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ORDER REIGNS IN THE HAGUE

The Dutch Elections and the Socialist Party

RECENT POLITICAL TURBULENCE in the Eurozone has usually been filtered through an economic prism. With the fate of the single currency planted firmly at the centre of analysis, each development in the member-states has been scrutinized for its potential to undermine ‘confidence’ and ‘stability’. Resignations and electoral defeats, the collapse of old political forces and the emergence of new ones, thus blend into one sequence of exotic diversions from the task at hand. Any sense of what these events actually *mean* for national and European politics is lost.

For the most part, it has been a question of temporary hiccups: the passing of the neo-liberal baton from centre-left to centre-right in Spain—or in the opposite direction across the Pyrenees—offered little reason for concern among stewards of the Brussels Consensus. If need be, a cabinet of ‘technocrats’ can be assigned the job of managing peripheral Eurozone states on the Troika’s behalf until a plausible government is cobbled together. Voters may swing as freely as they like, but the main lines of economic policy will not be disrupted. Yet elections in two EU countries during the summer of 2012 threatened to disrupt this understanding of political realities. For the first time since the 1980s, parties of the radical left appeared to be on the brink of exercising power from a position of strength, evading the tutelage of centrist parties and pushing beyond the limits of *la pensée unique*. After a series of ballots which had seen faces change while the programme remained identical, a more fundamental shift in the balance of forces might now be in prospect.

Greece was hit by the first tremor, with SYRIZA vaulting past the country's centre-left party and running the conservatives of New Democracy a close second in the battle to head a new government in June 2012. Barely had the news from Athens been digested when Dutch opinion polls suggested that another earthquake was in prospect. The Socialist Party (SP)—routinely described as 'far left' in press coverage, its leader Emile Roemer bracketed with Alexis Tsipras of SYRIZA as a populist demagogue likely to compromise efforts to stabilize the Eurozone—had eased comfortably ahead of the Dutch Labour Party (PvdA); some polls even placed the Socialists above the centre-right Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (VVD) of Dutch premier Mark Rutte. No party of the Second International had found itself out-paced by a competitor to its left in a major West European state since the voluntary abdication of the PCI in the early 90s. Now it appeared that two would suffer that indignity in the space of a few months.

Europe's conservative elites might well have considered this the cruelest cut of all. Long before the prospect of a SYRIZA-led government in Athens had crystallized, Greece was firmly established as a problem country, its politicians and citizenry derided for their presumed unwillingness to match the frugal industry of the Eurozone's northern tier. The Netherlands, on the other hand, could still boast a triple-A credit rating, and its conservative prime minister was seen as a crucial ally for Angela Merkel in her bid to impose *ordonomics* on reluctant member-states. Having strained every rhetorical sinew to see off a threat from the periphery, Merkel, Barroso and company had not expected to face a similar challenge from within the Union's core.

In itself, the presence of radical parties challenging the Blairized centre-left could not be viewed as a striking new development in European politics—although one would be hard-pressed to find any recognition of that challenge from journalists mesmerized by the far right. A document published by the German SPD's research foundation on the eve of the present crisis described the radical left as 'a stabilized, consolidated and permanent actor on the EU political scene' which was 'now approaching a post-Cold War high in several countries'.¹ This family of parties—its diversity fully acknowledged by the author—was 'increasingly confident'

¹ Luke March, 'Contemporary Far Left Parties in Europe: from Marxism to the Mainstream?', *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, Berlin 2008.

and ‘as strong, if not stronger than the Greens and the extreme right’. Yet this growth had definite limits: ‘There is little prospect that the far left’s popularity will outflank social democrats in the near future, since social-democratic parties are still far larger, have greater governing experience, political and organizational capital—including still existing relationships with trade unions—and flexibility, but we might expect some continued recalibration of the balance between the centre and far left in favour of the latter.’² After the startling breakthrough by SYRIZA, September’s Dutch election threatened to carry such ‘recalibration’ further than even the most optimistic radicals had thought possible as the year began.

