

THE SEDUCTIVENESS OF IDEOLOGY IN POLITICS

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Not all the ideas that public intellectuals have are valuable. Far from it. For ideas to have value they must be based upon and capable of being tested by

experience. Too often, they are not.

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At the end of my studies, back in the '50s of the last century, I thought of writing a thesis on “the anti-democratic intellectual.” The Cold War was then still very much in full swing. Many intellectuals had gone to the Soviet Union. Instead I went to East Africa to sell oil. But the subject stayed with me.

After a life full of activity, I decided to write a book on “the lure of ideology in politics” from which the fellow-travellers of communism seemed to have suffered. Usually this sort of subject is written about *by* intellectuals. I am more of a politician, so my experience and perspective are different.

Intellectuals are people who are interested in abstract ideas. Some may be about the arts or sciences, religion or culture, others about politics. In the case of politics, such ideas are eventually communicated to the public. Three elements—abstract ideas, politics, and communication—combine to form what is known as the “public intellectual.”

Not all ideas of public intellectuals are valuable. Far from it. For ideas to have value they must be based upon and capable of being tested by experience.

Experience is key. The people that promoted the Russian revolution did not have a clue as to what should happen afterwards. According to Sorel, Marx had once said that anyone who makes plans for after the revolution is a reactionary. “First we’ll destroy and then we’ll see,” was the slogan. Some of the wilder enthusiasts of the cultural revolution of 1968 thought the same.

With a few notable exceptions, the great political treatises were written after the authors

had turned fifty. Most young people—and nearly all young intellectuals—have not had the opportunity to acquire experience. It is therefore likely that their political ideas have little value, particularly if they are of a general nature.

Youth is naturally inclined to Romanticism, which has had a disastrous effect on politics. Rousseau was a romantic. His Social Contract foreshadowed totalitarianism. He wrote: “Whoever refuses to obey the General Will shall be compelled to do so by the whole body. This means nothing less than that he will be forced to be free.”

It is remarkable how much revolutionary movements have relied on youth. Gregor Strasser, leader of the left-wing Nazis, said: “Out of the way, old men” (*Macht Platz, ihr Alten*). The Italian Fascist movement appealed to *giovinezza*. In 1968 a slogan was: “Do not trust anyone over forty.”

But then look at the young people in revolt in Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt: Their ideas are of a general nature. Are they valueless? No—precisely because these people have had a lot of experience of dictatorship (although it remains to be seen what those revolutions will bring).

Since the middle of the 19th century, the state has intervened deeply in society. The domain of politics has thereby become much more extensive. Also, the mass media now play a very important role. It is, in fact, difficult to think of public intellectuals apart from the media.

These two developments have caused a great increase in the numbers of public intellectuals. But words are like money. They often also suffer from inflation. Today, few individual public intellectuals are heard. But collectively, they make an incessant din, amplified by a barrage of opinion polls. And with whom do public intellectuals associate? Other public intellectuals. They often form an in-crowd susceptible to hype, captivated by appealing ideas rather than sound ones and with a predilection for trumpeting catastrophes.

The ideas of public intellectuals may be dangerous, particularly if they are of a general nature and untested by experience. I now want to illustrate this in three areas: the European Union, multiculturalism, and Europe's vanishing self-confidence.

The European Union

The European Union is of great importance to us all. Its proudest achievement is the internal market. But now the EU is on the wrong track. Its actions are excessive. If it does not stop this excess, it will come to serious harm.

A premonition was given by the Dutch public, which a few years ago voted with a two-thirds majority against the erroneously styled European constitution.

Let me turn to the European Parliament: It lives in a federal fantasy. Everywhere it wants "more Europe." Sometimes that is necessary, but often it is not. The citizens of Europe, moreover, are sceptical. Parliament is legitimate since it has been elected by due process. But it is not representative because it is out of tune with the citizens of Europe.

The European Parliament wants more money at a time when every minister of finance has to scrape the bottoms of his coffers. This by itself makes clear how isolated from reality Parliament is. It forgets that it can find money in its present budget. Of the Regional Fund, only a small part is spent. The same thing goes for the Cohesion Fund. Also, a part of the Common Agricultural Fund may be repatriated. A critical evaluation of the EU's budget will yield quite significant financial slack.

As for the European Commission, it consists of 27 members, one for each member state. This is too many. Some commissioners have only half a day's work, if that. But all want to become famous. Their only way to stardom is to take initiatives, needed or not.

The only remedy for this excess of initiatives is to reduce the Commission to the number needed to run the daily executive of the EU—to no more than 12.

Where should they come from? The EU has large member states and small ones. The large member states are Germany, the UK, and France, followed by Italy, Spain, and Poland. They all deserve a permanent seat. That leaves six seats for the smaller member states. How to distribute these is then up for discussion.

Now, about European Monetary Union. It was born because France and Germany wanted it. But these two countries pursued different aims. France wanted political influence on the European Central Bank. That will always remain its aim. Federal Chancellor Helmut Kohl wanted a European political union and was prepared to offer the D-Mark in order to achieve that. Both aims were frustrated.

But these different aims have left a residue in the views of France and Germany. France wants important economic decisions to be taken by politicians with the practical consequence that fiscal imbalances would be distributed over surplus and deficit countries, and that the ECB would facilitate this. Germany wants fundamental economic decisions to be laid down in the Treaty itself: an independent ECB, priority for price stability, budgets in equilibrium, and no bail-outs.

