society and its citizens (3. *A different culture of governance?*). An introduction and concluding remarks complete this survey.

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Introduction

L'Humanité and the fleeting-floating world

With all the commotion about daily events that citizens are incessantly confronted with, many wonder 'what now' and 'how to proceed'. Many matters and issues seem to elude the citizen, so that the feeling of powerlessness (and pointlessness) is considerably greater than it is usually portrayed. As long as this feeling can be massaged away with all kinds of 'cosiness and festivity', superficially speaking there seems little to worry about, but those who look more closely see a different reality that does not lie. It is therefore not a question of 'optimism' or 'pessimism', as some jauntily claim, but of *focused observation*. Perceptions may diverge, but that does not mean they are interchangeable. Parallel realities exist side by side and through each other. While one group is partying and drinking beers, others are fighting for their conditions of existence, or (literally) for their lives. While many wonder how they can make ends meet financially, others soar carefree through the skies on their way to the next heavenly all-inclusive holiday resort. That is simply 'a fact of life', the lucky ones explain. Others know better. It is not so much a question of 'destiny', but of an *unequal distribution of wealth and possibilities of existence*. This implies **choices**. Not of those who are *affected* however, but of those who think they can decide about – indeed – the fate of others who *depend* on such decisions. And there are many, very many. Urging people to take 'fate into one's own hands' therefore usually amounts to nothing less than a slap in the face of all those who often have minimal possibilities of bringing about *change*. 'Change' in this respect is a luxury that most cannot afford. Making the best of it is often the only thing left. That has little to do with 'romance', but much to do with 'a hard road' (and heavy load). Not that everyone involved is burdened by it – as the other side of the *blues* emphasizes – but that life is no picnic when one wants to move forward but is thwarted in doing so. Man 'floats' all around a fair deal. If not between 'heaven and earth', then certainly between *hope, expectation and disillusionment*.

It may seem so simple: ensure that political issues are considered and initiated *community-based*, then saddle municipalities with all the major issues (such as the environment, housing, social security, refugee issues and so on), if necessary turn them into large-scale media events, and there you go — the citizen will solve it. That's how the big *decentralized anti-etatistic swing* ¹ really gets wings.

All in all, this points to an rather uncomfortable reality that shows how *powerless* the world community actually is when it comes to political decisionmaking. In the current geopolitical constellation of *interdependence* and (financial-economic) *power concentration* that is. Because things could be very different if societies would not focus unilaterally on *fragmented* national (and overstrained nationalistic) interests and would not hold on to them so strong. This requires a completely different

attitude and orientation than is currently demonstrated with a one-sided *apolitical* (depoliticised) focus on 'citizens-capabilities'.

1. Discomforting societal realism

When evaluating four decades of neoliberal policies from a *citizen's perspective*, then despite all the economic 'euphoria' – or complacency – about the policies pursued, a number of less attractive matters stand out, all of which have to do with the consequences of the *other side* of these policies and which have placed the ongoing *neoliberal policy line* for decades in a particularly sour light. The economic 'windmills' may be turning sufficiently, but the question is again and again *for whom, in what respect and on whose behalf* ? The « *dolce far niente* », or be it the « *savoir vivre* » c.q. art of (blissful) 'doing nothing' (which for many modern people is 'not an option', since it is believed that 'standing still' irrevocably means going backwards and 'idleness' is the devil's ear), has ended up in a *general state of hyperactive excitement* that is rushing in all directions. All sorts of obsessive 'undertakings' and 'start(-up)s' are being made, but many fundamental issues remain virtually untouched or, even worse, ignored. The many meaningless comments speak volumes in this regard. Despite all the pretended 'dynamism', stagnation – and yes, indeed – *regression* abound. That is the result of all the notorious 'utility and necessity' thinking that is supposed to propel society to great heights, but in the meantime makes the population swallow a lot of bitter pills. The *hybrid morality* of the merchant who pushes the consumer to spend (as the Dutch p.m. Rutte proclaimed: "*do buy that car and that house; book that vacation!*"), but in the meantime urges the citizen to moderate his consumption behavior and makes the cost of living skyrocket – and adds a few hefty tax scoops on top of that, takes the crown. How much money the citizen has to pay for all this is up to him. Surely, money has to roll, but this does not mean the government can 'pay for everything', so the shabby retort runs usually. Indeed, a sure recipe to go crazy. Meanwhile, the *accumulation of capital* rises to unprecedented heights and many citizens are left to their fate in despair. Is this then an example of a well to do country in which living is 'pleasant' and of which everyone should be so appealingly 'proud' ? When did we see such ambivalent moralism before in western history...? (Lucky guess: *Victorian particularism* is never far away, not even in 'modern' progressive societies ²).

In addition to 'external' factors such as the *Corona* epidemic, the *Afghanistan* debacle, the war in *Ukraine*, and the *refugee* issue, the policies pursued in various Western European countries over the past decade(s) have been characterized by:

- *the disruptive* – for public services and the public domain eroding – *transition from welfare state* (rather: social security state ³) *to a so called 'participation society'* (in the Netherlands

officially marked with the 2010 King's speech when p.m. Rutte's first (neoliberal) cabinet took office, but decided and started long before that)

- *cluttering of public administration* (decentralization ⁴) with increasing fragmentation and arbitrariness in (municipal) service delivery
- *unbridled market mechanisms* in housing, health care, environmental planning and other (social) services, as a result of which *commercial exploitation* has gained the upper hand over stable government control
- *the erosion of a rightful concept of* (political and constitutional) *citizenship*
- *decreasing social security, increasing inequality* and an *eroding middle class*
- *citizens' rights that are grossly being violated* due to blatant administrative hubris and bureaucratic bias ⁵
- *continuing and increasing structural poverty* due to disruptive and disproportionate taxation (on primary necessities) and burdens which are hardly bearable for many, that irresponsibly increases overall inequality as well as *increasing risks* towards downward social mobility (in German: 'Abstieg').