Another purple coalition

Almost as soon as that danger had registered beyond the Netherlands, however, it seemed to evaporate: in the weeks leading up to polling day, panic gave way to jubilation in the Anglophone press, as ‘pro-European’ forces clawed back ground lost to the Socialists and secured a decisive victory on September 12th—Rutte’s VVD came first with 26.6 per cent, Samsom’s PvdA second with 25 per cent. The *Financial Times*, which just weeks before had predicted a result that might ‘shift the balance of power’ across the entire region, greeted the final outcome with evident relief: ‘The skies are clearing over Europe’—‘the victory of centrist parties supportive of Eurozone rescue measures is the first tangible sign that anti-European sentiment may not be as deeply rooted in northern Europe as many had feared.’³

² March, ‘Contemporary Far Left Parties’. March notes that ‘participation in government has not been a very happy experience for the far left’, with the relevant party usually punished heavily at the polls. This appears to have been a fair reflection of the record in office, as ‘the far left can point to fairly modest reforms’, but ‘hardly a “radical” reformulation of neo-liberalism’, and has achieved virtually nothing on major policy questions—joining the Eurozone, government participation in NATO operations, austerity measures. March chooses not to draw the apparently obvious conclusion that radical-left parties would do better to adopt what he describes as ‘a populist anti-establishment strategy which guarantees medium-term electoral success and mobilizes discontent against the social democrats, but provides little policy influence’. If, by his own account, there is ‘little policy influence’ to be had anyway within the boundaries of a centre-left government, it is difficult to see what parties would have to lose by pursuing this course.

³ ‘Dutch Socialists catch the scent of victory’, *Financial Times*, 24 August 2012; ‘Dutch vote gives Europe extra time’, *FT*, 14 September 2012.

The speed and scale of the turnaround was dramatic. If we take the IPSOS polls as a benchmark—unlike some other surveys, they consistently placed the VVD at the head of the field—the Socialists enjoyed a comfortable lead over the Dutch Labour Party from late April to the end of August. As late as August 24th, the PvdA trailed by almost six percentage points behind its rival. Two weeks later, the parties had swapped places, and Labour continued to surge in the remainder of the campaign, ultimately gaining one quarter of the vote against 10 per cent for the SP—though still outpaced, as noted above, by the VVD. On a night when its main competitors tended to gain or lose support on a grand scale, Emile Roemer's party won almost exactly the same share of the vote as it had secured two years earlier. One scrap of consolation lay in the fact that Roemer would now head the joint-largest opposition party against a VVD–PvdA coalition likely to emerge from the vote. But this owed more to a collapse in support for the once-hegemonic Christian Democrats (CDA) and the far-right Freedom Party (PVV) of Geert Wilders than to any progress made by the Socialists themselves.

Was the notion of a radical party heading a government in The Hague as chimerical as these figures might suggest, or might Roemer and his comrades return to trouble Europe's orthodoxy in the future? Any sensible answer to this question must resist the temptation—very much evident in typical press reports—to elide developments in Greece and the Netherlands, presenting both as reflexes of the Eurozone crisis. That crisis has thus far not impacted upon the Dutch population as profoundly as upon those living in peripheral EU states. If we take unemployment as a crude but suggestive measure, the jobless rate in the Netherlands as of July 2012 was 5.3 per cent—one of the lowest in the Eurozone, against an average of 11.3 per cent across the currency union as a whole. The figures for Greece and Spain, by contrast, stood at 23 and 25 per cent respectively. The pattern for youth unemployment was similar: 9.2 per cent in the Netherlands, while more than half of their Greek and Spanish counterparts were jobless.⁴

Economists from ABN AMRO—itself the recipient of a €10 billion government bail-out—have noted that 'unemployment rose surprisingly rapidly in the second half of 2011, even more than in late 2008—early

⁴ Eurostat news release, 31 August 2012. Alarming levels of youth unemployment were not confined to the PIGS: the rates in France and Britain both exceeded 20 per cent.

