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Provos and Kabouters

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Inhoudsopgave

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”The fundamental trouble with the anarchist is that, though he may be highly intelligent, he has no sense.” With this remark Alexander Gray begins his conclusions on anarchism in his book *The Socialist Tradition*¹. But this statement is not a conclusion, it merely begs the question. Because what is ‘sense’ in a world of war, hunger, militarism and repression? What is the meaning of ‘sense’ to people who reject - as anarchists do - the realities of the foundations of our society?

Ich weiss, dass du mich für einen ziemlich schlechten Politiker hältst. Halte es nicht für Eigenliebe von meiner Seile, wen ich dir sage, dass du dich irrst. Nämlich du schätztest und schälztest mich nach meinen Handlungen in der zwilisierten Gesellschaft, der Welt der Bourgeois; hier benehme ich much in der Lat ohne alle Berechnung und obne das geringste Zeremoniell, mit scheltender, rücksichtloser Aufrichtigkeit?²

[Translation: *I know you think I’m a pretty bad politician. Don’t take it for self-love on my part if I tell you that you are wrong. Namely, you esteemed me and scolded me according to my actions in civilized society, the world of the bourgeois; here I behave much in lat without all calculation and without the slightest ceremony, with scolding, ruthless sincerity?*]

Michael Bakunin to Alexander Herzen, already expresses the no-sense of the anarchist. Perhaps it may be a key to the understanding of his theories and practices. Can method be found behind their no-sense?

The fundamental characteristic of anarchism is its attack on authority.³ Not a special authority - church, state or property - but authority as such. Here lies the fundamental difference with the other socialists — with Marxists, social-democrats and communists. ‘You are creating a new authority of the so-called scientific socialism, and the bearers of your scientific socialism will become a

¹ Alexander Gray, *The Socialist Tradition: Moses io Lenin*, London, 1948, p. 380.

² Letter of Michael Bakunin to Alexander Herzen, 28 October 1869. published (with a wrong date) in *Kwsbuch*, 19, 1969

³ Der historische Anarchismus des 19. Jahrhundert, . . . hat zum erstenmal in der Geistesgeschichte nicht nur den Staat oder die Herrschaft einer bestimmfen Klasse oder eines bestimmten Standes, sondern die Herrschaftr als solche grund- satzlich in Frage gestellt und dieses Problem zum Mittelpunkt seines Denkens und Handelns gemacht.’ Peter Heintz, *Anarchismus und Gegenwart. Versuch einer anarebistiseber Deutung der modernen Welt*, Zurich, 1951, p. 9.

new class of rulers and bureaucrats, more intolerant even than the capitalist class ... ' was the prophetic warning of Bakunin to Marx and his authoritarian followers, repeated again and again in anarchist propaganda. Indeed nearly all Marxist schools had, and still have, one thing in common in their theories and practical policies: they hope to change the world by using a power structure and authority. So they are always fighting - either in a revolutionary or in a reformist way, as parliamentary democrats or totalitarians - for power. Their appeal to the masses has always been: give us the power to do things, to change things. (When they do have the political power they ask the masses: *trust us*)

movement, as any other reformist organization. But, in any case, the future needs the anti-authoritarian imagination of the Kabouters.

of a quiet revolution is different from the conviction — common to all older anarchist and Marxist movements - that it is the class struggle which decides in the end. In the anarchist tradition, however, we find a more ambivalent approach to the existing society. Reclus, Kropotkin, Nettlau and f most other anarchist thinkers did not oppose revolution and evolution, but saw them as complementary social processes and favoured each evolutionary step in the right direction. *'In diesem Sinn glaubt [Nettlau] an die Reibe: von liberal zu libertät, sowie er an gute Erde für eine gesunde Pflanze glaubt und erwartet nichts von einer klasse, sei sie noch so proletarisch, in der stets bessere und schlechtere Elementen sich bekämpfen und paralysieren.'²

[translation: 'In this sense [Nettlau] believes in the rub: from liberal to libertarian, just as he believes in good soil for a healthy plant, and expects nothing from a class, however proletarian, in which better and worse elements always fight and paralyze each other.]

