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■ UBALDUS DE VRIES

'The malaise of extreme language was depicted with stunning accuracy by Thucydides in his account of the civil war in Corcyra:

Any idea of moderation was just an attempt to disguise one's unmanly character; ability to understand a question from all sides meant that one was totally unfitted for action ... Anyone who held violent opinions could be trusted, and anyone who objected to them became a suspect.

That was in 427 BC. What a long way we haven't come'.¹

Abstract

This article addresses the shifting nature of the political debate in the Netherlands and the tendency by some to feed and feed upon the fear of the populace in respect of the problem of immigration.

Keywords

Politics, Human Rights, Uncertainty, Freedom of expression, Antagonism, Nationalism

Anger

„Fitna” – the movie made by the Dutch right-wing populist parliamentarian Geert Wilders in which he proclaims the evil of Islam – provoked anger and is a product of anger.² It provoked anger on the part of those who felt insulted by its contents, wherever they were: in far away places and closer to home; whose religion and cultural identity was trampled upon. For many, their anger remained private though. Fitna is also the product of anger. At least, it both feeds and feeds upon the anger or feelings of discontent among white middle class Dutch about things they cannot control or ex-

1 Robert Fox, „Geert Wilders? He's not worth it”, The Guardian, 11 February 2009. See also: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/feb/11/race-netherlands> (accessed last: 31 March 2010).

2 'Fitna' can still be accessed through the internet, simply Google the term and hits will be found, check, for example: http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=216_1207467783 (accessed last: 30 March 2010).

plain, presented as the problem of immigration and integration of Muslims in Dutch society.

This is not the anger I want to address however.

Rather, it is the anger I felt or better: the anger I am feeling lately and of which Fitna has been a catalyst. I am not only angry at Fitna and what it provokes or at Wilders for what he does and says. My anger is directed towards something else, something more abstract. I am angry at the disregard for nuance in the political debate. I am angry at the over-exposure given to black-and-white schemes and how these schemes are employed and abused in the current Dutch political debate each time a problem arises that is linked to immigration and integration. A recent example is the dismissal of a Muslim male employee for his refusal to shake the hand of women visitors by way of greeting. Such an incident is (ab)used and elevated to a polarised (and absurd) debate about the *duty* to shake hands as the only means of greeting in the Netherlands. Another example is the intense and polarised debate that followed after the provocative refusal of a Muslim lawyer to rise in front of the court. I am angry towards those who abuse this scheme, and these incidents, but who should know or could know better.¹

Generally speaking, political debate puts emotion at its centre; it thrives on it. Indeed, the debate is one of proximity and engagement and implies a direct confrontation between subjects; it has an agonistic potential. Furthermore, the political discourse seeks to sketch messages in black-and-white schemes. It categorises the objects of the debate, as well as the participants, agonistically in terms of us/them: left/right.² In doing so, it ignores the nuance, the complexity of things as this would only disturb the bipolarity of the political discourse. What is missing are the shades of grey; there where the nuance is. This is the domain of the scholar and, consequently, disables him or her to talk in political terms and if he or she does talk in political terms the scholar must forego the nuance. This is the scholar's dilemma. Indeed, it is reason that dictates the academic discourse and implies distance and disinterestedness – irony. It also implies that the scholar does not engage, at least not with the subject – he or she merely takes issue with the object of study, observed from the outside from a, as we would like to believe, neutral position, objective and without prejudice. (Never is the academic asked to explain his or her position towards the object and to be reflective upon the possible prejudices he or she may entertain. This is paradoxical as postmodernism would have it that absolute truth is no longer out there.³)

Thus, my anger is political but my response must be scholarly and that frustrates. My anger is directed at the shifting nature of the political discourse and how it uses and feeds emotions, in particular fear and discontent. In this article, I seek to address the shifting nature of the *political* debate in the Netherlands (and perhaps elsewhere) and seek to plead for an *academic* response of nuance to be part of the wider *public* debate.