2009', and predict that it will exceed 7 per cent by 2014.⁵ But there is no direct analogy between present economic conditions in the Netherlands and those prevailing in Greece, Ireland or Portugal—not to mention the psychological impact which the arrival of Troika over-seers in the latter countries has had on their citizens. This is not to argue that reasons for discontent are lacking among a substantial layer of the Dutch working and middle classes: merely that there is a greater continuity with the pre-crisis environment in the Netherlands than elsewhere. The factors which might lead Dutch voters to support a party of the unrepentant left were established well before 2008: attrition of a once-impressive welfare state; marketization of health care; insecure and stressful conditions of employment for a growing segment of the working population.⁶

Against this backdrop, the trajectory of the SP cannot be set alongside the meteoric progression of SYRIZA from less than 5 per cent of the Greek vote in 2009 to almost 30 per cent three years later. Its recent advances fit squarely into a pattern of steady, though not continuous, growth since the SP first entered parliament in 1994. The highest figure attributed to the party by IPSOS during the election campaign was still barely 3 per cent above its most impressive haul to date, when it received 16.6 per cent of the vote and 25 seats in 2006, after spearheading a triumphant referendum campaign against the EU constitution the previous year.⁷ At the time this was easily the strongest performance by a party from the 'left of the left' in the EU 15 since the end of the Cold War—since exceeded, of course, by SYRIZA. If the SP's more recent scores appear less formidable when seen against this peak, we should remember that

⁵ ABN AMRO, 'Dutch economy in focus: Unemployment on the up', 11 July 2012. The bank's researchers also predict a record number of bankruptcies among Dutch firms by the end of 2012.

⁶ Factors discussed in these pages by Servaas Storm and Ro Naastepad: 'Most of the 1.4 million newly created Dutch jobs of the 1990s have been low-skill, low-productivity, and hence low-paid in nature—in other words, marginal jobs, the first to be cut during a downturn. Moreover, 50 per cent of those created between 1994 and 2000 were part-time, and 40 per cent were "flexible"—that is, temporary jobs with a contract period of less than one year.' Storm and Naastepad, 'The Dutch Distress', *NLR* 20, Mar–Apr 2003.

⁷ In both relative and absolute terms, this was a better performance than that of the PVV in 2010, when Geert Wilders was hailed as the 'real winner' of the election in press reports. Both Wilders and the SP have benefited from the Dutch system of proportional representation, which structures the entire country as a single constituency; with no minimum threshold, a party need only win 1 per cent of the national vote to secure parliamentary representation.

in most neighbouring countries, a left-wing party which received 10 per cent of the vote in two successive elections would be seen as having made a substantial breakthrough.⁸ The latter figure now appears to represent the SP's base-line vote, barring unforeseen developments, and one that can be improved upon: having lost many of their potential supporters to the PvdA in the last weeks of the campaign, the Socialists will now find themselves in a more congenial environment as Labour takes its place in a VVD-led coalition committed to drastic cuts in public spending.

Origins and outlook

It may be easier to grasp the party's ideological character if it is seen in motion and across a period of time, rather than by seeking to apply an instant label in the usual manner of the establishment press. Its origins—now fairly distant—lie in Dutch Maoism. Adopting its current name in the early 70s, the Socialist Party immersed itself in community and trade-union work for the better part of two decades before winning its first batch of seats in the national assembly. Having long since drifted away from Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy, the party formally discarded that heritage in the early 90s. It broke at the same time with the model of a tightly-disciplined, ideological cadre party, and now claims a membership of 47,000—a figure that has risen steadily over the past twenty years, at a time when the PvdA, CDA and VVD have all seen their base eroded. It is difficult to quantify what portion of those 47,000 members are active on a regular basis. Ron Meyer, an SP activist and union organizer from Heerlen, estimates that his local party has a membership of approximately 1,400, of whom perhaps 10 per cent could be described as activists.⁹ If this pattern is replicated throughout the national party, that would give a total of between 4,000 and 5,000 active militants.

The platform on which the SP has won support over the past decade can fairly be described as a traditional social-democratic one, from a time when social-democratic parties actually carried out reforms instead of seeking to undo them. As such it fits into a general pattern noted by Luke March: 'The more the mainstream centre left has appeared to abandon the mainstays of the social-democratic welfare consensus, such

⁸ Portugal's Left Bloc reached this level in 2009, yet lost half of those votes in last year's poll; Die Linke won 12 per cent of the vote in the last Bundestag election but will register a similar decline in support if opinion surveys are borne out.