Alas, the quiet anarchist revolution is certainly not the only characteristic of our times. We see also developments in another direction, towards more militarism, oppression and exploitation of men by men, towards bigger and bigger decision-making power in fewer and fewer hands. A quiet authoritarian revolution is just as real as the anarchist one. But if we are aware of the fact that both revolutions are going on at the same time - and perhaps *Like a Conquered Province* by Paul Goodman is the best example of a libertarian seeing both tendencies at work - does it make any difference ? There seems no greater and more bitter alienation in neo-capitalist society than between the leftist circles crying for confrontation, calling for unity between students and masses, etc., and the ordinary workers who form the majority of their 'masses'. In our societies we have to reckon with welfare states and non-revolutionary majorities (even people who belong to the revolutionary minorities, at the same time A but in other social roles, often belong to the majorities). Polarization against silent majorities in the end results in more authoritarianism. To make these majorities more conscious of the world they are living in, Kabouter imagination seems the more libertarian *and* the more realistic approach.

Will the Kabouters have a future? The dangers and problems that caused the death of 'Provo' are still there. Perhaps 'Kabouters will become a reform

² Max Nettlau, 'Biographische und Bibliographische Daten,' *International Review of Social History*, 1969, p. 45-9. Peter Heintz writes 'Der konsequente "politische" Anarchismus muss die für den Marxismus zentrale klassenkampftheorie verwerfen,' ... (p. 62). The only useful publication in the English language is the special Provo issue of *Delta*, 'A Review of Arts, Life and Thought in the Netherlands', autumn 1967.

THE COUNTER-SOCIETY

The answer of anarchism to the problem of how to change the structure of society without creating new authorities and without struggling for power inside the existing society is to be found in the concept of the counter-society. Already P.-J. Proudhon, with his exchange bank, tried to create the nucleus of another, a free society. The anarcho-syndicalist movements already wanted to build a structure for a new society - based on federalism and solidarity - during the struggle against capitalist society. According to this conception, revolution was not the take-over of the state by a socialist party in order to start a socialist reconstruction of society, but revolution should be the victory of socialism in the factories and workshops.

The concept of the counter-society - the people, not power - is particularly useful if we look at .popular and rural anarchism in Russia and Spain. In the eyes of the workers and peasants the counter-society was the real society. The official society - state, police, clergy, aristocracy and middle classes - was not only the people's enemy, but a strange and alien body, imposed upon their natural society, and consisting of violence, oppression, injustice and sin. If only this unnatural oppression — state, church, property — could be destroyed, the real society, consisting of free people, working together in free communes and in solidarity with each other, would re-emerge in new forms. This idea recurs again and again among anarchists. The Russian anarchist Emma Goldman wrote about the (original) soviet: 'it is the old Russian mirin an advanced and more revolutionary form. It is so deeply rooted in the people that it sprang naturally from the Russian soil as flowers do in the fields.'¹ A writer on the Spanish anarchists exclaims: 'There it is again, this constantly recurring Spanish theme of philosophical anarchism, this practical experience that if nobody interfered all went well.'²

¹ Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists*, Princeton, 1967, p. 252.

² J. Langdon Davies, *Behind the Spanish Barricades*, cited by Gerald Brenan, *The Spanish Labyrinth: An Account of the Social and Political Background of the Civil War*, Cambridge, 1943, pp. 195-6.

Indeed, this picture of the actual society and the anarchists' idea of the free society was more realistic and had more sense than many liberal and socialist scholars of Spanish history and society cared to admit. The Spanish revolution of 1936 proved that libertarian communism at least had many practical possibilities and brought more socialism than fifty years of communist rule in Russia.

In the industrial countries of Western Europe and North America with their liberal and constitutional revolutions, 'people' and 'power' never became so fundamentally and dramatically opposed to each other as, for instance, in Spain. The concept of a counter-society — the existence of a revolutionary and anti-authoritarian working class, completely alien to the bourgeois world and its state - became increasingly unrealistic as state and society became intermingled. Underestimation of the flexibility of capitalist societies is a weak point in all revolutionary theories. With the onset of political democracy, economic planning and social security, the world of the workers was more or less integrated with the bourgeois world; national industrial societies emerged and anarchist movements faded into the background. Orthodox anarchists continued to argue that fundamentally nothing had changed in capitalist societies, but their emphasis on 'fundamentally' showed that in fact many things had changed in the daily lives of the ordinary people and in their attitude towards the state.

