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In de ban van goed en fout. De bestrijding van de Centrumpartij en de Centrumdemocraten (1980-1998)

Vetten, J. de

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Summary

Under the spell of 'right' and 'wrong'

Combating the Centrumpartij and the
Centrumdemocraten (1980-1998)

In the Netherlands during the 1980s and 1990s, a high degree of consensus existed in the political and public debate on the immigration and integration policy. Opinion polls showed that there was a large group of people who opposed this policy, but they were hardly given a voice in the debate. Two political parties at that time, the Centre Party (Centrumpartij or *cp*) and the Centre Democrats (Centrumdemocraten or *cd*) – by many considered to be extreme right-wing, fascist or racist – endeavoured to address this issue in their own way, which was often provocative, harsh or insulting. Their actions were not appreciated; almost everybody turned against them.

This book outlines the way in which the *cp* and *cd* were combated in the 1980s and 1990s. It describes and analyses the fight against these parties and the effects thereof from a historical angle, on the basis of a great diversity of sources. The book discusses the following questions: (1) How were the *cp* and *cd* handled and how were they combated? (2) How did the *cp* and *cd* endeavour to assert their own political views and to avert the fight against them? (3) How can the fight against the *cp* and *cd* be interpreted? Were they combated so harshly because they were seen not as 'normal' political opponents, but rather as 'bad' or 'wrong'? In short, was the Dutch society by combating these parties – borrowing the words of historian Hans Blom about the national assessment of the Second World War – 'under the spell of right and wrong'?

In this book, five arenas are distinguished. These are the (virtual)

areas in which the fight against the CP and CD took place. These arenas are the following, with in between brackets the most important actors: 'the parliament' (the political parties); 'the courtroom' (Public Prosecution Service [Openbaar Ministerie] and civil society organisations); 'subsidization and supervision' (Ministry of Internal Affairs [Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken] and National Security Service [Binnenlandse Veiligheidsdienst]); 'the public opinion' (civil society organisations and the media); and finally, 'the streets' (anti-fascists, civil society organisations and municipalities).

Firstly, the book discusses the nature and ideology of the parties on the basis of insights from contemporary political science. The CP and CD were radical right-wing parties. They were nationalistic and xenophobic as well as critical of immigration and the multi-cultural society. Their ideology could be summarised by the statements 'The Netherlands for the Dutch' ('Nederland voor de Nederlanders') and 'Full is Full' ('Vol is Vol'). They were not anti-democratic – contrary to what was thought in the 1980s and 1990s – but they strongly opposed the political elites, i.e. the government and the large political parties, which they thought pursued an 'anti-Dutch policy'. The CP and CD also advocated a more severe fight against crime.

Furthermore, the book elaborates on the fight against these parties in each arena. In the arena of 'the parliament', the political parties favoured the strategies of 'ignoring' and 'isolating'. They established a *cordon sanitaire* around the CP and CD which remained in place during the entire period the parties were present in the House of Representatives (Tweede Kamer). Not only did nobody wish to cooperate with the parties, they also did not enter into debate with them. Other strategies were to change the electoral rules – the Electoral Act (Kieswet) for example was amended a few times – and to alter other regulations and legislation such as the Public Broadcasting Act (Omroepwet). Lastly, a prohibition of the parties was frequently debated in parliament as well as in society.

In the arena 'the courtroom', civil society organisations opened civil law cases against the CP and CD on the grounds of allegedly discriminating or insulting statements. Their strategy was 'un-

masking'; they wanted to reveal the 'true' (in this case: racist) face of the parties. Also active in this arena was the Public Prosecution Service, which prosecuted the CP and CD on the grounds of the anti-discrimination articles of the Criminal Code (Wetboek van Strafrecht). It is important to note that the Public Prosecution Service had no intention to combat these parties. The initiative originated from the political arena, 'the parliament', by means of establishing policies, altering regulations and legislation and exerting political pressure. The Public Prosecution Service endeavoured to apply the existing regulations and legislation as conscientious as possible. Their strategy was 'to treat them as any other party'.

The arena of 'subsidization and supervision' revolved around the subvention of party institutions furnished by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the supervision on extremist parties by the National Security Service. Similar to the Public Prosecution Service, the ministry and the National Security Service had no intention to combat the CP and CD and the initiative originated from the arena 'the parliament'. Both actors tried to apply regulations and legislation and/or government policies as well as possible. Their strategy, too, was 'to treat as any other party'.

In the arena of 'the public opinion', civil society organisations and the media gave preference to the strategies of 'unmasking', 'arguing and discussing' and 'action'. The first strategy endeavoured to reveal the 'true' (in this case: fascist, racist or criminal) face of the CP and CD. The second strategy involved the distribution of information and the spreading of awareness of the parties and their ideology. 'Action', the third strategy, was mostly used by civil society organisations. It encompassed the organisation of demonstrations in cooperation with anti-fascists and the establishment of partnerships and alliances that opposed discrimination, racism and the CP and CD. All these strategies revolved around influencing the public opinion.