On top of these seven disruptive developments, in terms of *political decision-making, governance and policy*, a number of other parallel plagues can be mentioned such as:

- far-reaching *monism* ⁶, as a result of which democracy is being 'kaltgestellt' (chilled) and parliament is left out in the cold
- *cynical governmental disdain* for social and societal needs (misplaced complacency)
- a *closed look-away culture* ('no memory') and a failing sense of responsibility
- an increasingly *unreliable government; fiscal arbitrariness*
- *apolitical approach* to societal issues because of a meager technocratic (management) approach in which mere 'efficiency and profitability standards' are decisive
- an increasingly narrow *nationalistic orientation* ('we'-culture) that is diametrically opposed to cosmopolitan thinking with a broad (humanistic) outlook
- *moral ambivalence* regarding life questions and related orientations (propagating 'the right life' but not living it up *in terms of policy and governance*; being concerned about 'declining civic trust and crumbling social cohesion', but not succeeding in nor being able to bring order to the domain of public administration and its organization)
- allowing to be guided by *illusory notions* of 'solutions' to social issues which turn out to be largely based on wishful thinking and quite often demonstrate a lack of awareness of reality.

Not exactly developments to be 'proud' of. On the contrary. *Regression* everywhere, from a bigote attitude that does not allow itself to be held responsible for such destabilizing policy choices. Neoliberal politicians and their lackeys who, like the neoconservatives, have been governing for years,

show themselves unaccountable for (the consequences of) their actions. The constant propagandistic (political marketing) rhetoric of 'good intentions' prevents this. As mentioned, the shutters are closed and the house is locked. (Who will turn the lights off, then *on...*?). Quite a bit is needed in the short run to *strengthen* (parliamentary) democracy and citizens' livelihoods in accordance with constitutional principles and the rule of law, including:

- a clear overview of all *lobbying circuits* that have access to the state, combined with
- an overview of *all major subsidy streams* and the (annual) amounts provided
- the establishment of a *Constitutional Court* that tests legislation against the constitution and has the power to *nullify* unsound legislation
- a thorough revision of the political-administrative *mandate system* through elections
- reversing the policy of *decentralisation* (and administrative fragmentation)
- restoration of the *public sector and service provision*; putting a hold to 'market forces' and commercialization as far as services for the general interest are concerned
- reversal of *privatization and corporatization of agencies* ⁷, that is containment of the grey in-between area of the *semi-public sector* ('quangocratization')
- break through *monistic decision-making culture*
- expansion of *information and research facilities* of the parliament (with a proper research organization of its own)
- complete restoration of the cluttered institutional *social security system*
- review (simplification) of the *cumulative tax system* (reduction of disproportionality)
- put an end to '*tax-rulings*', i.e. the tax exemptions for large (groups of) companies
- put a stop to the *transfer of capital* from public funds to the market sector
- balance the factors of (tax on and revenues from) *labor and capital*.

As it turns out, however, it is very doubtful whether the social damage caused will be restored if one persists in being right about such a *state-capitalist order* that is largely based on quicksand. For that purpose other (institutional) orientations will be indispensable – such as the *restoration of the social contract* between government and society – which, however, is still invariably dismissed as 'undesirable' (or 'irrelevant'). This cannot be left to individual politicians alone, but will have to be supported by *parliament as a whole*. In any case, the time will come when one can no longer avoid such matters and will have to realize that what is good for some – namely, rigid *capital accumulation* – is by no means in the interest of *society as a whole*. Those who don't want to learn will have to feel, so the old motto goes. In other words, *experience at first hand* what it means to be permanently patronized without any real prospects. One should hope that this fate may be withheld from future generations.

Reasons to be cheerful?

In this context a serious matter concerns furthermore the way governments are being advised as far as policy matters are involved. It appears that advisory councils are *rather reluctant* – not to say half-hearted, or duplicitous – in addressing questionable societal issues. Policy advisory institutions and organizations (such as the Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy WRR) often have little eye for the *social needs and distress caused by governmental policies*, but continually muse about 'do-capacities' of citizens instead, as if this would bring allover happiness to the people. There is little or no mention of the capacities and 'capabilities' of *policymakers*, as if it were an infallible category above reproach, so that executed policies are always more or less tacitly approved. Nevertheless, in view of the way in which this forementioned institution looks back on its 50th anniversary, it shows itself to be significantly pleased with its activities. Its research is widely publicized, as if there had always been an 'independent critical attitude', which is clearly not the case. For years on end, both the WRR and other similar advisory organizations (such as the Social en Cultural Planning Office SCP and the Central Planning Office CPB) have shown themselves to be the carriers of a *neoliberal market policy* that is diametrically opposed to what they claim to advocate for society. Not so much the welfare and livelihood security of the population, but primarily *economic interests* must be safeguarded, so it appears from many reports issued that do not exactly bear witness to a well-considered critical attitude. Especially reports of the last few years are lacking such orientations. The policy-related *status quo* must be maintained unchanged – and preferably with a few (tax) incentives, so it seems. But while politics and society make a sharp *turn to the right* and the shutters are closed, one continues to fixate on *totalized statistics* to suggest that everything is 'actually quite all right'. Instead, the 'accountants' preferably would do better to focus on a totalized overview of *all factors that lead to the societal-wide decline of population groups*, such as poverty figures *in combination* with the socio-economic consequences of the (recent) benefitsdisaster in the Netherlands and the Groningen gas extraction debacle ⁸, the general increase in the cost of living including housing and energy costs and health care, structurally reduced job security, systematic under-indexation of pensions, debt assistance, and so on. It will then become clear that we are dealing with *significant numbers* of households, and not – as it is usually presented – with a few 'socially disadvantaged' who will be kept out of the wind with just a 'helping hand'. That is a false image that does not do justice to this seriously disruptive social reality.

