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Birth of the water wolf

SELECTED TOPICS FROM THE TOPOGRAPHY

OF STUPIDITY

The war against the North Sea

‘The proximity of the sea makes one sharp and perceptive.’

– Hugo Grotius, *Parallelon rerumpublicarum* (liber tertius: de moribus ingenioque populorum Atheniensium, Romanorum, Batavorum)

In the tradition of Xerxes, king of the Persians, who in the fifth century B.C. flogs the water of the Hellespont with three hundred lashes, the emperor Caligula declares war on the North Sea in 41 A.D. He first goes on an expedition to Germanie to replenish his Batavian body-guard. The Roman ruler calls up his soldiers from all corners of his empire and goes to war. Because there are only few enemies left, he organizes mock battles between his troops on the way. The farcical war ends with the command to position the troops in battle array on the coast of the North Sea. Artillery and siege equipment are placed in position, after which the soldiers are ordered to attack the sea. Subsequently they are told to fill their helmets with shells: ‘spoils from the Ocean, owed to Capitol and Palatine’ (Suetonius). To commemorate the victory, the emperor orders a tall tower to be built, which is to point ships in the right direction in the night by means of fire signals. Triumphantly he returns to Rome.

Caligula’s war exemplifies the stupidity on which Dutch civilization rests.

Super prosthesis

The Netherlands is located in a delta of three large rivers, Rhine, Scheldt and Meuse, which is surrounded by the North Sea, Zuyder Zee and Wadden Sea. The water level rises due to climatic influences, the land falls as a result of geological factors. There you have the backdrop for the myth that Dutch civilization was

formed in the everlasting war against the water.

The current landscape was created by man in approximately a thousand years. Seas were dammed up, dikes were built, canals dug. Sixty percent of the land consists of polders, areas that are kept dry artificially. The sophisticated mechanism of sluices, locks and pumping-stations enables millions of people to live several metres below sea level. The Netherlands is a super prosthesis that prevents even the allegedly safe grounds above sea level from disappearing in the waves.

In 1995 the lowest point of the Netherlands, and therefore of Europe, was near the duck decoy on the Derde Tochtweg, in the municipality of Nieuwerkerk aan den IJssel, province of South Holland: 6.74 metres below NAP (Normal Amsterdam Water Level is the average high tide level of the North Sea). As soon as this truth hits the American tourists who are riding on a bus along a narrow IJsselmeer-dike, the tour guides have difficulty preventing a panic.

What usually isn't mentioned is the fact that we have called down this threat upon ourselves. Our war against the water is a permanent struggle with natural processes that were started by the Dutch themselves.

Undead land

Napoleon justifies the annexation of the Netherlands on July 9th, 1819 with the argument that Les Pays-Bas are merely a deposit of French rivers. Fact is that Dutch territory around the year 0 consists of a marshland delta silted up by the deposit of clay, gravel and sand.

Behind the embankments that have been thrown up by sea and wind, marshland lagoons, flats and salt marshes form. This nature, which is neither land nor water, fresh nor salty, dead nor alive, makes an ideal biotope for monstrous plants, salt-loving grasses and peat. Reed, moss and rootstocks do not rot in stagnant water, but form a slimy material that grows steadily to huge proportions. Over the centuries the decomposing remnants of plants form giant peat domes some 10 to 25 kilometres in diameter, spongelike cushions that rise several metres above sea level. Around the start of the Christian Era the area that covers the provinces of Holland and Zeeland to Groningen, Drenthe, Overijssel, North-Brabant and Limburg is covered with a layer of peat that is criss-crossed with small meandering streams. This is how the ideal landscape for the stupidity that has characterized Dutch culture so far is formed.

The Big Reclamation

Farmers settled in the marshes to reclaim the peat moors for agriculture. Between 800 and 1250 the number of inhabitants of what is now known as the Netherlands increases from a hundred thousand to eight hundred thousand. This population growth necessitates a systematic exploitation of the wasteland. Peat reclamation implies drainage, as peat consists of 80 percent water. Because the thick peat lies above sea level, the water automatically flows through parallel ditches dug by man into the low-lying rivers. But the systematic drainage results in a disastrous drop in the surface level due to subsidence and oxidation: the peat cushions collapse under their own weight and rot. In the meantime deposits push the riverbeds higher and higher. In less than five centuries the coastal land changes into an endangered archipelago thanks to the efforts of monasteries and private enterprise.

