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Misconception:
The Dutch are anti-colonialists
OR: LONGING FOR GHETTOS

The Dutch see themselves as cosmopolitans. And they are, when on holiday. These holiday-cosmopolitans believe they can easily join the great national tradition of global traders who knew what the world had to offer. No culture was too far or too strange, we went there for a long or a short visit. For the money, colonization, to spread the word of God. For not only do the Dutch know what is good for them, they know even better what's good for other people.

As a reaction to the enforced decolonization (Indonesia 1949, New Guinea 1962, and Surinam 1975), 'makeability' became the new religion in the post-colonial, dechristianized society the Netherlands wanted to become after the 1950s. Now that it was forced to retreat to its own territory, it was going to turn that boggy polder into a small paradise. A miniature copy of the United States, but without the drawbacks we saw over there, i.e. the din of arms, the phony Hollywood glitter, the belligerent foreign policy, the huge gap between rich and poor, racism and the accompanying ghettos where they stored those black people.

Externally the modernized variation on colonial days was expressed in the popularity of the Third World as an object to 'aid' into a paradise. Concretely by a range of doctors and engineers who would perform their salutary work for a few years in Africa or some other place. At home by donating money with a vengeance. Preferably during a national telethon for a charity far away. Between 1960 and 2000 the per capita yield of such drives was higher in the Netherlands than in any other place in the world. Development aid still is an almost sacrosanct tenet in Dutch politics.

In the meantime the immigrants came to the Netherlands. First the people from Indonesia, then the 'guest workers' from the Mediterranean, and after 1975 the Surinamese. Subsequently we experienced a veritable flood of asylum seekers, which reached a peak around 2000. Currently one million of the sixteen million inhabitants of the Netherlands are Muslims. The 'citizens' uprising' in 2002 was a reaction to this influx. And it made the establishment break out in a panic. Populism! Xenophobia! Racism! In the Netherlands! A fierce debate about how things got to this in our peace-loving polder paradise has been raging since. Hadn't Holland managed to develop nicely and reasonably into a tolerant and permanently multicultural dancing feast, a successful experiment to be adopted by the rest of the world?

One of the reasons for this, to many people abrupt change in the nature and image of the Netherlands is sought in the failure to cope with the greatest trauma in our national history: decolonization, and in particular the loss of the Netherlands Indies in 1949. The shame about the excessive violence that was used even in the final stages of the war to prevent independence, is believed to have made the baby boomers take up a new project, pacifistic as well as ethical, for the edification of our poor and oppressed fellow man. In the Netherlands, and also in the Third World, first of all in Africa. But is shame (and naïveté) sufficient explanation for the warm welcome that the notion of the multicultural society in the Netherlands got from the new baby-boom elites? And for the disillusionment, even shock, about the 'multicultural drama' that, although many did not want to see, was taking place due to a lack of integration?

No, shame and naïveté are not sufficient explanation. As a third emotional breeding ground for the attitude some groups in the Netherlands have towards the multicultural society, we cannot ignore the taboo emotion of envy. What can they possibly be envious about? Colonial times. Because they were born too late, the baby boomers never had the pleasure of actually experiencing those times.

Sure, passionate people in the 1960s and 1970s yearned for distant paradises. But the people who sympathized with Che Guevara, Mao Zedong and Pol Pot, or African model states in the process of formation such as Tanzania, Mozambique or El Salvador never thought of themselves as the oppressed. They were always leaders, whether they were development-aid workers, caring politicians or 'participating' journalists. No matter how well it worked out sometimes, there was always an element of paternalism. We will help you achieve a better future.

Unfortunately for these 'liberators', distant Utopias disappeared in the swamp one after the other, and eventually the whole underlying dream of communism and socialism evaporated. These cosmopolitan revolutionaries, too, were eventually thrown back on the territory of the Low Countries by the Sea.

It is true, the migration flows of recent decades can only be understood as a Western or even global phenomenon. And yet the different European countries took various positions. It is a fact that the Netherlands (the most densely populated country in Europe) has taken in the largest number of asylum seekers and refugees of all EU-countries. Why? Maybe because the only piece of land in the world where we could engage in 'ethical politics' and 'edification of the oppressed' turned out to be our own 'polder'.