All in all, no reason to be overly euphoric and pretend that pointing to *forty years of uninterrupted regressive policies* would not be relevant. Apparently, many prefer to sweep these matters under the carpet and cover them up with the cloak of 'understanding' (or 'concern'), rather than take a firm stand based on irrefutable data against the erosion and cluttering of the *institutional and administrative coherence* with which the existence of many people, before this policy was introduced, was approached in a clearly more *consistent* manner than is the case today with the bankrupt management and efficiency mentality. Researchers, too, appear to have been infected with this virus to such an

extent that they can hardly bring themselves to sound reflection and are unable to *free* themselves from the dominant financial market ideology and its disruptive consequences. As a result, the ball is invariably in the court of 'the' citizen and what remains is apathetic policy rhetoric. So there is no reason to celebrate and certainly no reason to beat one's chest. Now we know full well that breast-beating can be masked with 'modesty', but such an attitude is all too transparent. Especially when there is no change in the way social issues are approached and the research front remains hermetically sealed. Then one can continue to imagine oneself smug and need not fear any unwelcome resistance. The gratuitous reference to the achievements of social media, which are supposed to raise 'communication' to great heights, shows a unworldliness that misses the point entirely. It also grossly overestimates the 'possibilities' of dependent citizens to 'do' things and takes them out of their (cultural-psychological) context. The modern 'algorithmic poles of shame' so to speak are, as should be well known, all too often rather grotesquely used to give disproportionate attention to issues, leaving more elementary matters out of the picture. This may stir up emotions, but it is by no means always the 'welcome contribution' that one thinks one can discern here. Those who bury their heads in the sand should not be surprised when they no longer have a view of the ground, let alone that they are still able to *rise above* ground level and sound the well-considered word that is so indispensable. A ray of hope (if one can call it that) in all the political chest-beating, however, is that various cabinets together with compliant (coalition) parties and their policy advisers no longer succeed in straightening out many disruptive matters that have been systematically deferred, but which nevertheless unmistakably continue to *present* themselves. One encounters oneself and this proves to be more and more 'uncomfortable' for the persons concerned. However, the social dismay about the bankrupt policy is total.

2. The continuing and ever-expanding 'Tower of Babel'

We live in a world in which many people may consider themselves to be full of opportunities and free, and which may show itself to be 'open' to these purposes, but the reality is in many ways different. Contrary to the prevailing view, *closed and introverted societies* comprise a *broader spectrum* than merely authoritarian and totalitarian ruled societies. Those who observe carefully can see that, in this respect, image and reality are often less congruous than suggested. The current debate on the environment and climate is a striking example.

One can 'experiment' until one turns green, yellow or purple, much of the euphoria displayed will prove premature once the extent to which modern (industrial) societies are – and will remain – dependent on energy supply becomes fully apparent. *Mass production and consumption* are a fact of life that cannot simply be brushed aside. Not in the Netherlands, nor elsewhere. That is why 'climate targets' must be viewed with the necessary scepticism. Especially when such objectives are embraced

in a dubious and all too obvious manner by financial-economic conglomerates, as if they could serve as a *replacement* or *panacea for structural social problems*, such as poverty, scarcity and exploitation on a global scale. In the face of all of nature's ongoing disruptions, talk of 'climate neutrality' is just as unrealistic as believing that man can manipulate everything to his own ends. That is haughty vanity (to say the least). But as Carson warned in 1962, let there be no '*silent spring*'. This appeal to climate and nature awareness not only provided the impetus for the founding of the *Club of Rome* (1968), but can certainly *also* be interpreted more broadly as a wake-up call regarding everything that hinders and threatens mankind in his possibilities of existence. This goes considerably further than CO₂, nitrogen or phosphate problems. If we do not manage to control viral infections adequately, what do we actually imagine and pretend about 'the climate', which is clearly a much more *complex* phenomenon? All sense of proportion seems to have been lost. This sense of reality lacks a balanced view of the mechanisms of nature and the environment, as well as of what societies *depend* on and, if possible, actually would *benefit* from.

Tinkering and doctoring with (social) 'identities' and positions

Also many misconceptions about identity, identity formation and identity determination are characterised by fallacies, or even deliberate deception. Identity is said to be a matter of 'choice'. At least, that is the popular 'postmodern' (deconstructivist) view embraced by many. If this were so, then a bad or 'less fortunate' social position is not so much a matter of bad luck or fate due to unjust established structures, but of ones 'own fault'. ('*Capabilities*' not used properly; not being able to find the right 'way to the governmental office window', etc.). Class struggle, let alone solidarity with one's fellow man, is then out of the question. Charity, subsequently, would then morally speaking be the only thing left to do to lend a helping hand to 'unfortunate fellow men'. This is a classic example of social denial and *depoliticisation*.

