Individual, but not Egoistical

Social Cohesion in the Netherlands

The Schagerkogge crematorium in Schagen, near Alkmaar in North Holland, lies in a vast landscape that simmers in the abnormally warm April sun. Waiting at the entrance to the crematorium is a flock of young people, a whole school in mourning. They're burying Gerd Nan van Wijck, who died on 23 April 2007.

Gerd Nan was the victim of mindless violence – '*zinloos geweld*', as they call it in the Netherlands – a term which has only recently caught on in Flanders. It refers to excessive, motiveless violence for some trivial reason, the explanation for which is sought not only in the perpetrator – his personality, his motivation – but also, and mainly, in society as a whole: an overly liberal educational system, television, computer games, children whose parents no longer set them limits. That's what happened here: Gerd Nan died after having been struck on the head a few times by another boy his age. The fight was a matter of adolescent jealousy, something to do with a girl.

Camera surveillance in Bagijnestraat, Leeuwarden.

'A sudden burst of irrational hatred' is what the director of the school called it in his speech at the crematorium. He was using the same words that so many others had used in similar cases. Hatred. Irrational. Senseless. Sudden. It's an echo of No Hate Street, the street-sign campaign that became so popular in Flanders after Hans Van Themsche's murder spree – on 11 May 2006 the 18-year-old Van Themsche shot three people (two of whom died) in the city of Antwerp before the Antwerp police stopped him. It's an echo of the line *'and hatred was not yet a national sport'* from the popular Flemish song 'Kvraagetaan' by De Fixkes, a nostalgic meditation on the Eighties. It's an echo of *'against intolerance'* from the 0110 concerts in 2006 in Antwerp, Brussels and Ghent. It's an echo of so many attempts to pinpoint a certain cultural uneasiness, the suspicion of social cooling, and to fight it. The website set up in honour of Gerd Nan expresses it this way: *'We also hope that this website will help the people of the Netherlands to be more tolerant and to have more respect for each other, because what happened here is something we wouldn't wish on anyone else!'* [1]

Working together on the Netherlands

It's a comment you'll find today on countless sites, in all the newspapers and on every street corner. But in political and intellectual circles people are also convinced that a murder like that of Gerd Nan is not just a tragic incident but the result of something having gone fundamentally wrong. In this respect the Netherlands is no different to other Western European countries; wherever you turn the individualistic, secularised society is in crisis. Everywhere in the West people are convinced that the developments of the last forty years have gone too far, that they have shaken the very foundations of society, and that as a result children are killing other children over some adolescent love affair. Philosopher Ad Verbruggen sees a connection between this kind of violence and the 'myth of the free I', the person who thinks and acts independently and makes his own choices without regard for tradition and authority: *'We see in this tendency a return to a kind of idyllic, Rousseauian view of humanity in which it is believed that corrective constraint by family and society should be kept to a minimum and that real human happiness lies in the full self-development of a person's individual, natural disposition. This idyllic image of humanity is indicative of an utterly naïve and therefore dangerous outlook on life, which fails adequately to recognise that this same disposition also contains evil.'* [2]

As the 2007 Dutch Government coalition agreement already noted, *'When traditional ties lose their meaning, people begin searching for new forms of community spirit, security and certainty. The strength and quality of a society is determined by mutual involvement. Not "every man for himself", but "looking out for each other" and "treating each other normally". In a world that's always on the move, community spirit and solidarity give people confidence and the ability to cope.'*[3]

Citizens could offer their suggestions on the accompanying website, www.samenwerkenaannederland.nl, and they did. With an unprecedented display of concern comparable to the reaction to the appeal by Yves Leterme, then Flemish Prime Minister, to mail him ideas about how to fight mindless violence in Flanders, proposals and comments about present-day culture in the Netherlands came flooding in: *'No matter how tempting a world without rules*

might seem, in the end it actually makes children very uneasy. I think that we as parents should not be afraid to make demands of children.'