⁹ Interview with Ron Meyer, 13 September 2012.

as public ownership, economic interventionism and full employment, the more the far left has rushed to appear the defender of Keynesianism, welfarism, trade unionism, equality and workers' rights.¹⁰ The protection of social rights and services against the regressive trends which have characterized the period since the early 90s is a central theme of the SP's agitation. For the most part, it does not call for a radical change in property relations: the party programme, having defined its vision in essentially moral terms—'human dignity, equality of worth, and solidarity together with our rational analysis of the world form the core of socialism'—goes on to insist that 'democratic control must take precedence over any control linked to economic or private wealth', but explicit proposals for socialization of industry are confined to those sectors traditionally held in state hands under social-democratic rule ('essential services, public transport and infrastructure belong in the hands of the public authorities').¹¹

A call for Dutch withdrawal from NATO remained part of the SP's manifesto at the beginning of the new century, but has not featured in its platform of late; however, the party has contested Dutch involvement in any of NATO's wars, and demands the return of troops from Afghanistan. Commonly described as 'Eurosceptic' and placed in the company of Wilders' PVV, the SP has certainly taken a highly critical view of European integration, defending the prerogatives of national governments: it opposed Dutch membership of the euro—the party does not support a return to the guilder at present, however—and remains hostile to the path followed by the Union since the Maastricht Treaty. Against those of its rivals who accuse the party of narrow nationalism and flaunt their own cosmopolitan nature, it may be noted that the SP is the only major party in the Netherlands to have an extensive section on its website in a foreign language (English).¹² It has also begun to win support from

¹⁰ March, 'Contemporary Far Left Parties'.

¹¹ Socialist Party, *The Whole of Humanity: Core Vision, Tasks and Goals of the Socialist Party* (1999); available on SP website.

¹² Then-party leader Jan Marijnissen told Norway's Left Socialists that he could not understand 'why so few other parties make use of the possibility to keep others informed about what is happening, in a language everybody understands. And unfortunately for us, that is neither Norwegian nor Dutch but English.' Marijnissen, speech to Left Socialist Party congress, 24 March 2007. Having developed to some extent in isolation from other currents on Europe's radical left, the party has forged links with left-wing groups in neighbouring countries on an *ad hoc* basis, and does not participate in bodies such as the European Left Party.

immigrant communities of Turkish, Moroccan or Surinamese extraction in recent years, after long possessing a rather mono-cultural voting base—15 per cent of the present Dutch population was born outside the Netherlands, with a substantial number enjoying citizenship rights.¹³

The SP has reaped the advantages of its dominant position to the left of a formerly social-democratic party whose Blairite turn was most clearly in evidence during the ‘Purple Government’ of the 1990s, when the PvdA worked alongside the VVD to promote a neo-liberal agenda and erode much of the country’s social infrastructure. In contrast to the French presidential elections of 2007—when four candidates from the left-wing ‘No’ campaign sought to capitalize on hostility to the EU constitution—the SP had the field clear to itself as a vehicle for progressive opposition to the Union’s neo-liberal programme. Its only possible competitor might have been the GroenLinks (Green Left) party, formed by the Dutch Communists in alliance with three other groups at the end of the 1980s. While GroenLinks outpolled the SP throughout the 1990s, its Europhilia placed it on the wrong side of the fence after 2005. Support for the ‘Yes’ campaign has been followed by a drift towards liberalism: having supported the austerity measures of Rutte’s caretaker government—which the PvdA opportunistically voted against—Groenlinks formally asked to be seated to the right of Labour in the Dutch parliament. Two-thirds of the party’s former electorate rewarded this honesty by abandoning it on September 12th, prompting the resignation of its leader, chairperson and board of directors in a self-inflicted Night of the Long Knives.¹⁴

The SP’s rise was long considered synonymous with the personality of Jan Marijnissen, a veteran of its Maoist pre-history who remained the group’s parliamentary leader until ill health forced him to step down in 2008. Marijnissen was a very effective and charismatic performer, though even his admirers will acknowledge that his style of leadership was overbearing and impatient of dissent within the party—a relic, perhaps, of the SP’s origins. Emile Roemer, a former primary-school

¹³ Turkey’s ruling AKP felt sufficiently disturbed by the SP’s success among the largest single immigrant community that party activists handed out flyers outside Dutch mosques warning against a vote for the leftists; they seem to have been particularly upset by the presence of a Dutch-Kurdish woman, Sadet Karabulut, in the Socialist parliamentary group.