What is simply brushed aside with this kind of reasoning is that it does considerable damage to life and the supposed possibilities of choice in a market society. In a market society, the *market system* determines (the diversity of) the products and services rendered. Also in the cultural field. A factor to take seriously into account when talking about 'pluriformity' of opinions and ideas. It often turns out to be less multifaceted than assumed, as it is usually a case of 'more of the same', i.e. the lowest common denominator (or rather: the lowest common multiple) is the leading measure of choice, both *quantitatively and qualitatively*. It primarily concerns large numbers (bulk), which results in an enormous 'clearance' on many fronts. There is less room for deviating orientations than people are generally inclined or willing to admit. The conformist pressure that has a far-reaching impact on social thinking and acting can hardly be overestimated in all the jubilation about (personal) freedom of choice. A unified society is advancing more and more. This strengthens a *mass culture* from which it is almost impossible to escape. If freedom means the 'freedom' to fall in line, then that is a rather bitter liberty which has little to do with a correct concept of freedom, even if one believes that the margins held

would be ample or 'sufficient' enough. More scepticism would be welcome in this respect. If only to prevent such notions from taking hold of our hard-won freedom. It is not for nothing that freedom rights are *codified* in the constitution, so that they are all respected and observed unconditionally. This does not mean, however, that these rights cannot conflict. If, for example, the right to freedom of expression and fulfilment of life is made *subordinate* to the freedom of religion, so that religiously-based educational institutions can invoke the freedom of education (and educational organization) to keep the doors closed to 'dissidents', then freedoms become constricting structures which subvert the intention of the legislator. A tricky dilemma that requires correct prioritisation. A certain 'hierarchy of fundamental rights' therefore seems indispensable and also unavoidable, although it can easily lead to a sliding scale of lack of freedom when fashionable beliefs and views gain the upper hand.

Those who boast about the 'opportunities and possibilities' that society would offer should realise that citizens are expected to perform an almost impossible task in order to distinguish themselves and at the same time adapt to such a compelling market system. Only if society were to distance itself from this, and provide real space for personal freedom (so celebrated by liberals), would progress be made in this respect. (Rigid) *equalisation* is counterproductive. Especially when 'freedom' is predominantly interpreted in an *economic* sense and it is believed that the ability to 'distinguish' oneself (in a market-economic sense) offers the citizen sufficient opportunities for development. After all, economics is not identical to culture.

In short, if one continues to expect that citizens will automatically find their (right) 'place' because of the market economy, then one is sorely mistaken. The essence of this debate is that whoever is in charge is also fully responsible for when things go wrong. This was the reason why, at the time of the (construction of) the social security state, it was felt that the central government had to play an essential *redistributive* role in order to *protect citizens* from the consequences of unreasonable social security risks such as illness, dismissal, and loss of income, which formed the basis for the construction of an extensive institutional *public sector*. This formed the core of the social security system as it was founded. Liberals, however, continued to advocate a *minimalist* welfare state with an austere social security system ('mini-system') for those who 'really needed it' and, as a result of the rise of neo-liberalism, eventually got their way. That went far, very far, as we all know by now.

The aforementioned core idea that underlies the social security state has largely been lost with the rise of neoliberalism and has been turned upside down: the citizen is expected to bear these risks himself – after all, he is the 'manager of his own life', so it is said. This *tour de force* is at the root of many socio-economic and social problems that societies are faced with today. It is also reflected in the approach to the *corona* crisis, which has been lacking the necessary central direction for a considerable time. In other words, the 'freedom to be who you want to be' is being paid for dearly and is a boundless (neoliberal) *overestimation* of the (control over one's) own 'identity determination' in a social sense.

Identity encompasses considerably more than gender-related aspects or 'being yourself'. It is no coincidence that Bauman spoke of « *fluid identities* » in the midst of a *fragmented modernity* that is blowing in all directions.⁹ Much slips out of our hands if we are not careful, but continue on a disastrous path of individualistic positioning, or cling to collective delusions that have little to do with 'identity'. In a globalised market society, we are all subject to mechanisms that are determined only by *a few*. This *oligarchic-oligopolistic* coterie follows its own laws and thus in fact is able to dictate or manipulate entire societies. Societies which, despite all the ideological controversies, are *more similar* than it is made out to be. *Concentration of power* can only be contested with solid counter-power. This does not come from self-contented consumers, but from *politically aware civilian populations* who know how to join forces in the right, that is in an *effective*, manner. As long as this is structurally lacking, little or nothing will change. Not even in an identity-defining sense. History – even *contemporary* history – does not allow itself to be maltreated with impunity, despite the fact that neoliberal politicians and neoliberal-oriented researchers reject the term 'neoliberalism'.¹⁰

If one's own identity has to be defended at the expense of the identities of others, one has to ask what kind of 'identity' is actually being created. After all, a *humane* identity can never be claimed 'exclusively' by a parallel *denial* of an identity determination by those who do not belong to 'the chosen group'. No matter what arguments one might use for this. Such alleged 'exclusivity' is always accompanied by unacceptable *separatism*. If not (directly) in terms of actions, then certainly in terms of thinking. The debate on the multicultural society is full of such orientations. (Mainstream supported) asylum and immigration policies also bear witness to this. It is unfortunate that politicians often think they have to rely on 'exclusionary' arguments to reinforce their other political positions. That does not make their position any stronger. Yet such attitudes have become more or less commonplace, or at least 'salonfähig'. This burdens any thinking about cultural differences to this day. Such narrowminded nationalism is a growth that is both stubborn and virulent, and it seems scarcely possible to combat it by appealing to well-considered humanitarian and constitutional principles. It is therefore not a question of 'left' or 'right', but of sensible humanity that *transcends such polarisation*. It is not a question of 'charitable altruism' (or 'slackness' as is also alleged), but of recognising *everyone's right to a dignified existence*. That demands something from societies. Not so much 'denial' of their own cultural orientations, but *recognition of the consequences* this entails. It is therefore a permanent task that cannot be ignored.

3. A different culture of governance?

If there is one thing that recent and previous administrations have shown, then it should be clear that all the hyper-attention to 'the game of seats' (in cabinets and other administrative, legislative or executorial bodies) is completely irrelevant. Whoever takes a position on the pluche, it will be of no benefit to citizens or society if the overall ideological direction remains *unchanged*.

In the political (monistic) reality, one decisive and hardly imaginative main rule seems to apply: as long as one is *needed* as a politician or party as a (co-)determinant of power, one is taken seriously. If not, one can happily join in the chatter, but without any significant effect on the outcome of the debate. Monism, however, will not be easily broken, because governing elites will not allow their legs to be sawed off from their power base. This implies that political '*catch-22*' *stalemates* in which parliamentary opposition is quelled systematically by government parties can only be broken by '*non-monist* majorities', which is a contradiction in terms as the *essence of monism* is to *prevent* the formation of such majorities.