'These days children are just plonked down in front of the PC and the TV. You rarely see them doing things with parents any more.' 'Re-institute compulsory military service. At least that makes a man out of you and gives you norms and values for your fellow man.'

'Clubs and societies should be given a good shot in the arm. Not like in my town, where the clubs have been practically strangled by another terrible round of cut-backs.'

'Get marching bands to perform in cities and villages every Saturday. It would increase solidarity and make everybody happy. Foreigners and native-born, young and old, sick and healthy, employed and unemployed, poor and rich: it would cheer everybody up and make them look at the Netherlands in a different way.'

Smile!

In Noordwijk aan Zee, the charming little village that nestles between the beach and the flower fields, people have known for over ten years that the roots of mindless violence are located '*in the very fabric of our society*', in the words of Yves Leterme. This is the home of the National Foundation Against Mindless Violence, which was set up in 1997 in response to the first incident to be picked up by the media, the murder of Meindert Tjoelker. '*There was a massive reaction, but after a couple of weeks the interest died down again,*' says founder Bart Wisbrun. '*Marches and silent vigils are nice, but you need more than that to turn a culture around.*' Today there are over fifty thousand paving stones bearing the ladybird logo scattered all over the Netherlands. It graces Gerd Nan's website, too. '*The logo is widely known.*'

'It's like your Prime Minister said, "Violence begins the minute one motorist gives another motorist the finger." That's what we're starting with. We try to make people aware of anti-social behaviour, which carries the seeds of mindless vio-

This ladybug logo of the National Foundation Against Mindless Violence marks the spot were a teacher of the Terra College in The Hague was murdered. Photo by Marcel van den Bergh.

lence. We run campaigns against vandalism, bullying at school, fighting, weapons at school, road rage, minor forms of aggression that poison society and that – at the wrong moment, at the wrong time, with the wrong person – can have fatal consequences. Usually not, but it could happen to you. Today we're working with the police and about a dozen schools on a campaign against carrying weapons at school. Ten percent of Dutch youngsters have taken weapons to school at one time or another, because it's cool or because they don't feel safe. The campaign against road rage will start soon, and the campaigns against bullying at school have been running smoothly for years. Our visiting lecturers are being given update training during this period.'

Scattered all over the office building, which is bursting at the seams, are posters, stickers and pub menus in which the red-and-white dotted ladybird pattern is always clearly visible. The slogans run from '*Make yourself heard at every game*' (an appeal to drown out offensive choruses with positive messages during football matches) and '*Snack sensibly, prevent violence*' ('*there's a clear connection between unhealthy living, poor nutrition and aggression and violence*') to a simple '*SMILE!*'

When I was still a cynic I would have thought: is this really any different from the '*Swearing has to be learned; don't be a parrot*' slogan popularised by the Flemish Bond Zonder Naam ('the Unnamed Society', in existence already since 1938), a time when no-one was afraid of running into a frustrated adolescent with a knife? Now that I know that my cynicism too paves the way for violence, I think: the difference is that the National Foundation Against Mindless Violence has the spirit of the times on its side. And they tackle the problem professionally. The logo is nicely designed, recognisable and ubiquitous. Everything they do includes a promotion to get people on board: the road rage campaign invites everyone to post ideas for preventing aggression and irritation on the roads. There's a GPS device for the ten best tips, and the best one of all gets a Volkswagen Beetle to drive for a year – adorned with the dotted ladybird logo. The Foundation produces lovely anti-violence bags and has succeeded in making the laying of a 'paving stone against violence' a ritual with a certain element of cool: a town doesn't really count unless it's got one. When I compare this with that silly red-button campaign in Flanders, or with Zinloos Geweld (Mindless Violence), the lackadaisical Belgian non-profit-making organisation with their dopey butterfly, I have to stifle a certain amount of jealousy.

