

16. From the Social Movement Towards the Socio-Cultural Movement. The Example of Amsterdam

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Nothing about Amsterdam can be explained or described adequately without taking into consideration the genesis of the city itself.

There are several levels of social activity.

The first level: a medieval tradition is still alive: help given on a personal and individual basis. Historically speaking, this has been brought about by the experience and behaviour of the urban bourgeoisie. It resulted from the individualism of the commercial middle-class and was strengthened by religious theory (begging and monastic orders), Calvinism and Theosophy.

This help expresses itself in a multiplicity of ways. And in many areas. Primarily, however, in the care of the handicapped, sick, children, minorities, and the Third World, where the Netherlands has always played a leading role.

It pays to consider these facts anew. A concept like “conservative” rebounds off the facts and especially off their long-standing viability.

Radio programmes, broadcasting on several private radio stations,¹ devote themselves to direct philanthropic work of all kinds. With discussions, interviews, telephone contacts. They make appeals and supply addresses.

This directness is being strengthened. For, although they have been declared dead, *structures of neighbourliness* have, at least on a certain level, survived.²

It is due to this tradition, that the Netherlands possesses many more citizens' initiatives, in particular “action groups” and committees, than any other country in the world.

Historical tradition also determines the way in which people carry out their actions. Often from the market, out of the fun and games at the marketplace. A great favourite are “ludieke akties”, that is light-hearted, playful actions. I only need to recall to mind Provo and Kabouter. These actions are often works of art and are put

1 Radio and television are made by broadcasting companies, whose membership is open to the public, which approximate the most important large groups in society – a democratic procedure.

2 I cannot delineate here the reasons for the balanced relationship between anonymity (also a result of tolerance) and neighbourly “sociability”.

on in a graphic, imaginative and dramatic way. In this manner the actors make a cultural contribution. Individual initiative in the form of a pressure group has a long tradition going back to times before the formation of political parties. It has continued to be a small scale strategy, supplementing the block strategy of the large pressure groups. The structure of these citizens' initiatives – consciously and unconsciously – tends to be anarchic. They are following in the tradition of the “Geusen” (“beggars”) on the land and on the water, and of the bush preachers (hedge preachers). It is for this reason that they meet with an astonishing level of acceptance from society as a whole.

Here, social change is being pursued

- by many individuals
- that is, from below,
- very practically,
- that is, on a sophisticated plane of action
- in examples which are already partially anticipated,
- “sociably”,
- that is, communicatively,
- generally speaking, as a complex, social culture.

Subsequently, I will speak of social *culture* when a social movement contains a *complex* level, which is to say that it is not limited to a monetary context.

Due to a long practice of tolerance, especially in business life, the tendency to mediate is relatively well developed on all sides. This lowers the frustration level. Above all, it enables peaceful, enlightened and culturally sophisticated conflict strategies to develop.³

The second level: activities which were originally spontaneous and direct become institutionalized. In pluralistic Amsterdam, the many religious groups developed an abundance of social facilities. New movements, such as the Socialists, Theosophists, the New Left and the Alternatives orientated themselves on them and added their own institutionalization. Today, there is a profusion of social and cultural organizations – many more than in the Federal Republic of Germany.

The third level of social action: the state. To begin with, for many complex reasons the power and influence of the state have been being reduced for some time; with one exception: the social safety net. Middle-class liberals, who existed here sooner and were more widespread earlier than anywhere else in Europe, and the Socialists worked for the creation of the welfare state: the minimum level of existence was not

3 In connection with citizens' participation we also have the tradition of the unique procedure by which the government is advised. In 1976, the government had 368 external advisory committees, which were manned by private citizens as well as civil servants, and 34 independent advisory sub-committees. On these committees sat 801 private organizations, represented by 2,685 people (Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid 1977, 144 and 166).

to depend on grace and favour, should not be dependent on chance, but must be an inalienable right. The consensus that the state should fix the basic minimum wage by law developed out of a society imbued with the specific social sensibilities of the commercial middle-class. In addition, the “uitkering”, the unemployment benefit, is far higher than in any other country – about 1,000 gulden a month. And it is for ever! There exists no separation between unemployment benefit and supplementary benefit. Recent figures show that in the economically most important city in the country, Amsterdam, roughly half of the inhabitants live off the “uitkering”. Of course, this creates enormous problems, but the net of the entire socio-cultural structure is in a position to diminish the problems, to offer relief and compensation, and to make the problems bearable.