These different views have been papered over but not reconciled. Nor is it likely that they ever will be. It is a congenital defect. It is thus to be expected that after this crisis has disappeared, further crises may well occupy the minds of our successors.

Multiculturalism

Prime Minister David Cameron once declared multiculturalism bankrupt. He is far from the first to say so. In October of 2011, Germany's Prime Minister Angela Merkel said the same thing. In fact, some years ago, Trevor Phillips, chairman of the Commission for

Racial Equality, pleaded against multiculturalism since it no longer stood for diversity but rather for segregation. So yes, the doctrine of multiculturalism is on the way out.

But what precisely does it mean? Let me distinguish two aspects: essential values and group-differentiated rights.

The matter of essential values is relatively easy. I wrote about this in a leading Dutch newspaper in September 1991. I said that in the Netherlands we live in a free society in which people could behave as they pleased but that there were certain essential values which all should observe and which were non-negotiable. I mentioned freedom of speech and religion, equality between men and women and before the law, and the separation of church and state. This means that certain immigrant practices are unacceptable, such as the sexual mutilation of girls and honour killings.

The second aspect is group-differentiated rights. Listen to Bikhu Parekh, professor of political philosophy at the University of Westminster, who wrote the following in an article on multiculturalism in 1999: "The political community must value all its members equally and reflect this in its policies: group-differentiated rights, culturally differentiated application of laws, state support for minority institutions and a judicious programme of affirmative action."

The crucial term here is "group-differentiated rights." These have also been advocated by Jutta Limbach, who presided over the German federal constitutional court from 1994 to 2002. She says the German Basic Law makes no mention of a duty to "protect and foster the cultural identity of an ethnic or religious minority." Yet this is what should happen, she asserts.

These views must be firmly resisted because they oppose integration and foster apartheid. As Prime Minister Cameron has said: "Under the doctrine of state multiculturalism, we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives. ... We've even tolerated these segregated communities behaving in ways that run completely counter to our values." So

no group-differentiated rights. The individual who becomes a citizen owes allegiance to his new country and should not be entitled to a separate status as member of a community.

Europe's self-confidence

It seems Western Europe has lost confidence in its own civilization. In its modern form, the noble Western tradition of self-assessment and self-criticism has often corrupted into sentimental self-flagellation. Let me mention some examples.

Many people appear to think that Africa's underdevelopment has been caused by the West. It is one of the sentiments that underlies development aid. But the question to ask is not: Why are poor countries poor? The right question is: Why are wealthy countries rich? After all, in the beginning we were all poor.

Whoever wants to study the rise of the West should go back to the Renaissance, if not to classical antiquity. Colonialism has nothing to do with it. European colonizers came late to the Middle East, which for centuries was ruled by the Ottomans. The interior of most of Africa was inaccessible until late in the 19th century. Europe is no more responsible for the underdevelopment of Africa than Rome was for the underdevelopment of Gaul.

Many people also have sympathy with the predicament of the Palestinian people. That is understandable, because their situation is indeed pitiful. But who bothers about the lot of Christians in the Middle East? Their situation is equally pitiful, if not more so. The Christian minorities in Syria, Iraq, and Pakistan are discriminated against, often violently. In Somalia the Islamists hunt down anyone in possession of a Bible. No one seems to get excited about these crimes. These minorities rightly feel deserted.

Another example concerns public holidays. The European Commission recently had three million school agendas published. They mention Islamic, Jewish, Hindu, and Buddhist holidays—but not Christian ones.

The EUROPEAN CONSERVATIVE

The 19th century saw the high tide of imperialism. Europe was then brimming with self-confidence. What has happened since then? The last century witnessed the cataclysm of the First World War, the rise of collectivist dictatorships during the interwar years, the Second World War and the Shoa, Stalinism, and the cultural confusion of '68. These events—and the doctrine of multiculturalism—have eroded all certainties. But there is more.

We live in a civilization that has been deeply marked by Christianity. Consider the Gospel of Saint Matthew: “Whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.” According to Nietzsche, this characterized a slave mentality. These sayings, along with others such as “turn the other cheek” from the Sermon on the Mount, do not exactly stimulate the wish to stick up for one’s own.

Feelings of guilt are pervasive among us, particularly in Protestant countries. Listen to Bach’s “Saint Matthew Passion.” The chorus sings: “I shall be punished for what you (i.e., Christ) have suffered.” The mote in Europe’s eye was thought heavier than the beam abroad. This might not be a problem if there were atonement, forgiveness, confession, expiation, or any of the other theological or liturgical forms for purging guilt. Formerly, Catholicism and Lutheranism provided this. But they no longer seem to have credibility in Europe.

It is these matters which explain Europe’s lack of self-confidence and its desire to avoid troubling Islamic sensitivities. Also, intimidation. When Utrecht University theologian Pieter van der Horst wanted to devote his 2009 valedictory address to “the Islamisation of European anti-Semitism,” the university forbade it due to its fear of Islamic displeasure.

Who actually shares in this lack of self-confidence? Is it shared by all or just by an intellectual elite? Probably it started with the elite but has by now trickled down into general bourgeois culture. After all, it was the intelligentsia that encouraged secularization and invented multiculturalism. They were the first to be what we are all rapidly becoming.