The turnabout

The critical point is reached around the year 1000 A.D., when relief inversion occurs: the peat moors sink below the level of the rivers that are used for drainage. Suddenly the farmland must be protected by dikes and sluices to prevent flooding by sea or river water. And so the largely man-made landscape is born.

Again and again their stupidity forces the inhabitants to come up with new strategies to keep their heads above water. Each new solution results in new problems: drainage leads to further subsidence leads to higher dikes leads to larger floods and so on and so forth. And there you have the vicious cycle of stupidity. Directly proportional to their heroic efforts to put the country on the map, the Dutch drain and pump themselves into the ground.

The Netherlands as the nether-world

'Now one of the hard banks our footing bears,/ And the
stream's smoke maketh a shadowy shield/ So that the fire both
banks and water spares.// As 'twixt Wissant and Bruges the
Flemings build,/ Dreading the tide that ever towards them
pours,/ Their rampart that compels the waves to yield'
– Dante, *Divina Commedia*

The Dutch dike, a household world in Europe as early as the thir-

teenth century, is given a moral significance in *Inferno* Canto 15, when Dante walks on a dike along the blazing Phlegeton in the concentric circles of the blasphemers. The unnatural polder is the only appropriate accommodation for sodomites, alcoholics, drug addicts and others who have violated God's 'arte', i.e. nature.

The polder model

The relief inversion causes a revolution in technology, government, and economy.

- Their stupidity forces the inhabitants to employ all of their technological ingenuity; to keep their feet dry they must develop sophisticated systems of dikes.
- Their stupidity forces the inhabitants to cooperate on the local and supra-local levels; in order to maintain all those hydraulic facilities, a rudimentary form of democracy develops, based on consultation and consensus, simply referred to as: polder model.
- Their stupidity results in a change in the condition of the soil, which forces the inhabitants to shift from agriculture to cattle breeding, which is not as labour-intensive. This triggers the move to the cities, the development of artisan industry, shipping industry and export.

Burning up the homeland

The subsidence of the surface is accelerated by the peat cutting, which is already mentioned by Plinius.

'clods of earth that they cut out with their hands, they let dry in the wind rather than the sun, and burn them to cook their food and warm their limbs that are numbed by the north wind.'

From the thirteenth century onwards the large-scale destruction is taken in hand all over the Netherlands. The peat serves, among other things, as fuel for breweries, brickyards and salt works. The Golden Age was possible in part because Holland can fill its own energy need. And so the Dutch burn up the homeland they wrested from the water.

From the start of the sixteenth century people shift increasingly to wet cutting: peat is dredged from the water with scoops and dried on drying fields;

‘in the water we Dutchmen search for fire, we burn our precious earth, and warm ourselves by the stakes of the fatherland.’ – Hugo Grotius, *Parallelon*

The wash of the water makes the shores of the peat lakes crumble away, and dispersed bodies of water flow together into giant lakes that pose a threat to the surrounding area. In short, the Dutch do not only create their own land, they also create their own seas. Several villages fall prey to the water wolf. And so the cliché is born of a submerged land with steeples rising above the water.

Private reclamation companies are established: a ring canal is dug out around a sheet of water and a dike is built. Mills are used to pump the water from the lake into the ring canal. The reclaimed land is provided with drainage ditches, parcelled out geometrically, and farms are built on it. The reclamation is accelerated by the invention of the wind-powered pumping station.

Under the leadership of engineer Jan Adriaenszoon (1575–approx. 1650), nicknamed ‘Leeghwater’ or Jan Wind, the destruction is taken up in a strictly rational manner. Stupidity inspires the Dutch to ever-grander feats of ingenuity. In the multi-stage drainage system a number of mills is placed in line, each one pumping the water higher and higher until it can be discharged into the ‘boezem’ that flows metres above the land. Superfluous to say that the drainage leads to further subsidence of the land, which increases the danger of flooding, and necessitates higher dikes. The writer Multatuli prophesied that the rivers will one day walk on piles.

