De jaren zestig herinnerd: over gedeelde idealen uit een linkse periode

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Summary

The current research investigates the collective memory of the sixties. The main aim is to gain an insight into the ways through which commentators give meaning to this period. The focus is on: (i) the different interpretations and judgements about the sixties; (ii) the supposed effects of this decade on the way of thinking; and (iii) the conceptualisation of the sixties as a part of political struggle. The central research question reads as follows: how are the sixties remembered, why is this decade still relevant and what are the consequences of this way of remembering on current values and attitudes? By answering this question we not only gain an insight into the past, it also provides an explanation for the present culture.

Chapter 2 of the dissertation ‘Een levend verleden’ (A Living Past) sets out the theoretical framework. The significance of a collective memory on our present culture on the basis of the ideas of Halbwachs is explained. In line with Halbwachs, it is argued that commentators who talk in similar ways about the sixties shape a discourse. Within singular discourses, recurrent tales about supposed problems, causes, and possible solutions can be distinguished. These so-called frames show us why the sixties are still meaningful and why commentators still give meaning to this decade.

Subsequently Chapter 3 ‘De zoektocht naar het collectieve geheugen van de jaren zestig’ (An Investigation into the Collective Memory of the Sixties) describes the methodological approach to the research. Because the collective memory is reflected in the media, a range of magazines were analysed: De Groene Amsterdammer, Vrij Nederland, Elsevier and HP/De Tijd. A sample of 600 articles that were published between 1994 and 2009 and addressed the sixties were selected and analysed using thematic content analysis, enabling the organisation of a large amount of memories of this decade. Subsequently, argumentative discourse analysis was used to further investigate how commentators refer to the sixties in present-day debates. In order to do so, nearly 250 articles published between 2004 and 2009 that relate to various topics such as (anti) bourgeois, immigrant integration, morality and democracy have been studied. These topics are elaborated upon in chapters 5 through 7.

Chapter 4 ‘Een overzicht van de herinneringen aan de jaren zestig’ (An Overview of the Memories of the Sixties) provides an overview of the recollections of the sixties and their influence on debates between 1994 and 2009. The findings show that commentators perceive this decade as a left and/or progressive period with a strong focus on renewal and liberation. Some focus on innovation in pop music and fashion, others address progressive ideas regarding freedom, authority, and democracy, while a third group are of the opinion that those who challenged the traditional conventions caused a turmoil in national and international politics.

Chapters 5 through 7 provide a more detailed account of the ways through which commentators refer to the sixties. In Chapter 5 ‘Grenzen aan be-
vrijding? (Limits of Liberation?) it becomes clear that most commentators still value the liberty-oriented ideals and values fought for in the sixties – individual freedom, the acceptance of homosexuality, women's emancipation and sexual freedom – are still of great importance. One subgroup however argues that these ideals have gotten out of hand, while another sub-group fears that the freedoms that were gained in the 60's are currently being threatened.

Chapter 6 'Lovende cultuurkritiek?' (Praising Cultural Criticism?) demonstrates that, at first glance, commentators are critical of the sixties due to the supposed 'cultural relativism'. Upon closer inspection it becomes apparent that, in critiques about integration and the Dutch identity, most commentators are concerned about the survival of ideals from the sixties such as gender equality, gay rights, freedom of expression and religious freedom. Furthermore, some commentators perceive a threat the tolerance gained during the sixties due to the hard (right-wing) stance on immigration.

Chapter 7 'Gestuurde autonomie?' (Controlled Autonomy?) showed that the majority of commentators do not distance themselves from certain sixties' ideals, even though they perceive the anti-moralism and anti-authoritarian mentality of this decade as the main explanation for contemporary social issues (such as substance abuse, impoliteness, and crime). Furthermore, several commentators believe that morality and authority can, in fact, contribute to emancipation and individuality. In critical reflections where the sixties is considered as an important cause of the failure of contemporary politics, most commentators advocate political renewal. It is interesting to note that they do not seem to acknowledge the underlying contradiction, as the struggle for political renewal is itself a sixties ideal.

The concluding Chapter 8 'De jaren zestig in het DNA van de Nederlandse cultuur' (The Sixties in the DNA of Dutch Culture) claims that the values and ideals of the sixties now belong to the DNA of the Dutch culture. Because the notion that these values and ideals are currently at stake is so dominant, is the view on contemporary socio-political culture often bleak. Although this period has become the fundament of Dutch culture, many commentators are critical of the societal changes that occurred during this period. For example, they criticize the behaviour and choices of left-wing politicians, adolescents and young adults during the sixties. It is likely that commentators polarize by style; creating polarization is a manner in which to distinguish themselves from others who have the same ideas. Furthermore, it is concluded that progressive values serve a conformist ideal nowadays: various commentators are intolerant to others who deviate from the progressive norm (such as migrants who reject gender equality). This intolerance is inconsistent with the values in the non-conformist sixties. In any case, it is important to acknowledge that many of the left-wing values and ideals of the sixties are now commonplace.