¹⁴ The former Eurocommunists now propping up the Samaras cabinet in Athens on behalf of the Troika may catch a glimpse of their own likely fate in this experience.

teacher who took the helm in 2010, is credited with a more relaxed approach to party discipline that has made it easier for members who wish to advance criticisms of the SP leadership.

Passing of an illusion?

How can the sudden collapse in support for the party during the final weeks of the campaign be explained? At a time when the SP was out-polling Labour by a comfortable margin, the following cautionary note was sounded by Steve McGiffen, a British socialist who has worked for the party in Brussels and observed its rise at close quarters:

In the past, high standing in the polls failed to translate into seats, as in 2002 when in the last week before the election the Labour Party stopped looking nervously over its left shoulder and simply stole many of its policies, winning back swaths of votes. SP activists admit that many Labour defectors state an intention to vote SP in order to persuade what is the traditional political home of the Dutch working class to rediscover its purpose. On that occasion, Labour's about-face worked.¹⁵

The pvda and its new leader Diederik Samsom repeated this tactic in the final weeks of the campaign, and owe much of their success to the decision to tack left (as the more intelligent commentary in the foreign press acknowledged: a *Financial Times* report noted that competition with the SP had 'dragged Labour to the left on economic policy, with Mr Samsom vowing to protect workers' legal job protections and raise healthcare subsidies').¹⁶ Before joining the pvda's parliamentary group, Samsom had established a profile as an environmental campaigner during his time working for Greenpeace, giving the party's superficial left turn a little more credibility than it might otherwise have enjoyed when he took the reins in February 2012. Once the pvda had edged slightly ahead of the Socialists, its rise became self-perpetuating, as left voters now saw the party's leader as the only man who could prevent the re-election of Mark Rutte as prime minister.

Rutte's own campaign followed a similar logic at the other end of the spectrum, with the incumbent premier sharpening the tone of his rhetoric and pledging to block further aid to Greece in order to recuperate

¹⁵ Steve McGiffen, 'Dutch Socialists: Preparing for Power?', *Spectrezine*, 12 June 2012.

¹⁶ 'Rutte's victory reflects Dutch pragmatism', *FT*, 14 September 2012.

votes from the PVV, while using the threat of Emile Roemer as prime minister to consolidate right-wing support from Wilders' party and the CDA.¹⁷ The latter party has struggled to cope with the secularization of Dutch society in recent decades. The product of a merger between Catholic and Calvinist parties in the late 70s, the CDA appeared to have found a new formula for success at the turn of the century after several years of exclusion from government, coming out on top in three successive elections under the leadership of Jan Peter Balkenende. But its shift towards a more secular brand of conservatism left the party exposed to fluctuating currents of opinion among right-wing voters, who might just as easily cast their ballot for the VVD or its populist challengers. Having lost almost two million votes—two-thirds of its support—since 2006 and slipped to fifth place in the party rankings, the CDA's position at the heart of Dutch political life now seems irretrievably lost; although the volatility of the country's electorate over the past decade would caution against any final obituary.

The explanation of Labour's surge in terms of brazen political larceny was certainly accepted by the SP's party secretary Hans van Heijningen—a veteran of solidarity movements who worked as an advisor to the Sandinistas during the revolution of the 1980s—when I spoke to him on the day before polling; his exasperation at the PvdA's ability to hijack the agenda of its rival, despite its record of cynical U-turns once in office, was shared by many SP activists. A broader lesson can be drawn, perhaps, by Europe's radical left: while a politicized minority may fully grasp the transformation which social-democratic parties have undergone since the 1970s, it would be rash to assume that this understanding is shared by the general population. The slackening of partisan commitment that has been anatomized by Peter Mair is bound to have a temporal aspect, as shorter memories accompany weaker ties.¹⁸ The ability of centre-left

¹⁷ The FT's reporter suggested that this approach would create problems for a PvdA–VVD coalition: 'Labour and the Liberals have little choice but to form a coalition together. But their policies are less compatible now than in the 1990s' and 'they disagree with each other on the fundamental direction their country should take': 'Rutte's victory'. This surely exaggerates the difficulty which centre-left parties are likely to have in discarding electoral promises and governing from the right: the recent experiences of PASOK and the Irish Labour Party are instructive.