The political debate

The political is more than a political discourse. With the political discourse I mean the discourse that leads to decisions about the society the political seeks to serve. Indeed, traditional parliamentary politics is a mode through which we can deal, peacefully, with polarization and strife. In this sense there is nothing wrong in

1 Cf. Geert Mak, *Gedoemd tot Kwetsbaarheid* (Amsterdam: Atlas, 2005), [...].

2 Cf. Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005), 5.

3 Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *Science of Science and Reflexivity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), ch.1.

employing black-and-white schemes. It is useful for the purposes of political propaganda: to inform people of positions in the hope for their support. It provides for clarity. It is something different if and when this scheme penetrates and takes-over the political debate completely and becomes leading in the public debate also.

Indeed, I do believe that the political debate in the Netherlands is more and more taken hostage by propaganda of this kind. Characteristic for this type of propaganda, and hence for the political debate, is that it has shifted towards a moral register, delineating good and evil rather than left and right. It is geared towards fear and discontent amongst people setting then up against others, portrayed as enemies to be destroyed.¹ It does not matter whether this fear is real or imaginary. Any fear is powerful and politically explosive; fear and political power are a powerful mix. What I observe when watching Dutch parliamentary politics, is that this forum is used as a platform to create alienation and polarisation with an aim to instil more fear for the purpose of the popular vote and hence control and power, rather than being the mode through which we can deal, peacefully, with polarisation and strife, offering choices. „Fitna“, in short, represents and implies abuse of political power.

Human rights

The discourse is covered with the cloak of human rights: the right to freedom of opinion and expression is used to legitimize political power, which to me seems to imply a paradox. The right to freedom of expression, traditionally, belongs to those who feel oppressed by the powerful, i.e. the state and its organs. More abstract, human rights relate to hierarchy and seek to be a guarantee against the abuse of this hierarchy, protecting the weak from the strong and/or the minority from the majority. Nevertheless, it is true that human rights have evolved into a horizontal dimension also, where we rely on them vis-à-vis the other (i.e. among ourselves as individual citizens). Here, we see the state as both facilitating human rights as well as putting limits for the sake of social order or security, through, for example the incitement to hatred legislation and, for the sake of protecting one's good name and reputation, the libel and slander laws in private law. Wilders, among others, is a politician who puts this vertical and horizontal structure to good use: he demands that he and the likes of him – populist politicians generally – can say whatever they like and at the same time demands from the state, and he proposes to do so when in office, to limit reliance on human rights for those he seeks to fight, in particular he seeks to limit the right to freedom of religion. He seeks a right to silence others. (Perhaps this has been the overriding motive by the Court of Appeal of Amsterdam to order (upon appeal) the prosecution of Geert Wilders for incitement to hatred.²)

Shout, shout, let it all out

There is also something about the *manner* in which the right to freedom of expression is put to use. Again, traditionally human rights stand for protection against the powerful. Freedom of expression is in this regard related to freedom of conscience. The former gives words to one's conscience and the ability to share this with others (through the freedom of association). Furthermore, and in turn: freedom

¹ Mouffe, *On the Political*, 5.

² Court of Appeal, Amsterdam, 21 January 2009 (Hof Amsterdam, LJN BH0496; see also: http://zoeken.rechtspraak.nl/resultpage.aspx?snelzoeken=true&searchtype=kenmerken&vrije_tekst=BH0496 (accessed last: 30 March 2010).

of conscience is necessarily linked to freedom of religion, which in its turn includes a particular form of expression, closing the circle of the four freedoms at stake.¹

Ideally, „expression”, in the right to freedom of expression, would relate to the formulation of an (argued) opinion which seeks to convince others and engage them in order to mobilise critique against the powerful or the other. This can take many different forms, including the spoken or written word. The formulation of (argued) opinion is still central to freedom of expression but no longer exclusively so. The right to freedom of expression is more and more entertained as the right or better: the *desire* to shout. Human rights are relied upon without inhibition, yes even without shame. In so far shouting is to vent anger and frustration as an immediate reaction to a particular event, shouting (screaming) serves an important function in any political society (where things do go wrong that provoke this anger) but to me this is not to be confused with the right to freedom of expression. These are two separate things. Wilders and other politicians abuse the right to freedom of expression, in terms of form and function. It is employed to feed anger and discontent; it is employed to shout and bully.