Amsterdam, especially, is an example of the limitations inherent in the analysis of social reality. This analysis also doesn't offer many possibilities for action. Moreover, the current emphasis on the discussion of macro-structures (the long-term weather forecast), represents an admission of defeat. Apart from this, it is also a justification for helplessness and inactivity.

Learning from the example of Amsterdam, I would like to present a further consideration. I suspect that form, structure, and living quality in the metropolis are problems which concern *everyone*. *All* levels of society.

There is no social class which couldn't do with a bit more happiness. I suspect that even the rich are poor in many ways; and the poor are in many ways rich. People living on the margin of society not only have misfortune and bad luck but also happiness and good luck.

This could lead inevitably to the separation of the problem of social work from the existing definitions and, certainly, from the agencies which presently carry them out. To me, it seems absolutely necessary no longer to ask social questions but rather socio-cultural questions. After long experience, I have come to mistrust the emphasis put on the battle against some *few* forms of poverty by the social movement. It has left huge areas of poverty *untouched*. Indeed, it has virtually made them worse – just think, for example, of the philistinism of the unions. From all this, I can only conclude that the social movement in the industrial countries is finished, if it doesn't transform itself into a *socio-cultural* movement.

I think that we have to reflect on the fact that we are talking about the *variety and amount* of resources. This is also, or maybe because, complex investigation is a problem. I suspect it can be put to better use. Out of this amount of resources developments arise.

You have just heard an example of this thesis from another country (Pirella in this volume: 241 ff). Basaglia's and Pirella's work in bringing patients out of the mental institutions back into society is only possible when one can count on a certain *variety and amount* of resources. Amsterdam is an example of the fact that socio-cultural work is already widespread in society. Practically *everyone* does it – *every day*.

Consciously or unconsciously. Institutions do not play the sole and certainly not the leading role. I will try to analyse briefly a further level upon which this potential for action is founded.

One example. Pirella has just illustrated that tolerance is a quality in life upon which much depends. But in Amsterdam the philosopher Spinoza already experienced and described it.⁴

A citizen of Amsterdam:

“In the tolerant atmosphere here all possible extremes always emerged and became visible. That’s what makes Amsterdam so exciting.” (Ger Zeilstra)

“Here nobody lives in a fool’s paradise – nobody is arrogant enough to give someone else freedom. Nobody thinks about *giving* someone freedom – no, one *has* freedom. Everybody just *has* it.” (Uli Möntmann)

German history teaches us that lack of tolerance leads to impoverishment: from obstruction, sterilization, rejection to emigration and mass murder.

Steve Austin, Director of the Netherlands Theatre Institute has said:

“Germany still has to come to terms with its past and a study of Dutch mores could go a long way towards helping.”

Only imagine what an enormous social effort is involved in introducing tolerance in thought and deed into cities and countries. Isn’t that also social work? In behaving in a tolerant way, each individual is less limited, not only in his passive but also in his

4 Maritime city, catastrophes, refugees from all over the world with their own traditions, ways of behaviour and languages, commercial spirit, reduction of the state, ungovernability in many areas – all this has determined a broadly balanced social behaviour. To begin with many people feel threatened when others assume a right to their own development. In a structure of communal life based on dialogue everyone, even the one who began by attacking, will become slowly pacified, and everyone gets a sense of direction from the overall context. Spinoza already formulated this as the experience of the city of Amsterdam and formed a philosophy out of it. If you read his *Pantheismus* not only as the idea of an isolated thinker, not only as intellectual history, but as social history, then you will see in it at the same time the experiences and dreams of many people. “The city of Amsterdam is such an example, which enjoys the fruits of this freedom and therefore prospers and is admired by all people. For in this flourishing nation, in this excellent city all people and sects live in harmony, and if you want to entrust your fortune to someone, you merely enquire, whether he is rich or poor, whether he deals honestly or deceitfully; for the rest the city does not concern itself with religion or sects, because before the judges this cannot be used as evidence, and even the followers of the most hated sects, as long as they don’t injure anyone, will be left in peace . . .”. “Even though the power of the state is seen as that which has the right to . . . , nevertheless men cannot be hindered in judging everything according to their own conscience . . .” (Spinoza 1955). Here we are dealing not only with the rule of law or with equality in the eyes of the law, but with much more: with lived tolerance.