Now, since the 1960s, a new kind of opposition has been growing in Western industrial societies and libertarian and anarchistic ideas have been re-emerging too. The new opposition is partly formed by minorities who are not yet part of the national society. But there is also a revolt by young people, who are not born in 'another country' but 'inside the whale', rebels by choice, not by their position in - or outside - society. These are the sons rejecting the affluent warfare society of their liberal fathers. They do not have 'by nature' a counter-society, they have to create one. Sociologically, they have very little in common with the workers and peasants who formed the historical anarchist movements. However, if we look at the old anarchists we see among them many aristocrats, intellectuals and artists, who rejected their societies on the same grounds as do the young rebels of today. Already in the middle 1960s a lot was written about the similarities between the American New Left (SNIQ) and the Russian revolutionary students and nihilists of the 19th century. And two years before the black flag of anarchism reappeared in the streets of Paris tinting the May revolution of 1968, the movement of a little group of new anar-

Kabouters put forward the concept of an alternative society, yet to be constructed. (But the construction of an alternative society already lay behind the idea of 'modern schools', etc., and was present in many aspects of anarcho-syndicalism.)

2. The elderly anarchist movements had lost all real contact with society and the daily life of ordinary people. The anarchists became outsiders, sometimes soaring away in revolutionary dreams. The Provos and the Kabouters do not soar, they want to base themselves completely on reality, paying attention to the daily needs of ordinary people. As a result their actions and behaviour have found a real response in Dutch society, a response that anarchist movements had failed to obtain since the great depression in the early 1930s.
3. While acting within society and reality, Kabouters refuse, however, to become the *prisoners* of the standards and limits of reality.
4. Conclusion: Kabouters do not want to wait and to watch until things change for the better; they act in order to change things now; and they act according to their own standards and value system, neglecting the values of an authoritarian society and creating an alternative society. By doing so they hope also to influence developments in the old society.

But are their actions really changing the power and class structure of modern capitalist society? And will the actual authoritarian society die as the Kabouter movement spreads without fighting back and using violence?

'Kabouter' is — and Provo' has been - attacked by both old and new leftists. Several critics see the successes of the two movements as typical examples of repressive tolerance. They argue - as do others in Western Europe and the USA — that the class struggle, the confrontation of and the polarization between the 'oppressed masses' and the oppressors, are the only real things that count in our world. The Kabouter movement, in their eyes, is a dangerous phenomenon, opium for an elite pseudo-revolutionary group. In Kabouter activity they see only escapism and no-sense.¹

So we come back again to Alexander Gray. It all depends on our view of society. If we accept the concept of a quiet anarchist revolution, the Kabouter movement certainly makes sense. And it is interesting to note that the idea

¹ An unfair attack, full of nonsense about Provo's no-sense, was published * in *_Kursbuch_*, 19: Konrad Boehmer and Ton Regtien, 'Provo — Model oder Anekdote?'

About the same time, a movement to occupy empty houses in old neighbourhoods that had started in 1968 drew attention to the fact that house proprietors and the authorities often let houses go to ruin, because there was more interest in commercial building and in easy sanitation than in the well-being of the people involved.

As with the Provos, several persons and actions came together and formed the *Oranje Vrijstaat* of the Kabouters. Roel van Duyn, as member of the municipal council, became its first ambassador, accredited by the 'foreign' - but not alien - state, the Kingdom of the Netherlands. In the proclamation of *Oranje Vrijstaat* (5 February 1970) we read: 'Out of the subculture of the existing order an alternative society is growing. The underground society grows out of the ground now and it begins — independent of the still ruling authorities — to live its own life and to rule itself. This revolution takes place now. It is the end of the underground, of protest, of demonstrations; from this moment we spend our energy on the construction of an anti-authoritarian society.'