But I can't switch off my cynicism entirely. When I was young there were anti-bullying campaigns at school, too. And I was told about the dangers of weapons, and that I was supposed to be courteous in traffic. Aren't schools just doing what they've always done, except that now they've farmed their work out to a separate foundation with a cool logo as part of a 'save our culture' operation?

A swaying sea of Orange

While mindless violence may be one of the most visible causes of the general malaise, the solidarity hype is about more than that. Almost all social problems are attributed to a lack of human contact. Initiatives to promote cohesion are popping up like mushrooms, too. Friction between the native-born and ethnic minorities is tackled by the Social Cohesion Networks, which were set up in a number of cities in April 2007 in order to eliminate cultural misunderstanding

once and for all.[4] And in the realm of politics the hard-liners are being combated by www.tegenhaatzaaien.nl. In 2006 the DOEN! (Do it!) foundation – charged with spending the money from the national lottery on good causes – took on a new sphere of activity: social cohesion. They sponsor a wide range of socio-cultural projects, from the production of a reality soap opera to the vote for the best location for street corner youth to hang out. There are writing contests for 'stories against hate' and group hugs on Amsterdam's Dam Square.[6]

All very nice. Except for one thing: travelling round the Netherlands like this, I'm just not conscious of any lack of solidarity. On the contrary. There's nothing the Dutch would rather do than get together. They seem to be addicted to it.

It's Sunday evening, 29 April 2007, and my driver, whose name is Car ('*an ordinary Turkish name, but very handy if you've got a cab company*'), drives into the car park of the Rotterdam Ahoy. The enormous area in front of the arena is swarming with concertgoers. Every last one of them is wearing orange. And not just a tie or a ribbon, either: from hat to shoes, they're all decked out in the royal colour.

It's Orange Night, the evening before Queen's Day. In several places the festivities marking the national holiday get started the evening before. In Utrecht there's a sing-along event, in Groningen a concert, in The Hague a city festival, and here in Rotterdam a schmaltz song bash – in a concert hall with fifteen thousand seats that was sold out weeks ago.

Inside, the joint is already jumping. It's scarcely eight o'clock, but the place is packed and everywhere there's hopping, dancing, shouting and singing. On the stage: the Deurzakkers. They're all alone, without a group, on that vast expanse in front of the audience. Booming from the amplifiers is an electronic version of a Strauss waltz. The Deurzakkers sing laa-lalala-laaaaaa. Making exaggerated gestures, they urge the audience to do the same. La-lala-la-laaaaa sings the audience, arm in arm, a sea of orange swaying back and forth. Anyone who ever thought the Last Night of the Proms (the exuberant finale of a series of concerts in London, at which an immense variety of popular and classical music is performed) was an infantile, vulgar way to treat classical music should come and take a look at this.

After the Deurzakkers it's the Ko brothers. The same scene repeats itself: accompanied by music on tape, they perform their maritime hits 'Ik heb een toeter op mijn waterscooter' ('I have a hooter on my waterscooter') and 'Ik heb een boot' ('I have a boat'). They make way for Charléne, with 'Boom, boom, boom'. She passes the mike on to Sugar Lee Hooper, who does a house version of Queen's 'Who wants to live forever?' Sugar Lee, a woman of about sixty, is dressed in an orange Big Bird suit.

The spectacle goes on like this for four and a half hours! No fewer than twenty-six artists will perform. With the exception of Lee Towers they all go for the same genre: the Dutch schmaltzy hit/love song, accompanied by a frantic house beat that is devoid of all inspiration. This is a genre that has made no headway in Flanders, but in the Netherlands it's become the new folk music. Take 'Altijd is kortjakje ziek' (the Dutch version of 'Twinkle, twinkle little star') or 'Olleke bolleke knol', put a beat under it, and fifteen thousand Dutch people go berserk. For four and a half hours the audience form conga lines, sing along with all the lyrics and, although literally *every* artist runs onto the stage yelling '*I don't see any hands out there!*', the audience submissively stick their hands

up twenty-six times. A confetti machine shoots snippets of orange, white and blue paper into the air. *'We're one of the few countries where the national colours draw people together,'* muses Lee Towers backstage. *'There are people who think it's low-class and trashy... Well. The warmth here, the solidarity, is something you don't find anywhere else.'*

So what's this about a lack of unity?