The desire to establish a 'different administrative culture' (so it is said) will therefore remain mainly *cosmetic* as long as there is a *system of closed ranks*, however unjustified the view may be that the *opposition* would only have a 'corrective' steering function (and would otherwise be 'on the sidelines'). This is a flagrant denial of (real and necessary) *political diversity* that reduces all deliberation and debate to a *one-way* exercise. The same applies (unfortunately) to all those in the public media who do not tolerate 'prying eyes' and believe that pluralism could thrive on purely one-way traffic.

In short, many things *fragment* because of far-reaching carelessness, indifference and cynicism. Not only the foundations on which (Dutch and similar) societies are based, but also the political debate and the underlying ideas and conceptions that should underpin the arguments put forward to justify 'transitions'. People no longer 'understand' each other because of the many (fashionable) 'languages' that are used. Reasoning is often extremely sloppy and easy-going. A hellish cacophony remains in the midst of all the pandemonium. (Much welcomed by the *entertainment* industry, though).

Taking charge...

Although we live in a society in which all kinds of 'innovative entrepreneurs', 'human resource' and 'case-managers', 'counselors', 'mediators' and suchlike set the tone and seem to be able to roam freely, this does not alter the fact that modern societies largely remain a collection of (sub)contractors, temporary bosses, underpaid day labourers, penny-pinching accountants and even many people without a home or hearth, in which the struggle for existence is in many respects at least as *rigid* as in feudal times of yore. Although the *external conditions* seem to be 'comfortably arranged', the question remains: for *whom* actually, and in *what respect*? All things considered, a rigged façade of comfortable conditions of existence is a suggestive display of *wishful thinking* that, while it must maintain a questionable underlying ideology of 'freedom and equality', is increasingly distancing itself

from social reality. In their reporting, the news media are increasingly showing themselves to be a 'national information channel' with messages that do not exactly bear witness to an independent, let alone critical, position. This so-called *egalitarian* ('we together') *culture* of 'freedom of choice' and 'abundance of opportunities' is mainly theoretical and in the minds of ideologues and their obedient followers who do not want to see or acknowledge this reality. In addition, a massive coterie of financial and economic interest groups has an all-decisive grip on what is negotiated and decided in the name of the citizen. Unfortunately, this also applies to the EU community, as tax legislation (and subsidies) in numerous (EU-)countries has become a fragmented *wild-west* construction, where different standards are applied. All coherence and reasonableness is lost. An eroding parliamentary democracy is supposed to approve and legitimise all this. Not surprisingly, there is ongoing talk of a 'gap' between government and society (politics and citizens) together with continuous brain massage to 'get everyone to move in the same direction'. With less and less success, by the way, because the citizen who 'counts his knots' knows all too well why many things keep eluding him. It is not so much that the 'direction' is lost, but that it is in the hands of an elusive (and to a large extent *invisible*) group of people who seize powers that are by no means always theirs and who, often out of self-interest, go after the interests of society for which citizens have *not* given any (explicit) *mandate*. This is a serious, creeping development that should be drastically reversed.

Perspectives

We are living at a turning point, it is said. This would offer 'new opportunities' and perspectives. Some see parallels with earlier historical turnarounds (*caesurae*) such as the Industrial Revolution and the Enlightenment and believe that people have eagerly 'seized' such opportunities time and again. Did those opportunities just 'present themselves' and were their outcomes generally successful? These are questions that are not so easy to answer, though they are taken out of context all too often. One is the idea that the Enlightenment is 'no longer relevant' and that one should in fact start again from scratch. 'Back to square one', so to speak. That is sheer nonsense. Anyone who wants to 'look back' should be able to reflect contextually, otherwise it will remain nostalgia and insidious myth formation without meaning or any real perspective.

A new *social structure* (if that is what one would like to see) is not constructed out of nothing, but is brought about as an extension of everything that has been built up either successfully or ineffectively. (Or subsequently built on its 'ruins', as the cynic would say). In other words, nothing comes out of the blue. Thinking one has to 'reinvent' everything in order to achieve progress testifies to *ahistorical* hubris, for there are many lessons to be learned from the (recent) past. At least insofar as one realizes that history encompasses considerably more than a mere enumerating collection of 'narratives', as every right-minded historian should know. Moreover, many issues and matters have been left 'pending' (unaddressed, underattended, and/or unresolved) that could have benefited society and mankind if they had not been carelessly dismissed as 'unworkable' or 'passé', or radically jettisoned. *Inequality*,

poverty, exploitation and deprivation therefore encompass much more than 'just a few striking examples'.

If one strives for a 'better' society, one must first determine what that 'better' encompasses and in what respect such a society would deserve the qualification 'better'. The notion that people do not, or not sufficiently, 'understand' what is wrong with present-day societies and are therefore unable to develop 'sensible alternatives' bears witness to a similar non-committal attitude that can be used in any direction. One may 'say' one and another, but in fact one *explains* hardly anything. Whoever wants to 'move forward' (and to construct a 'new narrative' as the fashionable term goes), should first of all thoroughly immerse himself in the problem which he is addressing. If not, it will remain idle chatter. In this way, one can show 'concern' at length about a loss of 'social cohesion' or about 'lagging' citizens, without a thorough analysis of unnecessary erosion of the *rule of law in the constitutional state* (which, it should be noted, originated in the Enlightenment), and the fact that *social security systems* have less continuity than desired as they are extremely vulnerable to political volatility, such concerns remain all in all non-committal.