If we compare the Kabouters with the Provos we see several differences. 'Kabouter*' has more 'flower-power' and 'love'; it expresses friendly Kropotkinism instead of Bakuninism. The Kabouters are optimistic about their possibilities. They do not attack society with provocations, but through the confrontation of everybody, including the authorities, with real problems and the possibility of alternative non-authoritarian solutions for them. The proclamation of *Oranje Vrijstaat* ends with a summing-up of all kinds of alternative openings, and solutions: an alternative solution of the housing problem (a Provo white plan had already suggested the weekly publication of a list of empty houses); an alternative solution for the slums. There are alternative shops, selling fruit and vegetables cultivated without insecticides; an alternative service for elderly people; and all kinds of direct actions (planting trees in the streets of Amsterdam, removing stones from dangerous spots in children's playgrounds, the opening of swimming pools on Sundays.

The Kabouters share the most important characteristic of the Provos: imagination. 'Provo' was, in the first place, imagination against power; the Kabouter mentality emphasizes imagination at work. But, of course, the power structure often attacks and destroys the results of the Kabouter imagination.

The following points can now be made about the relation between Provo-Kabouter' and the old anarchist movements.

1. Instead of the old conception of a 'natural' counter-society, needing only to be liberated from the authoritarian wolves, state and property, the

chists reached the headlines of the world press and an international television public: the Provos of Amsterdam.

If there was any movement to which the verdict 'no-sense' seemed applicable, it was 'Provo'. There were fifteen issues of an often poorly printed periodical, inviting its readers to blow up a new traffic tunnel; the reprinting of an old leaflet, *The Practical Anarchist*, which included very unpractical recipes for making sea-mines, which were to be placed in the holy-water fonts of churches; magic happenings around a little boy's statue - 'Lieverdje' - with shouts of 'No happy-smoker is a riot-stoker'; the provocation of the police and the authorities to the point of authentic panic, with the terrifying battle-cry 'The police is our dearest friend'; a strong attack on royalty with the formation of an Orange committee, 'the pearl of the Jordaan', and smoke-bombs thrown against a royal wedding procession. Completely innocent people were beaten up by the police and even thrown into prison. Dutch justice was completely discredited in the eyes of thousands of people. An atmosphere of tension prevailed in Amsterdam with an eruption of violence such as Holland had not witnessed in peace-time since 1934. There was propaganda for a white-bicycle plan, a white-chicken plan, a white chimney plan, a white-woman plan. A young girl student was arrested and searched to the skin at the police station by policemen, for giving raisins to passers-by in the street. The chief of police and the burgomaster of Amsterdam lost their jobs. Over 13,000 votes were cast for the Provo movement at the election for the municipal council of Amsterdam and one seat in this council was won. And suddenly there occurred a Provo happening, proclaiming 'the death of Provo', on 13 May 1967 (twenty months and one day after the appearance of the first issue of Provo). However, a new movement was started in early 1970 with the proclamation of *Oranje Vrijstaat* (Orange Free State) by die Kabouters (Goblins). In the municipal elections on 3 June, the Kabouters obtained almost 38,000 votes in Amsterdam (11 per cent of the total votes) and 5 seats in the 45-member council.³

³ J. Langdon Davies, *Rehind the Spanish Barricades*, cited by Gerald Brenan, *The Spanish Labyrinth: An Account of the Social and Political Background of the Civil War*, Cambridge, 1943, pp. 195-6.

THE DUTCH BACKGROUND

Before trying to make sense out of the Provos and the Kabouters and to relate them to anarchism, let us first have a short look at Dutch society as it is today and at Dutch anarchism.

Dutch society and Dutch politics have always been characterized by a high degree of stability, typical of the burghers who founded and led the state. Law and order are held in high esteem, mitigated by a middle-of-the road philosophy and a sense of liberal tolerance. Extremism is rare. After the struggle against Spain in the 16th and 17th centuries, the Dutch never again attempted a revolution, but eagerly accepted the fruits of other people's revolutions (1789, 1848, 1917, 1918).