Here, my anger is not merely directed at Wilders and how he employs ‘his’ right to freedom of expression but, in more general terms, how this right is presented as a mantra and the be-all-and-end-all of European political life, presented as it is as the central pillar of the „democratic Rechtsstaat”. I would disagree. The right to freedom of expression seems to be called upon to allow xenophobia and false sentiments to flourish and to deny others their right, indeed to silence them. If there were one pillar of the democratic *Rechtsstaat* than it would be how it enables checks on the exercise of political power, preventing abuse, through the creation, among other things, of a public sphere in which ideas, even antagonistic ideas, can be exchanged through dialogue and decided upon peacefully and reasonably – freedom of expression is but one aspect of this.

Nuance, understanding and comprehension

The second object of my anger follows from it and refers to the lack of nuance. It reinforces thinking in black-and-white schemes. It keeps alive the ignorance. It is clear that the political debate is not one in which all the arguments can be teased out in detail and that it must allow for generalisations. However, what irritates me is that there is no scope at all to address underlying causes in respect of, in the context of this article, the(perceived) problem of immigration and integration. The focus is too much on symptoms (not shaking hands) which are enlarged to benefit the black-and-white scheme. One way out of this is to depart from addressing the symptoms, of which both Fitna and Wilders are mere representations, and make the possible causes or explanations our focus of attention. This is where academics, in my guess, can make a valuable contribution, seeking explanations about *why* one is fearful and discontented. The academy has a duty, which reflects its *raison d'être*. The duty of the academy is, among others, on one hand to give meaning to social developments and place them in their proper order, explaining them within a system of knowledge and, on the other, following this, to inform, and explain students as well as the greater public of this: to explain to them in order to engage them (talking with them). Politicians and political institutions have a duty to make clear the choices available to citizens but to do so without abusing the black-and-white schemes of the political discourse by merely feeding and feeding upon the fear of

¹ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ch. 2. See: http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/m/mill/john_stuart/ (last accessed: 30 March 2010).

the electorate. This demands from politicians a certain type of truthfulness and honesty that takes issue, also, with underlying causes rather than merely acting upon symptoms and be swayed by the *folie du jour*.

Modern European society

The success of modern European society is also becoming its downfall or so it seems and modernity is no longer synonymous with Progress. European society sees it itself confronted with adverse side effects of Progress and what is striking is that these effects are of its own making. It has caused the German social theorist Ulrich Beck to speak of a world risk society.¹ It denotes a situation where the adverse side effects of modernisation transcend the nation-state structure, as they tie all states irrespectively as well as individuals. (What is perhaps different is how states can respond.). Immigration and subsequent integration is an aspect of these side effects, posing a threat to established orders, uprooting them. I believe that the current discontent and the perceived fear are features of the world risk society. They are responses to developments, such as immigration, that tear apart our social imaginary of modern life. The problem Fitna implies can be explained as the uncertainty and accompanied fear (real or imagined) against the unknown, projected upon the physical presence of the unknown: the immigrant. It stands for uncertainty and insecurity, where a globalising world confronts us, rooted people, with others – uprooted people.² In itself, this is neither good nor bad. What is wrong though is that „Fitna” represents this uncertainty in „us/them” categories of a dangerous kind: friend and enemy. In doing so, it adopts a nationalist semantic and strategy as a mode to gather support and momentum. It feeds on fear and abuses this fear rather than taking serious issue with this fear as an expression of uncertainty and insecurity. It is doomed to fail, either because we realise the futility of the attempt or we don't realise this, ending up in a Hobbesian spiral of violence, destruction and death.

1 Ulrich Beck, *World Risk Society* (Cambridge; Polity, 1999).

2 Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives. Modernity and Its Outcasts*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2004).