'The streets' arena was dominated by the 'action' strategy. The civil society organisations and the municipalities preferred to prohibit meetings and demonstrations of the CP and CD, while the pre-

ferred strategy of anti-fascists was to prevent or hinder their meetings and demonstrations – with violence if necessary.

Some potential strategies had not been used against the CP and CD. The possibility to enter into debate with the parties was not realised; much was spoken about or against them, but no one spoke with them. Furthermore, there was no ‘co-optation’, i.e. no adoption of any of the ideas of the CP and CD, not even in a milder form. Also, the strategy of ‘cooperating’ was not employed – this went too far for the political and social climate of the 1980s and 1990s.

What did the CP and CD do to avert the fight against them and to assert their own views? The most used (counter)strategies were ‘provoking’ and ‘arguing and discussing’. By ‘provoking’, formulating their views in a defiant manner or bullying their (political) opponents, the parties endeavoured to make the headlines. This strategy was also implemented in the arenas of ‘the parliament’, ‘the courtroom’ and ‘the public opinion’. Another important strategy was ‘arguing and discussing’. The parties tried to spread their political views so that (potential) supporters could familiarise with them. This strategy was also used in the arenas of ‘the parliament’, ‘the courtroom’ and ‘the public opinion’. In ‘the streets’ arena the initial strategy was to ‘retreat’. After 1980, the CP and subsequently the CD did no longer organise any public meetings and demonstrations. This changed in the 1990s when the CD wished to march in the streets a few times (‘action’ strategy). However, these demonstrations were usually prohibited by mayors. The strategy ‘guarding against adversaries’ was employed against the National Security Service, for example by formulating the charter in such a way that the board had a strong grip on the party. A strategy which was not used was that of ‘cooperating’; even if the CP and CD would have wanted to cooperate, no other party or organisation would have been willing.

Combating the CP and CD seems to have been at its climax in the years 1980-1986, specifically because of the actions of civil society organisations and anti-fascists. These were also the years in which Dutch society feared the ‘revival of fascism’ the most. The period of

1989-1994 comes in second in this respect, particularly through the actions of the media. Noteworthy, but not surprising is the fact that the intensity of combating the CP and CD closely followed the results of the opinion polls. When support for these parties (virtually) began to increase, the intensity of the fight against the parties grew as well – possibly because of a stronger feeling of urgency by the adversaries – and vice versa. An exception to the rule was the (increased) activity of the majority in the House of Representatives in the years after 1994; this was probably a response to the election victories of the CD in 1994.

In her book *On the Political* (2005), the Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe discussed the rise of ‘right-wing populism’ or radical right-wing parties. She believed this to be the result of the increasing consensus and the decreasing contrast between the left and right wing in politics. As a result there was no longer a political alternative. The radical right filled this gap. The response of the established parties to the rise of radical right-wing parties only aggravated the problem in her opinion. Instead of taking the political, social and economic causes of this new phenomenon seriously, it was discarded as ‘extreme right’. It was considered to be a revival of ‘archaic forces’: ‘It was the “brown plague” rearing its ugly head again and it called for all the democratic forces to unite in resisting the reappearance of this evil force.’ The response was oftentimes a moral condemnation and the formation of a *cordon sanitaire*. The conflict between the established parties and the radical right-wing parties was not seen in political terms – as conflicting political opponents – but in terms of morality – the ‘good democrats’ versus the ‘evil extreme right’. According to Mouffe, there is a clear relationship between the weakening of the left/right-wing distinction and the ‘moralisation’ of politics, meaning that contradictions in politics are construed around the moral categories of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. When rivals are not defined in political, but in moral terms, they are not seen as ‘political opponents’, but as ‘enemies’. And debating with your enemies is impossible. ‘This is why [...] moral condemnation replaces a proper political analysis and the answer is

limited to the building of a “cordon sanitaire” to quarantine the affected sectors.’

This analysis by Mouffe is well applicable to the handling and combating of the CP and CD, naturally with differences in emphasis per arena. These parties were portrayed as extreme right-wing and were not considered to be political opponents, but enemies which must be combated. Since the early 1980s, fascist threats were no longer thought to be unique to distant, dictatorially-ruled countries, but were also seen in the Netherlands. The rise of the CP in particular, and of discrimination and hate against foreigners, caused many to be worried. The majority of the public opinion sharply opposed every sign of fascism, racism and discrimination. The distinction between fascism and racism on the one hand and democracy on the other hand was placed in moral terms: ‘wrong’ versus ‘right’. This contrast between the absolute evil (fascism and racism) and the good and proper (democracy and tolerance) served for many as *the* unifying force of Dutch society.

By criticising immigration, integration and the multi-cultural society, as well as by articulating this in a sometimes harsh or insulting manner, and especially by putting this criticism at the centre of their political views, the CP and CD located themselves outside of the dominant majority view of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. The contrast between the parties and the rest of society was not defined in political, but in moral terms. They were not considered to be political opponents, but enemies that had to be combated. They were ‘wrong’! Rational interaction was impossible.