Descendants of Noah

Put simply: stupidity is the driving force of our civilization. Because this insight is a bit too much for the Dutch, they have developed the myth that the land was formed in the struggle against the water. All the adversity has brought forth a nation chastened by their suffering. This image is sanctioned by Christian morality, which views the war against the water as a divine trial. The Calvinistic ethic even interprets the victory over fate as a sign that they are a chosen people.

The separation of land and water is also decided by God. Otherwise it would have been a mark of pride: ‘to make land is only for God’ wrote sixteenth-century hydraulic engineer Andries Vierlingh. As descendants of Noah the Dutch are predestined to inherit. St. Elisabeth’s flood of 1412 is regarded as a Deluge in which the

world will come to an end, but the Dutch will reclaim the land, purged of all sin, from the waves. In the Eighty Years' War also, sea, wind, and rivers are on the side of the righteous: cutting dikes to stop the Spanish troops is compared with the drowning of the pharaoh's armies in the Red Sea.

Vomit of the sea

The myth of 'land wrested from the sea' also serves political ends. Based on the fact that they reclaimed the land with their own hands, the inhabitants feel they are entitled to sovereignty. An absurdity in the eyes of foreign critics, for whom nationality is based on the possession and conquest of land.

Watery land or land from water is as preposterous as the political structure that is erected on this quicksand. During the Anglo-Dutch naval wars (1652-57) the amphibian nature of the Seven United Provinces is mocked by English propagandists: 'Holland, that scarce deserves the name of land/ As but the off-scouring of the British sand, .../ This indigested vomit of the sea/ Fell to the Dutch by just propriety.' (Andrew Marvell, *The Character of Holland*)

The Dutch know neither blood nor soil, but only the water that flows around and inside them: the land wrested from the sea is populated by stoics. The Netherlands is a damp country. Indeed: The Dutchman is a 'usurper who robbed the fish of their habitat.' And so the argument that is intended to justify their national sovereignty is turned against the inhabitants.

Morosophy

'Dieu créa le monde, mais les Hollandais créèrent la Hollande'

— René Descartes (apocryphal)

The Netherlands was created by the Dutch. In short: the Dutch were here before the Netherlands. Not in the sense that the land was dredged up and sculpted according to a predetermined plan developed by a ready-made nation. The disaster the farmers and fishermen brought down on their own heads forced them into civilization. The motley crew has turned into a nation in the common battle against the water wolf. This monster that appears to be threatening them from the outside, actually makes tangible the collective stupidity the nation is all about.

Dikes, dams, sluices, mills, pumping stations, polders, ditches and canals that frequently figure in moralistic and didactic emblem books from the Renaissance as emblems of courage, diligence and cleverness, turn out to be as many symbols of the self-destructive stupidity which compelled the Dutch people to develop these qualities. The most famous writer of emblem books, Grand Pensionary Jacob Cats (1577-1660), made a fortune speculating with submerged land; he ordered land in the province of Zeeland Flanders that was deliberately flooded during the war against Spain, to be diked in and drained, in order to sell it on at a profit. The proverbial bluntness of the Dutch is presented as a virtue in the emblem books for a reason. The meaning of the qualities stupid, rude, coarse and obstinate changes into: sincere, unspoiled, tenacious and possessing common sense.

Ars oblivionalis

Eighteenth-century patriots view the Dutch landscape as one big memorial, as tangible proof of the ingenuity and decisiveness of its inhabitants: 'Our nation has created itself in the fullest sense of the word. [...] Each blade of grass which grows on its soil, each smooth milk cow that shines in its meadow, carries the notion of its greatness.' (Rhijnvis Feith)

The *loci memoriae*, the locations that are presented to the tourist, but also to the inhabitants as monuments to the heroic battle against the water, are simply part of an ingenious art of forgetting, *ars oblivionalis*.

Besides the pyramid of Cheops and the summer palace in Peking, the steam-driven pumping station of Lemmer, Schokland, the mill network of Kinderdijk, the Beemster polder with its geometrical parcelling pattern, and the Dutch defence line have been added to UNESCO's World Heritage List; monuments that immortalize our brilliant stupidity.