Religion and religious fragmentation have affected society and politics to a very high degree. The result is a great variety of political parties (governments are always made up of coalitions), a strange moralism in politics and society and a very particular phenomenon, which is a source of amusement to foreign observers: the *verzuilen-system*. . . *verzuiling*, which means literally "columnization" or "pillarization", the idea being that the various blocs of the population represent separate "pillars" (*zuilen*), each valuable in its own right, and together indispensable in supporting the national structure; the phenomenon of *verzuiling* is by no means confined to politics. Each denominational bloc has set up a whole array of organizations encompassing practically every sphere of social life. Schools and universities, radio and television corporations, trade unions, health and welfare agencies, sport associations, and so on, all fit into the *zuilensystem* [. . .] the usual division is fourfold, between a Calvinist, a Roman Catholic, a "general" and a socialist bloc.¹

The *zuilensystem* has played a very important role in the emancipation of the Calvinist 'little men', the Catholics, and the socialist workers, contributing also to the stability of Dutch society in the emancipation and modernization process towards national integration.

¹ Johan Goudsblom, *Dutch Society*, New York, 1968, p. 32, a very good introduction to Dutch society.

FROM PROVO TO KABOUTER

The influence of the Provos survived, however. Perhaps we may compare the Provos with certain new groups, schools and reviews in art and literature: expressionism, cubism, the Stijl group and Cobra, for instance. They all lived for very short but very intense periods, but they changed art and had a lasting influence. The Provo movement did not want to become a structure, but Dutch society and politics after the Provos was not exactly the same as before. The Provo movement was a catalyst in the quiet revolution. There is much more freedom in the streets now. Amsterdam became a centre of underground culture and sexual freedom. Opposition inside parties and organizations expresses itself more freely. Television makers have more possibilities than elsewhere. The Labour Party has turned to the left. A new party was founded, 'Democrats 66', which tried to avoid an inner power structure. Student revolts have erupted, a few faculties have been democratized. Alternative schools and universities have been tried but failed. Actions against the destruction of old neighbourhoods and against air pollution followed the patterns set by the Provos.

The concentration of capital and the closing of several factories and firms caused unrest among the working people and brought forward the question of workers' control and participation. In the Catholic church non-authoritarian alternatives are growing and gradually replacing the old hierarchical structure. The 'imagination' of the Provos was used again by young women in their campaign against sex discrimination. 'Provo' was sleeping, not dead.

But especially among the students, there also developed an almost orthodox Marxism with an old-fashioned worshipping of the workers' struggle.

Roel van Duyn, who had published an interesting book about Kropotkin's ideas, linking these ideas to modern cybernetics and opposing cybernetics to Marxist dialectics, took over the Provo seat in the municipal council at the end of 1969. With him, imagination entered too. Roel van Duyn wrote a memorandum about sabotage as an alternative form of defence. The burgomaster refused to have it printed and discussed in the council.

of other political parties; only 7 per cent of the total electorate had this much academic training.⁸

The death of the Provo movement had several causes. The authorities had adopted a more intelligent policy concerning happenings and demonstrations. Provos realized that their actions lost their meaning after they had lost their originality. Provos never had a V common general conception; 'We agree to disagree', they said.

They did not see any possibility of realizing their white plans. The most important was Luud Schimmelpennick's white-bicycle plan: a project aimed at ending motorised traffic in the inner city of Amsterdam and replacing it by more public transport and the free use of several thousand white bicycles, thus at once attacking the real problem of urban transport in a social way and the anti-social idol of the enslaved consumer, his car. The Provo movement attracted a lot of people who were only egotists or interested in the tension of police violence. Among the Provos there were several with a complete lack of responsibility for their own deeds. A kind of open commune in a Provo boat ended in complete failure. Of the original group - perhaps 25-30 people - some went away, some turned to drugs, the first Provo council member became a film actor in Italy, many remained active in some way.