active life, and in his abilities, and by his fellow men as well as by the state. Look at other countries and see how much social work is invested by the institutions of the social welfare services into activating people into personal activity, into developing self-help. How pitiful the results often are! How seldom is this problem even taken into consideration in the public assistance structures, which are commercially as well as ideologically exploitable. Public assistance, even on an economically sophisticated level, means dependence, reduction in the freedom of movement, and emancipation. These remarks might help to make clear what it has meant in a city like Amsterdam to have personal initiative already existing on a highly evolved level of development⁵ – made possible by the framework of tolerance already existing within society. It doesn't have to be created first. The following is an example of the positive dialectic of tolerance:

“Jan, who looks after the playground and keeps the boys off, is actually a rotten sort, a kind of deputy sheriff. But at least he's doing something useful now.” (Uli Möntmann)

I would suspect that further qualities develop out of tolerance. First of all, an eye for reality which also includes the problems *other people* have, and which is consequently open to innovation. This can be proven in all walks of life and in many different areas. One example: the power of *observation* has played the most significant role in the pictorial arts right up to our own times. No other country in the world has so many artists as the Netherlands. Nowhere else is the socio-cultural reality so closely observed and depicted as here. In every house, in every pub and in every newspaper a large amount of such pictures are to be seen. This might serve to show how much this type of behaviour is not restricted to particular groups, but is adopted by *everyone*, and is also put into active practice. “Let it be!” is a common turn of speech and it implies respect for what others do. Thus it is, that in Amsterdam the manifestations of many people now a part of history have remained preserved. For, it is part of the potential for action that many aspects of history have survived. History creates resources for the socio-culture. Apart from anything else, as niches, compensations, stimuli. Amsterdam possesses a *mixture* of factors from various areas, times, spaces and cultures which are no longer completely ascertainable. It is a highly complex figuration, to use a definition from Norbert Elias. For example, the city is still permeated with a sense of the country, it is city and village all in one. Typical of this are the tiny little gardens on roofs and balconies. Greenery, which is “illegally” planted on the sidewalks, climbs up the housefronts, and in old barrels with holes cut in them which stop cars from parking. On Bickerseiland, a citizens' initiative is keeping goats and small livestock as a protest. In the houseboat culture, the village is alive everywhere. Every object, every situation has its cultural structure

⁵ This does not in any way imply Friedman's theory. For in the Netherlands and most of all in Amsterdam, a social framework became a foundation and a form of security such as cannot be met with anywhere else in the world.

and its own epoch – *side by side* with many other epochs. This, one experiences synchronologically and simultaneously. In Amsterdam, the cliché concept of urbanity is put into question, and this extends throughout many other academic disciplines. The concepts which have been in use for thirty to fifty years begin to fall apart. In contrast to the reductive Manhattan metropolis, Amsterdam is quite a different city. Let me give you another example of complexity. Although 60,000 people in Amsterdam are looking for a place to live, over 1,500 flats are standing empty in the high rise building estate of Bijlmermeer. This shows that even in the face of necessity many people will not sink to the level of accepting just any reduced form of life. Moreover, it shows us the questionableness of a housing policy which deals only in numbers not in the quality of life.

As a consequence of this multiplicity, it is Dutch architects like Aldo van Eyck and Hermann Hertzberger who are just about the only ones in the world avocating theoretically (and practically) the theory of polyvalency. Amsterdam can be said to be an example of the fact that not only is the macro-level of problems significant but also, and at least equally so, the micro-level. Moreover, that the macro-level if, as is common, it is studied on a reduced level is not in a position to give us much information about the actual reality. The sheer number of movements, like Provo, student revolt, Kabouter, Kraker, citizens' initiatives, existing usually during boom phases with widespread prosperity, show that poverty is far more than economic poverty and that a social movement aims at a complex spreading of happiness. Just a few more references to potential areas of action:

Citizens' initiatives regenerate the neighbourhood houses and old neighbourliness, which were both still relatively well preserved anyway. Many of these groups, often operating as incorporated institutions, take responsibility for their part of town. They are against the flood of automobiles, against decay and speculation, for modernization and construction on empty building sites, for infrastructures such as the increase of the intrinsic values of squares, playgrounds and children's farms on empty sites. They form a lobby and force participation in the planning. They form working and project groups.⁶

Many groups start up communication centres. Small cafés and an office, usually in squatted houses. Meanwhile, the city has been talked into financing a chain of community centres – mainly in old buildings or in small, former factories.