A good question. Maybe it's silly to use a schmaltz festival as proof of a strong national identity. But even so, that so many thousands of people were willing to come here dressed entirely in Orange shows that they're united by more than a mere love of children's songs set to house music. Add to this the fact that several of the artists addressed the hall as *'Holland'* (*'Are you up for this, Holland?'*) and you understand that this subculture could in large measure be identified with the national culture.

The next morning, on Queen's Day proper, I'm in Den Bosch, where I see the same scenes. The capital of Brabant is packed with people, and they're all – *all* – wearing orange. Before this the only time I had ever seen Orange Mania was at big football matches, but for this kind of dressing-up frenzy to occur on a national holiday – that surprises me. I see inflatable hats, crazy crowns, children *and* adults with their faces painted with the Dutch flag, scenes that you do expect at a football match, or if need be at a schmaltz festival, – but at a visit from the Queen?

'Today the canals of Amsterdam are full of little boats. Hollanders are going bonkers, flashing their muscular torsos, screaming their lungs out, Heineken in hand, "oranje boven". Queen's Day means an outing. Does so much national happiness even exist in Belgium?'[6] muses Dutch writer Oscar van den Boogaard.

Nope, Oscar van den Boogaard, it doesn't. So the Dutch better quit lamenting over their weak national identity and that they're so unsure who they really are and what they stand for. The Dutch are addicted to being Dutch. You heard it from me. Read what *de Volkskrant* writes: one out of every four Dutch families hangs out the Dutch flag on Queen's Day and on the Liberation Days, May 4th and 5th. (One out of four!) In 2007 an estimated one hundred and fifty to two hundred thousand flags were sold. *'We're among the top five biggest flag buyers in the world. Only in Scandinavia and maybe Switzerland are relatively more sold. Belgians, on the other hand, very rarely buy their own flags, which suggests that the Netherlands is one of the most chauvinistic countries in Europe.'*[7] Say no more.

I let myself be swept along by the crowds to the centre of Den Bosch. I'm looking for a spot on the Parade there, where the royal family are going to pass by. As soon as I get there I abandon the illusion that I'm going to be able to see them: the square is jam-packed, and the average Dutchman is bigger by half than I am. So I look around a bit, at every possible kind of orange. I see a street musician with an orange guitar (where do you buy that, an orange guitar? And what do you do with it for the rest of the year?), orange ties, orange pouf skirts, orange wigs, orange inflatable crowns. The Dutch Railway is handing out orange crowns. I see an orange-white-and-blue Mohawk adorning a chauvinistic punk. It's sweltering hot. They don't start on the beer here until the Queen has gone by. I jot down a few thoughts.

Thought One: in Belgium, the national celebration, the day of the dynasty or

Queen's Day in
Den Bosch, 2007.

any other festival to do with Belgium or its royal house, is invariably attended by young children as a school outing and the elderly who feel a sentimental bond with the King. The little kids wave their little flags, the old folks stand politely and timidly, waiting for a wave from the monarch. Here I see families with children, but I also see groups of young people. In Belgium you wouldn't get young people to turn out for the King for all the tea in China. Queen's Day seems more like a city festival, with a flea market, salsa joints and rock performances thrown in. The Free Market in Amsterdam is reminiscent of the Ghent Festival or, say... Mardi Gras madness in New Orleans, and it's wildly popular. It's eleven o'clock and at the Den Bosch railway station they are announcing over the PA system that anyone heading for Amsterdam will not be able to get out at Central Station *'due to the crowds'*.