The great depression and the German occupation had both a deep and a lasting influence on people's minds. The reaction was a strengthening of national unity and cohesion. After the liberation in 1945 Dutch life was for many years dominated by a mixture of political restoration (even reaction), economic social security and economic control. The socialists - who had first entered the government just before the war - became as conformist as any other *zuil* they saw in the social peace of Holland a model for the world, forgetting that the alienation of the people from the trade unions, from the political parties and from the decision-making process was almost complete. The only real issue of world importance - the liberation of Indonesia from its colonial status - was treated in a colonial and provincial manner. And the outcome did not disturb the position of the responsible politicians or parties. The communists, who had fought bravely in the resistance, formed the only opposition (they got about 12 per cent of the votes just after the war), but they spoilt everything by their Stalinism.

At the end of the 1950s and in the early 1960s things began to change slowly. Economic prosperity was growing. Workers fought - outside the trade unions - for higher wages. Television brought new communication between the *zuilen*. Journalism, influenced by the student weekly *Propria Cures*, became more independent. A new opposition against the cold-war policy - and Dutch moralism made the cold war very cold indeed - and its national conformist consequences was growing. A student trade union was founded and changed the image of the Dutch student within a few years. In the churches, especially the Roman Catholic, a stormy development had begun. Teenager consumption, beat and beatniks, pop and happenings, protest songs entered the scene, especially in Amsterdam.

Hitweek (today *Aloha*) a new youth-weekly, distributed information in a new form, at first only about music, but soon about every item of interest to the young generation. Activists, influenced by the English Committee of 100, organized ban-the-bomb groups and sit-downs. One of them, Roel van Duyn, puzzled by the problem 'What is to be done?', was impressed by Dada and tried to link it to anarchism. He saw the 'happenings' of the anti-smoking magician Jasper Grootveld around 'Het Lieverdje' (the 'Lieverdje' was a gift to the city of Amsterdam by a cigarette manufacturer) as an apolitical phenomenon but nevertheless directed at the enslaved consumer. Among the 'happenings' he saw 'the outsiders, the kids that don't belong to the proletariat - which had sold itself to its leaders and its television - or to the bourgeoisie or the squares,

⁸ Constance E. van der Maesen, in *Ada Politica*-, a summary is. given in *Delta*, "Provos issue, pp.

but who do belong to a big rebel group'.² He called them the provotariat. And, together with a few others, among them Rob Stolk, a very good-humoured and imaginative young worker, he founded a monthly and a movement. The Provo movement was born.

of the traditional anarchist movement. But he also noticed the development of a quiet anarchist revolution inside modern societies. He found forms of anti-authoritarian life and experiences emerging in art and literature, in education and science, especially in the social sciences. In fact to most of the anarchist thinkers anarchism was always much more than the movement and the ideas behind it. They saw anarchism as a driving force in mankind and its history, a driving force towards more freedom, self-expression and self-realization.

In Dutch society a quiet revolution, stressing real democratic values and trying to escape from authoritarian and bureaucratic ties, had been well under way since the 1950s. This development took place in all social groups and all *zuiden*, breaking down the *zuiden-system* and in a sense remaking alliances — not of political parties but of groups of people — when certain practical issues regarding tolerance and dissent were at stake. In almost every party, among many newspaper staff, television staff and in many official organizations and institutions there was a kind of guerrilla war between progressive and open-minded people against the more conservative elements. A lot of people did not want to get involved in politics, not because they had no interest, but precisely because they had political and social interests but became sick and tired of the 'regents'⁷ mentality of the parties and in the political process. In the Provo movement they recognized some of their own criticisms, dreams and ideas. It was interesting to observe that the positive response to the Provos came from people of all sections of society and certainly not only from the old Left. The negative response to the Provos came from leftist authoritarians — including, of course, the communists and 'regents' from the Labour Party — as well as from rightist defenders of law and order. The overwhelming majority of the population rejected the Provo movement completely, and there was a serious effort at witch-hunting against the Provos by the newspaper *De Telegraaf*, appealing to all kinds of prejudices (long hair, drugs, laziness, asocial, etc.). An investigation concerning the municipal council elections of 1966 revealed that 'among Provo voters, 32 per cent came from the two highest socio-economic levels, outdistancing all other political parties in this respect. The level of education among Provo voters was remarkably high; considerably more of them (24 per cent) had secondary school or university education than had the voters

² Roel van Duyn, interview, *Delta, Provo issue, autumn 1967*, p. 28.