For the most part the official social workers understand their job as socio-cultural work. Social security is not only a right, but also socio-cultural development. Take, for instance, artists. Many of them set up their ateliers in squatted houses and factories.

These communication structures provide unemployed people with many chances for obtaining employment on the side.

6 Many projects were financed independently through collections.

In addition, there are many small, self-organized artisans groups which have often arisen in the course of squatting and renovating houses.

Finally, print is flourishing: printing-presses, a weekly newspaper (“Bluf”), book shops, even a free advertising newspaper.

Indeed, it is only through these sophisticated socio-cultural conditions that many people have to come to terms with a life permanently on the “Uitkering”, the unemployment benefit, instead of despairing at the duration of their unemployment.

Within this socio-cultural framework it is no wonder that many of them use the “Uitkering” as a chance for doing socio-cultural work – without payment. Advising, for example, in the improvement of old housing.

All the large cities in this world are the products of extreme crises and catastrophes. The glorification to the status of metropolis is an ideological product of colonialism and later of a very small group of people who were able to profit from the city. For the rest of the people it has constituted and constitutes today a huge complex of problems in the attempt to make it inhabitable. To overcome the “inhospitality of the cities” (Mitscherlich 1965). To develop social-culture.

Social work cannot limit itself to assistance and support in such problem areas as unemployment and marginalization, but must also be an all encompassing *socio-cultural* movement in all areas. In this respect Amsterdam appears to me to be in advance of all other large cities. This could be substantiated in detail.

I suspect that one cannot come close to solving the problems by means of the analyses, thoughts and strategies of yesterday, which would be point by point strategies.

I suggest that we also consider complex strategies. They include by their very nature: detours, compensations, cultural nets, which can also assume the functions of social assistance, can create niches, overcome isolation, support flexibility, and increase self-confidence. This cannot be achieved by means of the currently defensive social work, but only through a large number of socio-cultural initiatives.

Amsterdam has always understood how to absorb break-ups (such as streams of refugees) and conflicts (such as uprisings) in a positive manner⁷: how to develop social culture out of them.

In this city of many peoples and many groups, integration and persuasions (public relations) strategies have developed on the basis of the recognition of differences. In crises, break-ups, and conflicts they prefer to emphasize the *chances*.

A last example. In the sixties we had a lot of pressure towards change in the inner city: threatened clearance of whole areas, relocations, high rise buildings for centralized services. Unoccupied buildings, decay of the old urban centre. Speculation. Housing shortage. Thousands of people *squatted* in empty houses – today it is

⁷ Not to be forgotten: the capacity to mourn – for instance, for the destruction of Jewish culture.

estimated that there are approximately 10,000 squatters with around 50,000 sympathizers. They are preserving the historic core of the city. Policies are being changed. Services are being sent to the outskirts. Reduced automobile traffic, excellent public transport. Preservation of around 7,000 historic buildings. Above all: no other city in the world places so much council housing in the inner city. Steve Austin, Director of the Netherlands Theatre Institute:

“It must not be allowed to happen that something actually works in Amsterdam. Just imagine, that the parking metres were altered and that everything was in good working order within two days. It would be a crime. No! The administration must count on things not working. Imagine wanting to put on a musical performance on the Grachten or a play in a courtyard in Sälchen in Berlin! I’m sure you’d be arrested before you’d even opened the door!

Fortunately, over the years the city administration (of Amsterdam) has always made good decisions on important issues. This sensible practice, for example, in regard to the squatters, has meant that Amsterdam now has a flourishing youth culture in practically all areas, from video to creative arts and music. This has laid firm foundations which can be exploited in future. These are the pleasant side effects of having such an administration. That is, if you don’t ever expect, or even want, all the rules which have been thought up over the course of the centuries to be lived up to. You can’t expect anything like that here.”

(Niews van de Dag, 27.11.1984)

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