Thought Two: I see in the Netherlands what had already struck me in England – a great devotion to the culture of the people, especially a rather vulgar, almost rustic version of it. You can call the Netherlands a middle-class society, but

Orange football craze, Summer 2006.

the way the Dutch identity is celebrated is decidedly common. Heineken beer flows abundantly, bare chests are visible everywhere, the carnival atmosphere conveyed by all the orange clothing is reinforced by those same sentimental songs set to a frantic beat that reverberate from the cafés. The Queen visits Den Bosch, but her subjects wear Heineken crowns.

Thought Three: when Dutch people do something as a group they fall back on football codes, whether the gathering actually has anything to do with football or not. It was already apparent at Pim Fortuyn's funeral in 2002. It may have been the Netherlands' first political assassination since that of William of Orange, but people mourned as if the Cup were at stake. '*Pimmie, thank you, Pimmie, thank you, Pimmie Pimmie Pimmie, thank you*', they chanted in chorus

before launching into the football song '*You'll never walk alone*'.[8] The same thing happened at the memorial to Dutch popular singer André Hazes, which took place in the Amsterdam Arena in 2004. And you see it today as well. The vast majority are wearing football shirts. People greet the Head of State with shirt slogans like '*World Cup Experience*', '*Hup Holland Hup*', '*Johan Cruijff, el salvador*' and a whole range of player's numbers. There are probably practical reasons for this – they just don't make that many ordinary garments in orange – but it's still a little nutty. Whether you're going to see the Queen or to watch Edgar Davids score some goals, it makes no difference.

Happy Birthday, Afsluitdijk

This hot Queen's Day will eventually attract sixty thousand people to Den Bosch. Half a million went to the Free Market in Amsterdam. And another million and a half watched the live broadcast of the royal visit on by the NOS, the Netherlands broadcasting network, with an additional million watching the repeats. '*Slightly fewer than last year, but considering the marvellous weather and the absence of princess Màxima (who had recently given birth), it's very good indeed,*' said a satisfied Peter Kloosterhuis, head of the NOS Events Service.

Set up in 2007, this service is new. And it has a special purpose: '*In addition to the pure news and sporting events, this year the NOS will also broadcast a number of other events to promote "social cohesion" in the Netherlands*'[9], says NOS director Gerard Dielessen.

'*Oh, come on,*' responds Kloosterhuis, to put it in perspective. '*The NOS has always broadcast things with a national character – elections, Liberation Day celebrations, Queen's Day – and they have always appealed to a shared experience. They're part of "nation building", great moments in a country's history. With this new department we want to take this even further. Soon it will be seventy-five years since the completion of the Afsluitdijk . Of course the Afsluitdijk is part of our cultural-historical heritage, but it's also a symbol of our struggle against the water. There's historical footage of a woman holding up her skirts and walking across the dike, the first person to do so. On her grave it says, "Her life was the Afsluitdijk". That's a wonderful story to build a programme around, isn't it? And then you can also say something about global warming, our next struggle with the water... But we're going to do something with NPS on the Rotterdam summer carnival, or even the commemoration of the Hungarian uprising – three hundred thousand Hungarians came here, and that makes it possible to say something about that event, about how well they integrated.*'

It's not only the topics that foster national solidarity, it's also the way they're presented. '*I think the way people watch television is slowly changing. The news, series, documentaries – the process is slower than many people think, but it will happen – eventually viewers will watch them when they feel like it and not when they happen to be broadcast. At the same time, I think, there will be more demand for programmes that make the viewer feel as if he were sitting in the front row at an event. A football match, an important political debate, a visit from the Queen – two days later you don't watch them any more. So the shared experience is important. A few hundred thousand people watched the press conference with the lawyer Bram Moszkowicz because they were there at that particular moment. So live television is going to become even more important.*'

A quite different kind of cohesion

Bear it in mind: according to the NOS, television can reinforce social cohesion if you do live broadcasts of major events – those whose content teaches us about the history of the country – so that people have the feeling that they were all present at the same time. So social cohesion has to do with the consciousness of a shared past, expressed in a shared experience.