¹⁸ 'Citizens are disengaging from the arena of conventional politics. Even when they vote—and this is less often than before, or in smaller proportions—their preferences are determined closer to polling day and are less guided by partisan attachments.' Peter Mair, 'Ruling the Void?', NLR 42 Nov–Dec 2006.

parties to win back a large part of the progressive electorate with promises they have no intention of keeping should not be under-estimated, especially if they have been out of government for several years—the recent victory of François Hollande offers one striking example.

Yet some party members have argued that the SP left itself unduly exposed to this danger by its approach to the election campaign. According to this line of argument, the SP leadership had put too much emphasis on the need to enter government.¹⁹ Following the 2006 election, the SP entered coalition talks with Labour and the CDA, only to find itself excluded by the latter parties, who placed the blame on the Socialists and their ‘unrealistic’ attitude. Party strategists attributed the loss of support in 2010 to this failure to pass through the gates of power, and made the SP’s readiness for office a central theme as it faced the September vote. The party’s only route into government lay through a partnership with the PvdA (the support of other parties would also have been required to secure a majority in parliament). This constrained the SP’s freedom to criticize its rival, without imposing any comparable restraint on Labour: whatever happened on polling day, the PvdA would never find itself under pressure to reach an accommodation with the Socialists, and could attack them as freely and as mendaciously as it liked.²⁰

Building upon this analysis, the SP’s failing may not have been that its programme was too moderate, but that its leaders did not appreciate how indigestible that platform remained for the centrist parties. Steve McGiffen argues that it would be too simplistic to describe the party as having filled the reformist ground vacated by the PvdA; in the present context, even rather modest left-wing policies imply a direct clash with the framework of European political life:

Defending the welfare state takes you into all sorts of areas—including defending Dutch democracy against the European Commission. The problem for social democrats, and it would be a problem for the SP too, is that everything they once stood for is now illegal. That presents you with a problem, but it also presents the EU with a problem. It’s all right destroying

¹⁹ Examples that have been made available in English include Willem Bos, ‘Right victorious as Socialist illusions are shattered’, *International Viewpoint*, September 2012, and Alex de Jong, ‘Netherlands elections: a hangover instead of an earthquake’, *Links*, 13 September 2012—both available online.

²⁰ ‘I think we were too friendly [towards Labour], we were too focused on government; maybe the lesson is, let’s first win the election, let’s remind people how the Labour Party acted in the past.’ Ron Meyer, interview.

a little country like Greece or like Ireland, but the Netherlands was one of the founders, a core member-state that's absolutely central to the EU; you can't imagine the European Union existing without it. If you push a country like this into voting for things that the Commission will forbid, it's going to be a crisis for the EU.²¹

Even before the present crisis, a robust social-democratic agenda was considered beyond the pale in Europe's political mainstream, and this aversion to policies that were once deemed unobjectionable has been strengthened immeasurably since 2008. For the SP leadership to imagine that they could reverse such trends while governing alongside the PvdA and other parties to its right suggested a large element of wishful thinking on their part. Had the early poll figures been borne out on election day, the other parties would surely have closed ranks to exclude the SP from office—or perhaps allowed it to join a ruling coalition that would be designed to fail and discredit the party, opening the door for new elections that would cut it down to size. The comparative equanimity of European ruling circles can easily be understood with this context in mind. If SYRIZA had edged ahead of New Democracy in the second Greek election, the vagaries of seat allocation would have made it very difficult to exclude the party from government by democratic means. No such problem was likely to manifest itself in The Hague, and a full-blooded campaign of harassment and intimidation after the Greek fashion might have proved counter-productive. Much better to have the work of scare-mongering carried out by Dutch politicians and newspapers, with the right-wing daily *De Telegraaf* leading the charge against the Socialists.

Roads to power

The party now faces the choice of moving further towards an already over-populated centre ground, or turning back to its roots in community activism and projecting a more combative face to the Dutch political establishment. Pursuit of the latter course will require the SP to confront a number of obstacles. Firstly, there has been a comparative dearth of social mobilization in recent years, with the Dutch labour movement struggling to find a new path after the decline of traditional bastions in manufacturing. A debate between 'service' and 'organizing' models of trade unionism—which overlaps to some extent with divisions between PvdA and SP supporters—is in progress within Dutch unions: a

²¹ Interview with Steve McGiffen, 12 September 2012.

