Vrij vissen in het Vondelpark. Kleine politieke partijen in Nederland 1918-1940
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Summary

Free fishing in the Vondelpark
Small political parties in the Netherlands 1918–1940

Free fishing in the Vondelpark (a municipal park in Amsterdam) was the second demand on the program of the so-called Rapaille Partij (literally the riff-raff party). This 'non-party' was formed by a group of anarchists in Amsterdam as a protest-movement against compulsory voting. With the well-known Amsterdam vagabond / street-artist 'Hadjememaar' (real name Cornelis de Gelder) as its number one candidate, the party managed to attain two seats in the city council in 1921.

In the Netherlands, the story of Hadjememaar and the Rapaille Partij has become somewhat of a historical legend. Still the very name Hadjememaar is a synonym for political vulgarity; journalists and politicians have often used the story of Hadjememaar to discredit new parties in the Netherlands. This poor opinion of new parties is also reflected in the scientific literature about the Dutch political system in the 20th century. Most studies focus on the large and dominant parties, whereas the new emerging parties are often denounced as silly excesses of the since 1917 prevailing system of proportional representation.

The main reason for this scant attention of new parties is of course the simple fact that not one of them managed to become a lasting main actor on the political scene of the 20th century. In 20th century Netherlands, the political system had always been dominated by the same parties: the liberal parties (vDB, Vrijheidsbond, VVD), the socialists (SDAP/PvdA) and the main Christian parties (the protestant ARP and CHU and the catholic RKSP/KVP), who merged in 1977 in the CDA. These parties were the major parties not only in electoral terms, but also in terms of political power; until 1971 (when for the first time a new party entered the coalition) coalition making was strictly their affair. New parties were considered as minor parties or small parties that at best played dysfunctional roles in the political system. However, new parties can be considered not only as dysfunctional elements, but also as indicators of the stress-lines within the political system. In studying the minor parties, it is possible to enlarge knowledge about the various feelings of dissatisfaction in the population, about challenging groups and ideas and rejected alternatives and also about the boundaries of the legitimate political culture of a given period.

This study focuses on the Dutch minor parties in the interwar years (1918–1940). In particular in this period, there appears to be a paradox between strong political
stability on one hand and broad feelings of insecurity and dissatisfaction on the other hand. By focusing on the small parties in this period, this study aims to present a clearer view on the various feelings of discontent, but it also tries to give an explanation of the apparent paradox between stability and dissatisfaction.

Between 1918 and 1940, over 160 parties participated in the elections. This stunning number was due to the fact that there were virtually no barriers for participation at elections: new parties could participate after having presented a list of twentyfive signatures. The electoral threshold also was quite low: 0.75% of the votes was sufficient for one seat in parliament. In order to overcome the enormous splintering of the political landscape, in 1935 the parliament accepted a rise of the electoral threshold to 1% and the introduction of a deposit for participating. Because most of the parties that participated in the preceding years were in fact one-person's lists without any organisation (about 100 out of 160), the number of parties participating in the 1937 elections dramatically decreased. In this study the political dwarfs are left aside, only minor parties with a certain degree of organisation and of electoral support are taken into account.

In this study, these 'serious' minor parties are divided into four categories that are based on four archetypical conceptions of politics.

1. The oldest conception is a liberal one that prevailed during the nineteenth century. According to this conception politics is an affair of independent distinguished members of parliament who, without consultation with their constituency, aim to promote the national interest. Outside the parliament, the electoral committee is the organisational form of this notion of politics.

2. At the end of the 19th century socialist and Christian parties challenged this conception. They considered politics as an affair of party-organisations and of doctrinal programmes. Members of parliament were no longer considered as independent gentlemen but as representatives of the principles of their party. With the extension of suffrage these doctrinal parties gradually replaced the old liberal notion by their own concept. In order to survive in the mass-democracy, the liberals now reluctantly adapted this new conception of politics. With respect to minor parties two other conceptions of politics, that never became dominant, seem to be relevant.

3. Accordingly to this conception politics are in the first place a matter of the specific interests of various social groups in society. The 'interest party' can be considered the organisational form of this conception.

4. Finally there is a conception according to which politics as such are rejected because they necessarily lead to a division between state and society. Instead, this notion aims at a society that is completely subject to one doctrine. The revolutionary party is the vehicle of this conception.

The gradual decline of the first conception of politics underlies the foundation of a few small liberal parties that are discussed in the second chapter. For these parties
politics remained a matter of distinguished persons whose candidature should be promoted by a small electoral committee. At the 1918 elections, the Economische Bond, lead by the secretary of finance M.W.F. Treub, tried to give a new dimension to this old notion by stressing that only independent, distinguished businessmen were capable of promoting the national economy. Despite an extensive populist campaign, the party only gained 3 seats in parliament. In 1921 the party merged with the two main conservative-liberal parties into de Vrijheidsbond. At the 1922 elections two electoral committees were formed to promote the candidature of two 'distinguished persons': E.A. van Beresteyn who was forced to leave the left-liberal vdB as a result of his reluctance to accept the parliamentary discipline, and the 85 year old former minister Samuel van Houten who pleaded for a limited suffrage. However, the style of these electoral committees was too elitist and their organisations were too weak to attract much support (resp. 0,4 % and 0,6 %). Despite the lack of success, a group of notables (including Van Houten) took part in the 1925 elections with a new electoral committee, called 'Vaderlandsch Verbond'. Again, the result was humiliating (0,4%). Realizing that restoration of the 19th century political culture was not possible within a democratic framework, some notables now began to search for non-democratic solutions. However, to their liking the early fascist parties in the Netherlands were too rough and too tightly organized; most conservatives as yet refused to accept them as allies. The first fascist party that in a way managed to overcome the socio-cultural gap between early fascism and elitist conservatism was the Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging (NSB) in the thirties.

