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A guise of humour for political periodicals

_Pseudo-propaganda periodicals and the Second World War_*

Periodicals are representative of a particular culture: a journalistic, cultural, literary or political culture. In order to define such a culture it is necessary to keep a sharp eye out for either hidden or overt ideological messages in periodicals. Just as there are writers who publish under a pen-name, it can be observed that there are also periodicals which appear in disguise. They look white but in fact they are black. The pseudo-propaganda periodicals that appeared during the Second World War are an example of this. Propaganda works best when it is not interpreted as propaganda, pseudo-propaganda is even more subtle: using the methods of the enemy, messages from the selfsame enemy are given a one hundred and eighty degree turn. As far as the Second World War is concerned, this phenomenon can be aptly illustrated by a few minor periodicals which were actually aiming for the opposite of that which at first sight they appeared to represent. In this article I shall be concentrating upon so-called resistance periodicals set up by the Nazis, in which the resistance movement is cunningly made to look ridiculous. This is also the goal aimed for in a few semi-literary, semi-political periodicals which in the first half of 1945, on the threshold of war and peace, made fun of not only Nazis but also the so-called ‘good Dutch people’. In contrast to pseudo-propaganda radio broadcasting in the Netherlands, these periodicals have never been an object of study.¹ But this is not the only reason to devote attention to _De Gil_ [The Yell], _Metro_, _Sic_ and other now forgotten periodicals. Upon further study it can be seen that they also belong to a hidden opposition movement, that of anti-pluralism avant la lettre.

In order to understand what anti-pluralism is, we must first clarify the term pluralism. A famous study published in America by the Dutch researcher A. Lijphart convincingly describes pluralism as a system of religious and cultural isolation originating in the nineteenth century.² The word segregation is

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too strong for this social and mental separation of sections of the population, that is why the word pluralism (divided into sections) was introduced by Lipshart. Dutch society was subdivided into four sections, based on religion or Weltanschauung: catholic, protestant, socialist and in spite of itself, the liberal section of the population is considered as a ‘leftover’ section. This separation was visible as a differentiated mode of social organization. Thus for each section separate newspapers, schools and libraries were created, not only this but up into the sixties of the twentieth century, housing associations and sport clubs were designated in this fashion and subsidized by the government. Even up to the present day this system of pluralism can still be seen in the names of television broadcasting companies and universities. Some Dutch political parties eagerly try to convey that there is still a need for a pluralized society, but in so far as this mode of organization still exists it is a façade of empty receptacles for which most Dutch people feel no affinity.

The sections maintained very little contact with each other, interchange of ideas or confrontation between standpoints was avoided. In this climate it is hard for satire to flourish.

For this reason the Netherlands had practically no tradition of political satire since 1869 when pluralism was given a powerful boost by the abolition of newspaper tax. Because from this year onwards the removal of this state taxation meant that newspapers could be sold more cheaply, this left the way free to supply a wider section of the public with journalistic reading matter. Very swiftly the catholic, protestant and socialist elites set up their own media thereby creating fruitful ground for intellectual isolationism and effectively blocking interchange of ideas on all levels. Humour had never been a weapon for the sections, the reigning climate in journalism was too serious for something as banal as laughter. At the very most a political cartoon could be placed, although this would not raise much more than a smile. Humour was associated with magazines to be found at the barber, like the light-hearted De Lach and some barbers stocked the slightly erotic Paris Paris. Thus, if only for this reason, it is remarkable that during the Second World War so many satirical periodicals suddenly appeared. One of the reasons for this could have been that during the occupation the pluralism that so typified the Netherlands was more or less eliminated. After all the sections were either not tolerated or barely tolerated by the occupiers, in favour of National Socialism.

3 In the stencilled edition of Satirische tijdschriften (1848-1940) compiled by Renée Vegte in 1990 for the Netherlands Press Museum Foundation, it appears that in the course of almost a century there have been very few non-compartmentalized satirical periodicals in the Netherlands. See also: Pijassen van de pers; Satirische tijdschriften 1848-1940, comp. Susanne Gabriëls et al. (Amsterdam, Netherlands Press Museum, 1990).