⁷ 'Regents', the great patrician families which dominated Dutch politics in the days of the Republic.

- a demonstration, its route, the content of its banners - one needed special permission from the police. The 'Ban the Bomb' groups had already broken these bounds. The Provos automatically confronted public opinion with the fact that young people were arrested, held in jail and condemned for peacefully distributing the paper *Provo* in the streets, for peaceful happenings and for shouting image, image'. At the same time, there was no persecution of policemen who had used violence without any reason; complaints concerning maltreatment were nearly always suspended. A lot of decent people were shocked by the behaviour of the police and still more by that of the judges and prosecutors in the courts and by the sentences pronounced. A painful reappraisal of the Dutch administration of justice took place. An advertisement, signed by approximately 1,200 citizens, appeared on 18 June 1966.

The text began with the words: 'Our sense of justice is being affronted.' It ended: 'We desire of all police officials, burgomasters, members of municipal councils, officers of justice, magistrates, members of parliament, the government, and all other authorities that they do everything in their power to restore reason and fairness to the administration of justice. This reason and fairness are not to be found at present.'⁵

Important dates in the process of escalation were the royal wedding (10 March 1966); police violence at the opening of an exhibition of photographs showing the police in action on 10 March (19 March); the sudden death from a heart attack of a worker after the police had attacked a demonstration of construction workers, dissatisfied with an administrative decision by trade union bureaucrats regarding their holiday allowance (the evening of 13 June); and an attack, the next morning, by a group of striking construction workers and sympathisers on the building of the reactionary newspaper *De Telegraaf*, resulting in serious disturbance in the inner city.

The sympathy aroused by the Provos was not so much the result of the confrontation with the police as of the peaceful and imaginative methods the Provos utilised against law and order. This sympathy for the Provos was further stimulated by the white plans and other unorthodox contributions to social well-being, their rejection of manipulation, their open-mindedness, anti-dogmatism and sense of freedom. In an article I wrote on the Provos, I mentioned the expression 'quiet anarchist revolution' used by Peter Heintz in his book *Anargismus und Gegenwart*.⁶ Heintz, writing in 1951, noticed the death

⁵ *Delta*, Provo issue, p. 10 j.

⁶ See note 3 above

THE PROVO MOVEMENT

The Dutch anarchist movement arose at the end of the 19th century, in those days the social-democratic parties in Northern Europe - following the example of the German mother party - turned to parliamentarism. The opposition by revolutionary minorities inside the parties was often defeated at the congresses in a less democratic way, through manipulation of the party machines. The origins of several anarchist movements are to be found in these oppositions (the Jungens in Germany and Sweden). In Holland, however, it was the leader of the Social-Democratic Party, Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis (1846-1919),¹ who turned his back on the reformist German model. In 1898 he started an anarchist paper *De Vrije Socialist* ('The Free Socialist'). A minority of socialists - several young intellectuals and some old militants of Domela's Social-Democratic League - had founded a new Social-Democratic Party (SDAP) in 1894. Most socialist workers followed the old and beloved leader. The SDAP had a hard fight to establish its position.

Domela was both an asset and a liability to the anarchist movement. His personal reputation among the workers was tremendous and lasted till long after his death. The anarchism of many of his followers was poor, however, consisting mainly in an uncritical admiration of the great man and hate of the 'treacherous' social-democrats. After Domela's death *De Vrije Socialist* degenerated without losing its public of true believers and old admirers. More interesting forms of anarchism can be found outside the genuine Domela movement: in syndicalism (C. Cornelissen), anti-militarism (the IAMV), the extremely revolutionary youth movement, the *Maker* ('sledge'), in the 1920s, the monthly *Bevrijding* ('Liberation') of Bart de Ligt in the 1930s, etc.