International cooperation in the area of livelihood security and safety also leaves much to be desired. Not to mention the persistent poverty and exploitation mentioned before. A lot of 'good intentions' have come to naught and/or have barely begun to bear fruit. It would make a big difference if social democratic and social-liberal principles were to be applied in a truly consistent manner, instead of continuing to follow a rigid market system that has caused so much destruction. As long as this institutional disintegration does not fully penetrate, there is little point in dreaming about the future.

Both the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, as well as the periods after WWI and II, offered new hope and perspectives for true progress in a humanitarian sense. That hope, however, was not only *clearly outlined and shaped*, but was often *thwarted* again (such as by totalitarian ideologies and/or 'self-serving' actions of groups of people and states). The perspectives developed at the time, however, remain 'work in progress'. Without insight into the (geo)political and economic order that has been brought about, talking about a 'different social structure' is an empty exercise. The ideological debate about it cannot be avoided with impunity. The current nature and environment discourse is at best an *impetus* for this, but also no more than that. To think that it offers a genuine *alternative* to numerous social issues on a political, economic, cultural and interpersonal level is to conceal this reality.

In other words: the age-old question of the *individual and the collective* – and subsequently the related question of whether society is (or should be) a collection of politically free citizens (« *Gesellschaft* ») or a cultural community of like-minded people (« *Gemeinschaft* ») – *remains* relevant at all times. This question is not 'solved', however, by embracing civil society views that substitute such a 'Gemeinschaft' for a *failing* institutional *Gesellschaft* which, although it ascribes 'autonomy' to the citizens, is grossly inadequate as far as their rights are concerned. Then (veiled) feudal relationships in many

respects continue to exist as if they had never been abolished for the benefit of *both* individual and collective freedom of movement. A society of like-minded people – in the sense of *identical* political and life views – will never be a reality, let alone viable. And certainly it cannot be enforced, however much one may think that maneuvers to 'extend a helping hand' to each other would represent such a type of society. This 'helping hand' would be (largely) superfluous if one would realize that governments have not built up *institutions* for nothing, which should protect citizens from such arbitrariness. The fact that people nowadays think they can do without such institutions (as if, for that matter, the widely embraced market itself were not an institution) does not alter this. As a result, many people are wrongly wandering around in a labyrinth that would not need to be a labyrinth if people were to realize that a constructive *way out* had previously been provided for a long time that could offer *real security of existence* in which individual and collective rights were also guaranteed. The current community thinking in terms of 'self-governing *communities*' is, and remains, an admission of weakness. It threatens to turn society into a collection of 'city-states' that compete with each other, instead of being able to take a *joint political stand* against arbitrariness and injustice. Such counterproductive decentralization can easily be missed and should therefore wisely be avoided.

The democratic deficit. The 'majority' decides ... or not after all?

The prevailing view of parliamentary (representative) democracy is that it represents the views and wishes of society as a whole. In fact, this is a *polyarchic* vision based on the assumption that, on a 'level playing field', all social bodies are free to promote their interests more or less equally and, if possible, to achieve them. This would create a certain 'balance' between the competing interests of political-social actors (Dahl ¹¹). This is a fallacy, because it is purely theoretical. Such a system of 'peoples sovereignty' does not exist, because political representation amounts to a mechanism of sovereignty that, on the basis of *unequal power positions*, favours *selective interests* at the expense of others. Especially when parliamentary democracy is in fact a '*lobbycracy*'. '*Win-win situations*' (as profitable business agreements are fashionably called in management terms) usually come at the expense of citizen's interests. Many deals with sassy lobbyists and opportunistic entrepreneurs are arranged in the *twilight* of political decision-making process and then presented as a '*fait accompli*'. In this way questionable 'democratic deliberation' is confined to the few and Parliament is bluntly ignored. ¹²

Despite this being common practice, such a system clashes with the constitutional principle of political equality of *one man, one vote*. This leads to much confusion and misunderstanding of the true workings of democracy, in which citizens often feel (justifiably) trapped. It refers to the actual *representation gap* that always plays tricks on politics and about which little seems to be able to be done as long as it is believed that *theoretical political equality* guarantees a *practical balancing of interests*. All things considered, the citizen has practically no (direct or decisive) influence on the setting of priorities through his electoral vote. Certainly not in a party democracy that can operate at

will with an *open mandate*. That may be the political reality, but for interest representatives who know how to organize their affairs (and for instance can take part in all kinds of 'consultation tables') it remains a 'foregone conclusion' that – if it were up to them – cannot be altered. The *electoral sum total* of the individual votes is far from what is assumed in a truly democratic sense. It 'legitimises' decisions only *in a formal sense*. This gives (political) 'participation' an extremely bitter meaning. Good governance is not the sum of uncritical and 'value-free' actions, but the result of well-considered political and moral positioning. This 'weighing up' should then take place in complete freedom and openness and not – as all too often happens – in the seclusion of a twilight zone where (unwelcome) *stakeholders* are effectively sidelined and the carpet is rolled out for (wealthy and powerful) others. These are mechanisms that have no place in a true democracy.