2010 victory by cleaning workers after the most prolonged strike in the Netherlands since the war has strengthened the hand of those who favour a militant approach, but remains an isolated example for the present.

While socialists in Britain or France may bemoan the restrictive electoral system under which they are forced to operate, the very openness of Dutch political life presents a challenge of its own. Discontent finds expression in the realm of conventional politics almost as soon as it has crystallized, which tends to militate against more disruptive forms of protest outside the established channels. This applies as much to the far right as to the radical left: one could not imagine Geert Wilders or his forerunner Pim Fortuyn associating themselves with street violence in the manner of Jean-Marie Le Pen or Nick Griffin—still less that of Golden Dawn. The parliamentary turbulence of the past decade has yet to be accompanied by social upheaval of the kind glimpsed in southern Europe since 2008. The absence of racist street gangs linked to a dynamic right-wing party is hardly to be regretted, of course. But it is difficult to envisage a purely electoral movement shifting the balance of forces in Dutch society to the left.

The SP also confronts a Dutch intellectual scene where left-wing ideas have been systematically excluded from acceptable discourse. The problem manifests itself at both ends of the scale: university departments push Marxism towards the fringe, frowning upon its academic practitioners, while a largely apolitical student body is unlikely to produce any fresh crop of radical thinkers. This conservative stranglehold on the world of ideas hobbled the SP during the election campaign, according to one of the party's few academic supporters. The Central Planning Bureau, a state-funded body responsible for conducting economic research, churned out a series of documents analysing the party manifestos for their likely impact on the Dutch economy. Supposedly objective and scientific, these analyses were in fact based on the tenets of Friedmanite economics, unsurprisingly concluding that the SP's agenda would precipitate massive job losses, while the VVD was bound to stimulate employment by following the usual nostrums of labour-market 'flexibility': 'If you don't have the intellectual firepower to attack those kinds of calculations, then you cannot win the election. This is really problematic for the Socialist Party because they don't have that.'²²

²² Interview with Merijn Oudenampsen, 14 September 2012.

Beyond such hurdles, there remain topics that have understandably fallen off the agenda of Europe's radical left after the intense controversies of earlier decades, concerning the nature of the bourgeois-democratic state and the strategies that can be adopted by socialists operating in the heartlands of advanced capitalism. The possibility of exercising power—whether through the ballot box or an insurrectionary general strike—has been so remote over the past two decades that such questions were bound to suffer neglect. Yet they remain of fundamental importance. Another contrast between Greece and the Netherlands may be drawn in this respect, which brings to mind observations made by Daniel Singer after the French general strike of 1968, contrasting the brutality of the CRS in Paris with the apparently more restrained behaviour of the Metropolitan Police. This was not due to 'any metaphysical cause, to French toughness or British gentleness'; rather,

The explanation is historical. Bourgeois democracy has never struck such strong roots in France as in Britain. It was not only governments that trembled. Successive regimes felt ephemeral, their legitimacy openly questioned by large segments of the population. They could not always afford the luxury of subtle domination. The police were not just for show or for traffic duty. More than potentially, they have always also been a weapon of civil war.²³

Given the history of the Greek state, left-wing movements can hardly avoid discussion of its class character. Experience of the colonels' regime is barely a generation old, and when the collusion between Golden Dawn and the Athens police force can be observed in plain sight, the 'repressive state apparatus' is no mere abstraction of Marxist theory.²⁴ A long history of parliamentary rule in the Netherlands, briefly interrupted by Nazi occupation, has obscured this dimension of the social order: state repression has not been lacking, but its experience has usually been confined to activist minorities beyond the sphere of consensus politics.²⁵

²³ Singer, *Prelude to Revolution: France in May 1968*, Cambridge, MA 2002, p. 121.

²⁴ In an interview with an Argentine newspaper, SYRIZA's Alexis Tsipras suggested that if his party had won the June elections, 'we would have become the Chile of Europe'. Having expressed his confidence that a far-right government would not be able to take power in Athens ('our people are heirs to a great anti-fascist tradition'), Tsipras warned that 'neo-Nazism and Golden Dawn are not an anti-systemic force; no, they are a force of the system, within the system. It is the strongest arm of the system which will be used if it senses it is in danger.' *Página 12*, 19 September 2012.