It's a valid position. But look at the way the popular family channel TROS defends its approach in a report to the Commission for the Media: '*Under the heading of "social service broadcasting" TROS has a range of programmes which are made with the viewer's interests in mind. In TROS's view, consumer programmes like Radar and Opgelicht contribute to social cohesion. TROS also has many programmes in the entertainment category . Examples are the series Lingo, Dit was het Nieuws, Postcodeloterij, 1 tegen 100, Miljoenenjacht, Love Letters and the TV Show. According to TROS, these programmes reflect popular culture and social cohesion. And when it comes to music, TROS has a preference for Dutch artists. Even the music programmes focus on popular culture and social cohesion.*'[10]

Now bear this in mind: a programme fosters social cohesion if a lot of people watch it. That's quite a different definition, isn't it?

And take other television programmes that have been brought together under the motto 'social cohesion' in recent years. Go ahead, include the Flemish ones while you're at it. *Allemaal SAM*, for example. That was about promoting volunteer work and paying tribute to people who took 'positive initiatives' to bring people together. Or *Fata Morgana*, which was shown in the Netherlands under the title *De Uitdaging* (The Challenge). That show had people from a single village combining to face several major challenges and dealing with them successfully. These people are doing something together, it's true, but there is no trace of any sense of a common past to be seen, or of making an effort to ensure a more sustainable society. There, cohesion means little more than ten people working together for a few days to reach a goal that has absolutely no social impact. Getting five hundred dwarves dressed as Romans to build a human bridge over the Dender, for example. Anyone who can tell me what's the use of that gets a Volkswagen Beetle painted like a ladybird.

Who belongs, and who doesn't?

The confusion doesn't stop there. All the previous examples were about mass spectacles: there is social cohesion if as many people as possible do the same thing or look at the same thing. But you can just as easily read analyses that link cohesion with things on a *small* scale – the feeling you can get in a neighbourhood or village.

As I drive over the almost seventy-five-year-old Afsluitdijk, I am thinking about the writer Geert Mak (of *In Europe* fame). I'm on my way to Jorwerd, the little Frisian village – hardly more than three hundred souls – whose history is the subject of one of Mak's books. He places a special emphasis on solidarity: '*For villages, that tradition of solidarity – the kind that once existed in the working-class districts of the big cities as well – is above all a tried and tested means of collective survival. In many places there used to be pieces of common land,*

Buses carrying supporters of the 'Young Orange' football team on the Afsluitdijk.

gifts were exchanged on a grand scale on important occasions, they combined into teams for harvesting and other activities, seasonal workers usually moved around with others from their village, and sometimes people even emigrated as a group from the village to the city. In short, the village was often a direct extension of the family.'[11]

As described here, this is a much more durable form of social cohesion than that of the orange Big Bird singing 'Who wants to live forever?', or the participant in the television challenge. People take care of each other, and of each other's animals, when times are hard. The cohesion in Jorwerd, as Mak tells it, seems to have what it takes to prevent mindless violence.

At the same time, clear-cut limits are implicit in this kind of solidarity . Not everyone can be part of the village community. On the contrary: *'Who belonged, and who didn't? The young people used a complicated set of codes: there were the natives, and there were the imports, and then there was the difference between Frisian imports and non-Frisian imports, and besides that there was the difference between active and non-active imports. (...) The elders had stricter norms. When Eef in the café got into a discussion about who was a real Jorwerter and who wasn't, Folkert and his friends responded with absolute certainty. Although Eef had lived in the village since she was twenty and had run the village's only café for thirty years, the opinion of the men was unanimous and irrevocable: "You're not a real Jorwerter because you were born in Baard."'*[11]

And to me that, too, seems logical. Each group connects and differentiates at the same time. The larger the community, the easier it is to belong to it, but also the more superficial and temporary the connection. And the millions of Dutch people who in some way or other take part in Queen's Day, whether physically dressed in orange or sitting in front of their television – being all together may have made them feel united, but that doesn't mean that they know and respect each other as equal human beings. They know and respect one small aspect of each other: the colour of the hat. But as soon as it goes any deeper than that, it also gets more sinister. The 'us-them' thinking, which every right-minded

View of Jorwerd.

philosopher of cohesion fights tooth and nail, is inherently part of an otherwise tightly-knit community where people would never murder each other for a cigarette.