Democracy – if working properly – can take a beating, but it is not resistant to *institutional erosion*, nor to anxiously closed power strongholds that are *only sympathetic to democracy in word*. That's where the shoe pinches and that's where a healthy democratic society pierces straight through. To the left or to the right. However, if one allows oneself to be led exclusively, or mainly, by resentment and agony, then that is a disastrous path which only leads to *repression*, as history shows. The 'rattling at the gates of power' remains, however, a task of the first order when one wants to make a clean sweep of administrative arrogance and complacency. Thinking that this is not (or is no longer) of relevance is a denial of social reality, since many signs point to such reprehensible attitudes over a long period of time. It is not about 'incidents' and/or individual governmental administrators, but about *structural injustice* in which one persists despite all denial. This is criticism that may be considered 'unwelcome' in all current views on democracy, but which exposes and raises *the core* of social discontent. Thinking also that by 'silencing' or 'appeasing' things will 'blow over' is a serious mistake. After all, not everyone is 'afraid losing their jobs' and not everyone will be silenced or dismissed so easily. That may offer hope (even if it is often against the odds), but a selective – one-sided – approach to this issue will offer no solutions. Certainly not if (more or less critical) political parties also apply the principle: *if you can't beat them, join them* and claim the maxim 'participation to prevent worse'. This is a sheep-like legitimization that we have seen before in recent history and which should make us think ashamedly. Because then 'the game' is lost before it even started and although one is crying (electorally) with 'the wolves', one is nevertheless collaborating in a reprehensible way with those one claims to be fighting. It would therefore be preferable for such parties to stand firm and not to become involved with an ideology that is the cause of so much misery. Then it would soon be over with 'majorities' of occasional coalitions that do not actually represent a majority, but only keep the numerical ranks in parliament closed.

Concluding remarks

An '*entrepreneurial state*' may have sounded tempting and attractive for quite some time, it has proven to be a *bureaucratic monstrum*. The plagues discussed are not a 'natural phenomenon' or an 'act of God', but *man-made* aberrations. Therefore 'Exodus' remains possible. This however requires not only righteous 'Moseses', but above all determined populations who stop 'chattering around' and instead aim their arrows at what is unnecessarily causing them to 'slow down' in putting rightful demands forward. Those who are not strong must be smart, as the saying goes. Cleverer, in any case, than those who think they hold or represent 'the truth', but mainly wish to secure *their own position*. This requires an attitude that is less compliant, but dares to take a critical stand, enforce sensible legislation and in particular subject (the application and implementation of) governmental *mandates* to a critical eye. After all, citizens are no 'clients' (as the former vice-president of the Dutch State Council, Tjeenk Willink, rightfully stated years ago), nor 'subjects' of anyone or anything whatsoever. Governing is not 'managing' and certainly not (illicit) 'doing business' (or advocating general 'selling out' policies).

In short, we are not nearly as 'modern' as it is believed. Not even in communication via 'social media', which is often unjustly praised. After all, the fact that people are running up against all kinds of injustice does not mean that such injustice is actually being tackled. For that we need more than 'selfies', ad hoc appeals, or nationalistic tambouring on the 'people's singularity'. Concentration of power can only be fought with solid *political counter-power*. Whether the world community is capable of making such a (politically united) stand depends on the attitude of many, but without effective *backing* from states and their (international) institutions they remain blanks, just as the many needs in the world are not solved with donations or charitable actions. Every little bit may 'help', but 'a little bit of humanity' does not exist, nor 'a little bit of peace' or 'a little bit of respect'. Also bloodless and powerless politics will not be helpful. A correct understanding of history remains crucial to understanding current issues and developments. *Historical amnesia* is lethal, as is the propagandistic-manipulative maltreatment of history for dubious nationalistic purposes, for which such amnesia actually leaves the doors wide open. As noted, stirring up controversy is an unholy path. A more *realistic* approach to both national and geopolitical issues is more than desirable and certainly not a luxury in a world in which people proclaim to want to move forward. To achieve this, one will not have to leave it at 'cat-and-mouse strategies', or let it come to this continually. *Transcending* such attitudes and positions is what matters. Idealism (moral positioning) and realism will have to be combined if one wants to prevent either idealistic daydreaming or uncompromising 'Realpolitik' from gaining the upper hand. Neither is desirable, but that does not diminish the importance of the issue, as the world political situation (unfortunately) shows. It is precisely *this* recognition that is crucial for a (more) realistic approach to power claims, no matter how concerned one is with the fate that

shamelessly and unreasonably befalls many people. 'Taking chances' and knowing how to convert them, lucratively or otherwise, is no guarantee of pursued ideals of success and happiness. In this respect, too, the market is ruthless, short-minded and has no scruples. 'Stars' can rise high, but also tumble deep. Fame is more relative, because it is more fleeting, than one might think. Those who wish to become truly *human*, despite the limitations of the « condition humaine », must practice a **humanity** that cuts across all social, geographical and ethnic divisions. This requires not only a certain moral courage (« *fortitudo; virtù* »), but also *modesty*. Or the opposite of cowardice, hypocrisy and arrogance that too often mark officials in positions of responsibility. 'Moral leadership'? Self-proclaimed leaders and their political marketing strategists are still far from that. Those who continue to use the 'language of the market' as their starting point and compass should not be surprised when they lose their way completely and become entangled in self-created fantasies that will subsequently close hermetically like a net. 'Net-mending' then becomes a hell of a job, if not impossible. The road is long – and lonely, as Fellini shows poignantly and without embellishment in his classic film *La Strada* (1954).

All those who fear sound and serious criticism in the midst of all the confusion of speech about 'truth and politics', should bear in mind the following words that may offer support and guidance:

"Truth is great, and will prevail if left to itself, that she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error, and has nothing to fear from the conflict, unless by human interposition disarmed of her natural weapons, free argument and debate. Errors ceasing to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict them."

(Thomas Jefferson, *Statute of religious freedom*, 1777)^{13 14}

One might hope that free speech – even in democratic societies – is not curtailed. Also not under false pretences. But if words remain rather non-committal, then nothing is gained.