²⁵ The leader of the SP's group on the Zaandam local authority criticises his party for sitting on the parliamentary committee in The Hague which supervises the Dutch secret service. Formed at the peak of the first Cold War, the BVD—now rebranded

One of the main strategic options discussed before conservative retrenchment took hold was that of ‘revolutionary reformism’. Ralph Miliband provided one of the clearest elaborations on this ambiguous theme: while it would involve ‘intervention in class struggle at all points of conflict in society, and pre-eminently at the site of work’, his favoured approach would also require a serious engagement with electoral politics, geared towards winning a parliamentary majority: ‘The alternative, amply demonstrated by long experience, is for parties intent upon radical change to remain confined in a very narrow political space.’²⁶ For Miliband, this strategy could be distinguished from traditional reformism insofar as it would be accompanied by ‘a permanent critique of the limitations and shortcomings of bourgeois democracy, of its narrowness and formalism, of its authoritarian tendencies and practices’. It would not anticipate ‘a smooth and uneventful transition to socialism by way of electoral support and parliamentary majorities’—‘in the context of capitalist democracy, such a transition requires a massive degree of popular support and commitment.’ Revolutionary reformism was also ‘bound to be very conscious of the fact that any serious challenge to dominant classes must inevitably evoke resistance’, and would be ‘determined to meet that resistance with every weapon that this requires.’²⁷ A socialist government would have to bring about ‘radical changes in the structure, modes of operation and personnel of the existing state, *as well* as the creation of a network of organs of popular participation’.²⁸

as the AIVD—has a long record of infiltrating and spying upon left parties and social movements such as the campaign against nuclear missiles in the 1980s, which is sensibly presumed to continue into the present day. Interview with Patrick Zoomermeijer, 11 September 2012.

²⁶ Ralph Miliband and Marcel Liebman, ‘Beyond Social Democracy’, *Socialist Register* 1985–86; Ralph Miliband, ‘Reflections on the Crisis of Communist Regimes’, *NLR* 1/177, Sept–Oct 1989. For Miliband, the ‘rejection of insurrectionism’ was ‘the largest and most important fact about the working class in advanced capitalist countries since 1918’—although this did not imply ‘an enthusiastic endorsement of bourgeois democracy, parliamentarism and representative institutions. On the contrary, there is very deep and widespread scepticism about all of this, and the chances are that it has always been so.’ Miliband, ‘Constitutionalism and Revolution: Notes on Eurocommunism’, *Socialist Register* 1978.

²⁷ Miliband, ‘Reflections’; Miliband and Liebman, ‘Beyond Social Democracy’.

²⁸ Ralph Miliband, *Marxism and Politics*, Oxford, 1977, p. 189. The main alternative strategy for the developed capitalist states—envisaging a struggle between parliamentary institutions and a new form of democracy based on workers’ councils—was articulated by, among others, Ernest Mandel: see ‘Revolutionary Strategy in Europe—A Political Interview’, *NLR* 1/100, Nov–Dec 1976.

A certain echo of this perspective could be heard in the rhetoric of Jean-Luc Mélenchon during the French presidential campaign, with his talk of ‘civic insurrection’ and ‘revolution through the ballot box’. It offers one standard against which emerging left forces can be measured: none of the parties challenging social democracy at present could be said to possess a vision as clear and as radical as that expressed by Miliband. For now, discussion of ‘structural reform’ remains the prerogative of the neo-liberal right.²⁹ Yet if the struggle against Euro-sadism in the Mediterranean deepens and spreads to other countries, we can surely expect to see a revival of strategic thinking among those who reject the Goldman Sachs democracy being prepared for them.³⁰

²⁹ As in the *Economist*'s predictable homily on the Dutch elections: ‘The labour market needs a shake-up to cut the cost of employing older workers and encourage people to work longer hours. The need for structural reforms in Europe is not confined to the Mediterranean—and it is no easier to get voters to back them in the North than in the South.’ ‘Gloom in Polderland’, *Economist*, 23 June 2012.

³⁰ The author would like to thank those members and supporters of the Dutch Socialist Party who spoke to him about the subject matter of this article: Hans van Heijningen, Alex de Jong, Niels Jongerius, Ron Meyer, Steve McGiffen, Merijn Oudenampsen and Patrick Zoomermeijer.