And isn't that logical? Isn't that how societies function, and have always functioned, despite the concept of the individual who is disconnected and cut loose from every society, who accepts no authority but his own? Wherever people live together there is solidarity and division. At the same time. The more intimately connected you feel, the smaller the group that gives you that feeling. The larger the group, the more superficial the contact. People switch roles every minute of every day – neighbourhood resident, Dutch citizen, car driver, Frisian, Jorwerter, student, Christian... Every role brings with it solidarity with the one and estrangement from the other. Of course it can't hurt to prod people into paying more attention to the things that bind them, but if there are so many different ways of doing that, and if they're all so successful, doesn't that mean that cohesion in the Netherlands is actually doing well? And that what we need to learn is to accept the fact that the different forms of solidarity sometimes conflict with each other, and that when they do things can go wrong?

Stand-by solidarity

That's what Joep de Hart thinks. He's a researcher with the Social and Cultural Planning Office. De Hart studied the massive public reactions to the deaths of Pim Fortuyn and André Hazes. He begins his study with a wide range of remarks made on internet forums that mention the *'great unity'* of the Dutch. *'If only that we had that unity all the time!!!!!' 'The positive thing that this shows is that there's SOLIDARITY among the people of the Netherlands.' 'Yes, the sadness you felt and saw was about more than André Hazes... maybe it was sadness for this country?'*[13]

'That feeling being expressed there is quite remarkable', says De Hart. *'As far back as the Seventies you see a strange contrast emerging from questionnaires.*

If you ask the Dutch how their society is doing, the overwhelming response is always that it's getting more and more egotistical and amoral. The norms and values change so quickly that you no longer know where you stand; there are so many identities that you no longer know where you belong. That's what they say if you ask them about society. But if you ask, "How are you *doing?" they're very positive. Then they don't think there's any confusion at all, or any lack of norms and values. The percentage of people who say that they personally are satisfied with their lives is just as large today as it was twenty years ago.'*

'So there's a gulf between society itself and how people experience it. You can quote dozens of statistics proving that criminality hasn't risen and morals haven't really deteriorated, but it doesn't help. Here at SCP we also regularly conduct surveys about the future in which we try to gauge the expectations of the average Dutch person. Once again, it turns out that people attach a terrific amount of importance to unity and solidarity, and that they're scared stiff that in twenty, thirty years they won't exist any more. People are afraid that the dominance of the assertive citizen will only increase.'

'They say that, even though the Netherlands is really a very social country. We're at the top internationally when it comes to volunteer work. When you look at which organisations have grown since the Eighties, it's environmental societies, human rights societies and NGOs, and organisations concerned with moral problems: euthanasia, abortion, things like that. These are perfect examples of subjects of general social importance; joining one of these groups gives you no personal advantage. If society really is becoming more egotistical, then wouldn't those organisations be the ones to suffer?'

De Hart doesn't know why this should be so. Like many people he points to the *'ontzuiling'* – the breakdown of traditional religious and socio-political barriers and affiliations – which has resulted in each person having to learn to steer his own course, leading to greater insecurity. But in the end we're managing pretty well.