During the interwar period the four major doctrinal parties (the protestant CHU and ARP, the catholic RKSP and the socialist SDAP) were confronted with a different kind of problem. In this period the CHU, the ARP and the RKSP formed the government-coalition (from 1933–1937 with the liberals and from 1939–1940 with the socialists), whereas the SDAP was strongly represented in local government, especially in the big cities. Their political responsibility forced these doctrinal parties in a way to alter their conception of politics. After having mobilized their supporters with high hopes about a new future, the main doctrinal parties now had to explain to their supporters that political change could not be reached overnight. The contrast between high principles and a more harsh reality was the main factor for the emergence of small dissident parties that pretended to be the only real heirs of the original doctrine. They accused their 'mother-parties' of a lack of principles. The CHU and ARP were confronted with left-wing dissidents (a.o. the Christelijk-Democratische Unie (cdU)) who claimed to be the heirs of the original Christian-social theories and with two strict orthodox-protestant groups, the Hervormde (Gereformeerde) Staatspartij (HGS) and the Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij (SGP), which protested heavily against the coalition with the Roman-Catholics. Within the SDAP a small left-socialist group condemned the new reformist party-strategy as 'bourgeois'. In 1932 this group left the SDAP and created the Onafhankelijke Socialistische Partij (OSP), which for a short time was popular amongst the younger members of the SDAP. Because of its heterogeneous structure the RKSP was very prone to dissident activity.
However, the Catholic clergy, who officially condemned all dissident Catholic parties, backed the RKSP. Therefore, both the Roomsch-Katholieke Volkspartij (RKVP) in the twenties and the Katholiek-Democratische Partij (KDP) in the thirties were bound to fail. With the exception of the SGP, which is still represented in parliament, in fact all dissident doctrinal parties eventually disappeared because of poor electoral results.

In the 1918 elections a few interest-parties won seats in parliament. Their presence was very controversial. Both liberals and the doctrinal parties agreed that all parties should put the national interest above specific interests. Therefore, interest-parties were considered as factions. Because of this negative attitude, most interest-parties disappeared in the 1920's, except for an agrarian party (Plattelandersbond), and a few parties that claimed to represent the interests of the petit bourgeois. In order to overcome their isolation, these parties made attempts to formulate a specific principle. However, these attempts all failed, partly because of the rise of the NSB in the 1930's.

The rise of the NSB is described in chapter 4, which deals with the revolutionary parties in this period (i.e. anarchists, communists and fascists). The NSB reached its peak in the 1935 elections for the Provinciale Staten (7.9% of the votes). The NSB managed to attain this result -that for interwar Dutch standards was quite stunning- because of its programmatic vagueness, its spectacular political style, and its identification with the economic results of Nazi-Germany. After 1935 the constituency of the movement dramatically declined: in the 1937 elections the NSB collected only 4.2% of the votes. This decline can be ascribed to a successful exclusion of the party out of the legitimate political culture. As a result, the party lost its conservative, bourgeois members and radicalised in political style and program. In the late thirties the NSB had become a party very different from the party it had been in the early thirties. With its tight organisation, its party discipline, rigid doctrine, and fanatical support it resembled in many ways the two communist parties in the Netherlands, the Communistische Partij Nederland (CPN) and the Revolutionair-Socialistische Arbeiderspartij (RSAF). The totalitarian grip these parties had on their followers corresponds to the concept of the totalitarian party, as described by the French political scientist Maurice Duverger.

The NSB is probably the only new party that - although for a small period of time - formed a relative threat to the political stability of the country. However, the lack of success that all new parties did achieve in this period does not mean that the feelings of dissatisfaction, which these parties tried to exploit, were too rare to give them a considerable support. A proper understanding of their lack of success is only possible if other factors are taken into account.

The first factor that should be mentioned is the very nature of most new parties. They barely had any organisation; their leaders were often soapbox politicians or political dilettantes who were not able to formulate realistic political solutions or a coherent political program. In the end these small populist parties gave all new parties a bad name; every new party - also the serious ones - thus suffered from the image of ‘riff-raff-politics’.
The second factor is of course the opposition from the main parties. To them, all new parties were potential competitors, who had to be cut out before they could become dangerous. For that purpose the main parties had a few important instruments at their disposal. They could rely on most newspapers that were closely linked to one of the main parties. These newspapers of course did their bit in strengthening the bad image of new parties. Moreover, the main doctrinal parties were considered to be the representatives of a specific subculture with its own organisational network. This system of ‘verzuiling’ (literally pillarisation) made it possible to banish dissidents out of their own community almost completely.

The fear for social exclusion and being publicly put in the pillory restrained many discontent persons from founding or joining a new political party. Most capable distinguished candidates kept aloof from new parties, resulting in the new parties getting more and more vulgar and thus confirming again and again the negative image. Only a few minor parties survived in this negative political climate (notably the NSB and a few minor fascist parties, the CPN and RSAP, the SGP and the CDU) thanks to the support of a few small societal groups that had been neglected by the main parties.