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Notes and References

- ¹ *Statism* (or *etatism*) is connected to the French *l'état* and refers to the state (or government) and its functions. *Anti-etatists* dispute and challenge its *raison d'être* and foremost the construction of an *intervening redistributive* state in which the government takes care of welfare economics, that is the *distribution of wealth* and the *shared well being* of its citizens.
- ² Even in antiquity, people knew that legislation that turns out to be *counterproductive* and/or does not (or no longer) serve the *purpose* for which it was created must be amended or abolished. A correct distinction between what « *ipso facto et de jure* » [in fact and by right] *is* and *is not in the general interest*, or only serves selective (private or temporary) interests, is essential here. Moral principles, too, should be tested against this starting point, and this applies, if possible, to complete (policy) ideologies as well. (See, for example, Livius, *Ab urbe condita*, book XXXIV, 5-7, concerning the issue of legislation prohibiting the public wearing of luxury clothing and jewellery by Roman women, against which many women around 195 B.C. rebelled successfully).
- ³ Although only a few Western European countries realised a true institutionalized *social security state*, it appears common practise to speak of 'welfare states'. This however is not the same thing (see Van der Kooij, 2020; 2021)
- ⁴ Governmental decentralization under the guise of (local) 'customisation' violates above all the constitutional *principle of equality*, as it interferes with the central government's control over a uniform application of legal regulations. This results in overall arbitrariness of executorial powers.
- ⁵ In the Netherlands a special parliamentary investigation commission had to be installed in 2021 to sort things out over a long period of time. It appeared to be a true *Pandora's box* by which state and government had failed disconcerting and dismally).
- ⁶ *Monism* occurs when either *one* political party is in power, or when *coalition parties* block any kind of opposition (such as in the Netherlands: e.g. the 'Rutte-doctrine') by voting consequentially *against* such attempts.
- ⁷ *Agencies*, because of the corporatization and privatization of government functions, often act as (quasi-) *independent* administrative organizations ('quango's'). There are various types of these organizations such as legal entities with statutory tasks. In the Netherlands these include educational institutions, the Land Registry, the AFM (authority on financial markets), DNB (Dutch National Bank), SVB (social insurance bank), COA (immigration; asylum applicants), UWV (execution board of social security payments), CBS (central bureau of statistics) and many more. Years ago there were already a total of **172** such organizations. At the time, approximately **132 billion of public money** was involved (*Kaderwet Zbo's*,

Reikwijdte en Implementatie [Framework law on special administrative bodies, Scope and Implementation], Dutch National Court of Audit, The Hague, 2012).

- ⁸ Both the recent disaster with *social benefits* (*Toeslagen-scandal*) and the *gas extraction debacle* in Groningen are striking examples of unprecedented *governmental mismanagement*, which have provoked social outrage and horror. Matters were *systematically* denied and covered up. Only after long insistence by parliament and thorough investigation, it was revealed that there had been *deliberate and even malicious deception*. Not only to parliament, but especially to the (many) affected citizens who were unlawfully labeled as 'fraudsters' and who, insofar as the gas production was the result of injudicious geological exploitation (ground subsidence and earthquakes), had suffered irreparable damage to their homes. These 'issues' are still far from being settled.
- ⁹ Bauman, Z. *Liquid modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2000; *Wasted lives. Modernity and its outcasts*, Polity Press 2003; *Liquid times: living in an age of uncertainty*, Polity Press 2007
- ¹⁰ As outlined in Van der Kooij, H. *On Neoliberalism. Neoliberalism as a doctrine further questioned and contested*. ISSR, 2021 and *More nonsense upon stilts? Dead end pathways of neoliberalism*. ISSR 2022 (on academia edu).
- ¹¹ Dahl, R. *Polyarchy: participation and opposition*. New Haven: Yale University Press 1971
- ¹² A significant example is the way the Dutch government during the corona-crisis made a *mouthcap deal* with an 'adventurous' entrepreneur who forced his way in, delivered inferior products, and then ran off with the money. This had cost the taxpayer 100 million. Money, which did not benefit health care but went up in smoke.
- ¹³ Quoted in the Huizinga-lecture *What happened to the idea of toleration?* Leiden University, Dec 9, 2011, delivered by Simon Schama.
- ¹⁴ Although there is certainly 'duality' (moral ambivalence) with Jefferson, given his involvement with *slavery* (plantations) and the driving away of *Indians* from their territories, he is considered the 'spiritual founding father' of the United States. He was closely involved in the *Declaration of Independence* and - however time-bound and certainly controversial by today's standards his moral positions may be - was inspired by Enlightenment philosophers such as Spinoza and Locke and aimed to shape their notions politically. However imperfectly. One can hold this against him and regard it as a serious blind spot in the American self-image (as Finkelman does and as McKenna also writes *), one can also see it in the context of the (unruly) struggle to provide 'hands and feet' to freedom and equality ideals and to strive for the concretization of the adage: « all men are created equal ». In that respect Jefferson does not show himself to be (much) different from many a former or current human rights advocate. This also applies to contemporary well-to-do landowners such as Quaker William Penn, George Washington and others who

represented this dualistic spirit of the time equally (although their financial positions were incomparable to the excessive financial assets of many current oligarchs). Even the renowned Dutch author Douwes Dekker (aka 'Multatuli') who was one of the first to take a stand against exploitation and fiercely attacked in the open the *colonial system* in the ('Dutch') East Indies (1860), did not go that far as pleading for its complete abolishment. A full war of independence had to be fought to provide for this.

What matters, however, is the extent to which actions are linked to words that actually facilitate progress in this respect. Therefore many 'Lincolns', 'Kings', 'Mandelas' and others were needed to provide real advancement. Good intentions may be a starting point, but in any case it will not be sufficient to leave it at that. This could be the (tough) lesson learned.

- * Finkelman, P. *Slavery and the Founders: Race and Liberty in the Age of Jefferson*. New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2001; McKenna, G. *The 'dualities' of Thomas Jefferson*, First Things (firstthings.com), June 2000.

(Although McKenna may be right in writing: "...to try to find in his writings any firm guidance for the future, any unambiguous markings that might get us started into this new century, is to seek something that simply isn't there", this seems all too easy to write honest and righteous principles off).

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