'A different kind of solidarity has developed', he says. *'The spontaneous, almost rustic solidarity of the past has been replaced by a more ad hoc form. Stand-by solidarity, is what I like to call it. A month ago there were some serious problems with the trains and travellers had to camp out in the stations. Then suddenly you'd see Dutch people popping up all over, offering the travellers a place to stay, cooking soup for them. It was like Siberia! But as soon as the trains were running again the group disintegrated: they had come together for a purpose, and once that purpose was achieved each one went his own way. But that solidarity is available virtually on demand. If a tsunami happens , the Dutch are there. So don't underestimate it: we are an individualised society, but that is not to say that we're egotistical. We just interpret solidarity in a different way. It's more geared to the needs of the time. Maybe people are no longer willing to turn out every Wednesday from eight to ten and sell Limburg fruit pies for our son's football club, but we will pay more to keep the club going. We give more to organisations like Amnesty and Greenpeace, but we're also more critical about them: we expect good service, otherwise we're out the door. That's different to how it used to be. People are more assertive, they choose for themselves more, but that doesn't mean that they only choose for themselves.'*

And those big emotions? You can't always attribute them to social uneasiness. *'We've simply become a much more dramatic, emotional people than we used to be. That has to do with the democratisation of public emotions. In the past it was seen as improper to cry in public. Now it's almost compulsory. Compare this*

with romanticism, when it was very fashionable among the 'jeunesse dorée' to peddle sentiments and emotions far and wide. In that respect the culture has really changed: we get an itch for the dramatic sharing of emotion on a grand scale, just as you saw in the silent marches. But you also see it on popular TV shows: what don't they cry about! If they win some little quiz show they start blubbering.'

De Hart likes to compare it with the pietistic school of Protestantism, in which you proclaim your faith by showing your emotions as explicitly as possible. '*The Dutch were always regarded as introverts, but there's certainly been a breakthrough in that respect. When you look at things now you almost get homesick for that strict Calvinism!*'

And since those old Calvinists wouldn't have been seen dead wearing orange wigs on their Reformed noggins and ripping into another round of 'Olleke bolleke knol', I see exactly what he means. ■

Translated by Nancy Forest-Flier

NOTES

1. Message on www.hetlevenvangerdnan.nl

2. Ad Verbruggen, *Tijd van onbehagen. Filosofische essays over een cultuur op drift*. Nijmegen: SUN, 2004, p. 24. Quoted in: Wouter Beke, *De mythe van het vrije ik. Pleidooi voor een menselijke vrijheid*. Averbode: Uitgeverij Averbode, 2007, p. 31.

3. Coalition agreement between the governing parties of the Lower House of Parliament – CDA, PVDA and ChristenUnie – 7 February 2007, p. 8.

4. See www.socialecohesie.nl.

5. The number of academic studies on this subject, whether or not designed as advice to the government, is nothing to sneeze at either. '*In the Social Cohesion race in the Netherlands, the central question is: in a society in which there are significant differences between groups of citizens in terms of lifestyle, views about norms and values, and identity, how can trust, cooperation, solidarity, mutual care and responsibility develop*,' writes the Netherlands Organisation for Academic Research, which has now produced no fewer than fifty-three studies on the subject.

6. Oscar van den Boogaard, 'Koninginnedag'. In: *De Standaard*, 30 April 2007, p. 17.

7. Peter de Waard, 'Nederlanders hangen weer vaker de vlag uit'. In: *de Volkskrant*, 28 April 2007, p. 2.

8. Enjoy seeing this again on the DVD *Ik kom eraan. Het laatste hoofdstuk van zijn leven* by Hugo van Rhijn (Speakers Academy Multimedia, 2003).

9. ANP, 'NOS gaat extra evenementen uitzenden', 19 February 2007, read on www.nrc.nl.

10. Report of the Commission for the Media, 3 September 2004; download via www.cvdm.nl/documents/20040048o1.pdf.

11. Geert Mak, *Hoe God verdween uit Jorwerd*. Amsterdam: Atlas, 1996, p. 180.

12. Ibid., p. 30.

13. Joep de Hart, *Voorbeelden en nabeelden. Historische vergelijkingen naar aanleiding van de dood van Fortuyn en Hazes*. The Hague: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2005, p. 9.

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