And so the Netherlands, after its unsuccessful colonial adventure and equally unsuccessful anti-colonial adventure in the Third World, and after the fall of the Berlin Wall, started on a new colonial project within the confines of its own dikes. This also explains why the asylum seekers who arrived from all over the world since 1990, rather than the earlier immigrants such as the Dutch citizens from the East Indies, Greeks, Spaniards, Portuguese, Moroccans and Turks - who generally had to fend for themselves despite numerous expressions of solidarity, became the new targets of the time-honoured ethical task that 'a small country can be great at'. It is also significant that this new 'colonial project' of the asylum seekers was supported mainly by groups and parties that had little to no experience with pre-war colonial days: D66 (liberal democrats), PvdA (Labour), GroenLinks (the Greens) and a considerable part of the confessional parties.

And so we can wonder whether it was pure solidarity, or rather the need to be scoutmaster or teacher, that was hidden behind the (no doubt sometimes also sincere) cosmopolitan tolerance and humanity each asylum seeker was greeted with from the 1990s on. That is to say, by 'politics' and 'the media' (not by large sectors of society itself, as events in 2002 made very clear). Shouldn't we dig much deeper into the caverns of the psyche of 'the right-minded part of the nation'?

Yes, and when we do we might just discover that the proclaimed need for an egalitarian and peaceable multicultural society was only a facade for the need for a new colonial society. The reality of the coloured, illegal cleaner in the affluent cosmopolitan double-income family - including those of journalists and politicians - was only a first sign. The almost clandestine daily bicycle ride of many progressive parents who take their children to the white school in a better neighbourhood is another. When the existence of 'black' schools could no longer be denied, there suddenly emerged, like the proverbial rabbit from the hat, the political theory that 'education in your own language and culture' is much better for the preservation of the newcomers' identity anyway. This acceptance of the separateness of the other person comes dangerously close to indifference here. And then a quite common next step is displacement.

After 'the uprising of the people' in 2002 against the multicultural society that brought so much socio-psychological disruption (housing, alienation, crime), the demand that the strangers 'integrate' sounded in unison. This cry of despair was not only based on a new illusion - namely that they would all want to integrate with us - but was also filled with a considerable dose of hypocrisy. Initially these 'angry citizens' - dismissed by the progressive, right-minded part of society as 'envious and resentful white lower class' - were not unsympathetic towards integrating with the ethnic groups. But the social differences were too many and too large, and they were cultivated by the government. Non-adjustment was subsidized. That is what made them furious. They had become strangers in their own neighbourhood, and felt abandoned by the government. And that is why the inhabitants of the supposedly safe suburban paradise they recently moved into also felt threatened by strangers. And so they opted for social and physical safety among themselves, i.e. for segregation.

But doesn't the same hold true for many progressive advocates of the multicultural society? It is a fact that 'politics' - including local politics - has done very little about this integration in previous decades. And has therefore allowed unemployment among ethnic groups to rise to bizarre heights, socio-economic inequality to take on American proportions, and black schools and ghettos to develop.

Apart from shame and naïveté, perhaps the explanation for this indifference is also to be found in their envy of their parents' and grandparents' experience of colonial times. Or could it be even worse? And was this indifference perhaps subconsciously the intended outcome? And was this outcome based on the following, never expressed desire: we - the 1968 generation - not only want to be and remain the intellectual and cultural elite in this country, we also want to be the socio-economic elite: surrounded by 'the lower classes', preferably of all colours, tramps and homeless people are welcome too. That adds a cosmopolitan flavour to the position of the elite.

Even the well-intentioned Mr. Average in the newly built Suburbia in the polder can secretly feel like a colonial when thinking of those 'poor devils' in nineteenth-century neighbourhoods in the Randstad, that coloured metropolis which today is as much feared as disdained, and which he avoids as much as he can.

After all the failed projects based on the Netherlands-as-the-model-country concept, the ghettos and black schools in the Netherlands may not be the dream paradise for modern baby boom elites in the better neighbourhoods. But they are the next best thing. And to many people the colonial feeling that now replaces the failed revolutionary liberator feeling does not taste that bad. Perhaps it even tastes so good, that we have no choice but to admit that jealousy of the colonial sense of power (including the longing for hierarchy and segregation) was one of the driving forces behind the entire multicultural project from the start.

And so current reality fits in a typically Dutch tradition. For the class-consciousness and ghetto-thinking of the Dutch have always been as strong as their egalitarianism and cosmopolitanism.