As in other countries apart from Spain, the movement had been in decay since the early 1930s. There was no organized anarchist resistance under the occupation. After 1945 two publications reappeared but the movement was not resuscitated. Reprinting old and out-of-date arguments, these two periodicals had no influence and no readers outside their own circles of several hundred el-

¹ See my article on Domela Nieuwenhuis in *Delta*, 1971.

derly anarchists. In the 1960s, when young people entered the editorial boards, their contents became a little more interesting. One more publication must be mentioned, *Puiten de Perken* ('Beyond the Limits') (1961-5), a monthly with an anarchist-syndicalist background. It tried to be 'inside reality but beyond its limits' and welcomed contributors, and, in its last year, editors with other backgrounds. Its circulation never exceeded a thousand but it was well received and read by students and other young people, including several of the founders of the Provo movement.² So let us now return to them.

Many anarchists - and I do not exclude myself - have been excited by the actions of the Provo movement and, at the same time, puzzled about its anarchism. Foreign anarchists, who visited the Provos, were often in despair about their lack of theoretical interest and knowledge.

A first generalization about the Provo is provided by the slogan of the French May revolution in its first stage: *L'imagination ate pouvoir!* About 'Provo' we can say that it was imagination against power, and also the imagination at work. In spite of all the differences, the group that started the Provo movement had this in common: imagination, which they could neither express in their daily lives and work in the factory, nor in their jobs, nor at the university, nor in traditional politics and opposition movements.

'What makes us really mad is the individual's lack of influence on events. A happening is an attempt to seize at least the little part in things that you ought to have and that the authorities try to take away from you. A happening is therefore a demonstration of the power you would like to have - influence on events.'³ 'Provo' was a way of life, a way to be happy. Here Provo' is already on common ground with Bakunin's appeal to the spontaneous forces of life against the abstractions of science and scientific socialism. (The Proves' appeal to the 'provotariat' - the riff-raff, the *lumpenproletariat* of modem big cities - is, of course, another element it shared with Bakuninism.)

Imagination there was, in the word-play and slogans of the Provos. *Lieve revolutie - liever evolutie* ('Dear revolution - better evolution') a bicycle is something but almost nothing', etc. There was imagination behind the white plans, in the provocations and activities, even in the clashes with the police and in the dealings of the Provos with publicity.

The first idea behind the Provo movement was the provocation of the whole of society, without any illusions about the results. The opening page of the journal *Provo* contains the following declaration of principles:

PROVO is a monthly sheet for anarchists, provos, beatniks, pleiners, scissor-grinders, jailbirds, Simple Simon stylites, magicians, pacifists, potato-chip chaps, charlatans, philosophers, germ-carriers, grand masters of the queen's horse, happeners, vegetarians, syndicalists, Santa Clauses, kindergarten teachers, agitators, pyromaniacs, assistant assistants, scratchers and syphilitics, secret police, and other riff-raff. PROVO has something against capitalism, communism, fascism, bureaucracy, militarism, professionalism, dogmatism, and authoritarianism. PROVO has to choose between desperate resistance and submissive extinction. PROVO calls for resistance wherever possible. PROVO realizes that it will lose in the end, but it cannot pass up die chance to make at least one more heartfelt attempt to provoke society. PROVO regards anarchism as the inspirational source of resistance. PROVO wants to revive anarchism and teach it to die young.⁴

When they achieved their surprising success and found a lot of sympathizers among groups who certainly could not be classified as 'anarchists, provos, beatniks, . . . and other riff-raff', the Provos very soon lost their pessimistic outlook and realized that perhaps they could win something in the end. Provocation of society as such turned into the provocation of the establishment, of authorities and of the police, but most of all, of the false values and feelings of the establishment (which came clearly to die surface on the occasion of Princess Beatrix's wedding).

In fact it was not the non-violent actions and provocations by the Provos that provoked die escalation in Amsterdam in 1965 and 1966, but the violent and intolerant reaction by the police and the authorities. Already in the thirties many civil rights had been curtailed in Holland, especially the right to express a dissenting opinion at demonstrations, etc. After 1945 the situation did not change. Political freedom in the streets - the right to demonstrate, to hawk in the streets, to yell - was extremely limited, almost non-existent. For everything

² I should warn my readers that I was one of the editors of *Buiten de perken*.

³ Roel van Duyn, interview, *op. tit.*, p. 30.

⁴ *Delta*, Provo issue, published this statement with the note: 'from Provo 12' (p. 42). In fact the statement appeared in *Provo*, 1 and 2