

IDEOLOGICAL INTERPELLATION IN PROPAGANDA OF THE CENTRUMPARTIJ*

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Introduction

In the Netherlands, the fact that the *Centrumpartij*, a party openly antagonistic to “foreigners”, took part in the national and local elections and was voted into a number of seats[1] has led to a heated nation-wide debate about how to account for this phenomenon. The contribution to this debate on the part of the field of sociology has been negligible. A certain amount of empirical research has been conducted into features of the *Centrumpartij* electorate (Van Donselaar and Van Praag, 1983), but no discussion has taken place within the field about possible explanations for the empirical patterns that were found to exist.

Van Donselaar and Van Praag hold differing opinions, which led to the formulation of two hypotheses at the end of their joint research report. Van Praag mainly explains the electoral support for the *Centrumpartij* on the basis of a “general protest tendency” whereas Van Donselaar stresses the “hatred of foreigners”. Both of the authors assume that both this “tendency” and the “hatred” were already in existence within the Dutch population before the *Centrumpartij* began to exploit them. But the first success of the *Centrumpartij*, limited as it was, is thought to have acted as a catalyst, making it possible for both this tendency and the hatred to increase.

It is striking in both of the hypotheses that the *Centrumpartij* is mainly viewed as a party representing and articulating an already existing inclination rather than as a movement producing inclinations of this kind. In this sense, both of the hypotheses are in keeping with the two most important views expressed in the media about how the *Centrumpartij* should be combated: the first one propagating a legislative prohibition of the *Centrumpartij* and the second one recommending “exposing” the party for what it is. In discussions on the possible effectiveness of banning the party, it is often noted that this would serve to keep the “hatred of foreigners” assumed to exist among a segment of the population from getting out of hand. The strategy directed toward “exposing” the *Centrumpartij* for what it is usually works on the assumption that there are “real” problems that can lead to protest behaviour on the part of the population. The

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Centrumpartij is then thought to be exploiting this more or less justifiable protest tendency (pertaining to unemployment, the housing shortage, the widespread fall in income) by presenting irrational and immoral “solutions”.

In reasoning of this kind, be it that the two lines of reasoning can be quite different, *specific* explanations are always sought for the growth of the Centrumpartij following: *specific* inclinations among the population that are not exploited by any party other than the Centrumpartij (“protest tendency”, “hatred of foreigners”) and/or *specific* (“irrational”, “immoral”) ways that the Centrumpartij puts this exploitation into practice.

The central proposition of this article is that there is no specificity of this kind, and that the electoral success of the Centrumpartij can be relatively simply explained by the fact that, with varying degrees of success, it makes use of the same political instruments as every other party (similarly with varying degrees of success). I am of the opinion that it is a misconception to think that the immoral and racist nature of the political views and policies of the Centrumpartij also implies a fundamentally different way of playing the political game.

Politics as Discursive Productivity

In this article, I should like to make it plausible that the effectiveness of the Centrumpartij can be comprehended as a *discursive productivity* that needs no further explanation outside itself. By “discursive productivity” I mean a process in which statements produce effects (“meaning”) by interacting with each other.

This description of “discursive productivity” is rather abstract. It is perhaps easier to understand what I mean if, by way of an experiment, we examine the “meaning” of one and the same statement in different contexts. For example, take the following statement, which could be a quotation from various of the texts to be referred to later in the article.

“Due to economic conditions (poverty and unemployment in his own country, a demand for unskilled labour in the Netherlands), the foreign labourer has been forced to come to our country. It would have been better for him and for us, however, if the economy of the Third World could have been stimulated in such a way that this migration would not have been necessary.”

This statement could be a quotation from one of the groups promoting the interests of foreign labourers at the beginning of the seventies. In *that* context, the statement constitutes an effort to explain why foreigners are in the Netherlands. The immigrant is depicted as someone who is just as much a victim of an economic situation beyond his control as the average Dutchman. The statement can easily be linked to an anticapitalist political programme.

However, the statement could just as well have been quoted from a publication of the Centrumpartij, where it functions as an argument for remigration programmes. This illustrates the well-known rule that no statement should be

quoted out of its context. It also illustrates at least one aspect of “discursive productivity”: the sentences quoted here are attributed with a *specific* meaning by the relation they come to bear with other sentences (the “context”).

There is more to “discursive productivity” than this. The proposition defended in this article holds that a text like the one quoted above not only gets its “meaning” from the context it is in (for example a Centruumpartij publication), but also from the fact that the same sentences have also appeared at some other time in some other context (for example in a publication of a committee promoting the interests of foreign labourers). In other words, it is not only the message that the Centruumpartij expresses that is important in determining the text’s meaning. It is at least equally important that this is done with sentences that could have been quoted from texts promoting the interests of foreign labourers.

The effects statements have on each other (which I refer to as discursive productivity) thus do not solely consist of the interaction between the text and the context, but also of the influence of *various contexts* on each other. This is a historically advancing process producing societal (political) facts that have to be taken into account when new statements are formulated. One can comprehend this “factuality” of discursive products by imagining the problems an author is confronted with today (in 1987) if he wants to write a text about the causes of the migration in the sixties and seventies in such a way that his text can not be (mis)used by the Centruumpartij.

On the grounds of the notion illustrated here, *politics* can be described as a dynamic field of interactional “texts”: bodies of statements, some of which are in written form (as in party platforms, folders, proposals and so forth). These *texts* are supplemented by *acts* (demonstrations, petitions, mob violence). Political developments such as the rise of a neo-racist following can now be described as alterations in the relations between these bodies of statements.

It has been noted above that political developments, understood as “discursive productivity”, do not need any explanation outside themselves. This means that in this approach, “interests”, “demands” and “fears” are not viewed as facts that precede the articulation of statements. Instead, they are viewed as *products* of these statements.

Of course the interests, demands and fears produced in texts are not endorsed by individuals without further ado. For this purpose, a certain extra dimension is required of a statement or a body of statements. What is needed is a quality that acts in such a way that the individual is *interpellated* or *hailed*[2] as the “bearer” of the statement. The question as to how and why a certain individual acknowledges a certain statement as representing his or her “own” standpoint is an interesting (and as yet unsolved) problem which, however, will not be discussed in this article. This is no obstacle to the study of the “discursive productivity” of the Centruumpartij, since the problem of “interpellation” is not confined to just this one party. Anyone who wants to solve this problem might just as well, or even preferably, study how and why much larger percentages of the electorate are “interpellated” by the social democratic and conservative parties. I have

used as my point of departure the much less problematical fact that the standpoints of the “established” political parties, though frequently just as irrational and sometimes equally immoral, have been widely accepted by the population. I should like to confine myself here to making it plausible that the interpellation of individuals by the propaganda of the Centruumpartij can be viewed as the adaption of interpellations that have already proved to be effective as interpellations by the labour movement, the socialist and communist parties, democratization-oriented action groups, social workers in the community and, in particular, the environmentalist movement.

Centre (Centrum) of Anti-Fascism and Anti-Racism

Numerous authors have already noted that the Centruumpartij propaganda makes use of several of the innovative ideas of the sixties and seventies. This holds particularly true of such themes as “democracy”, “peace policy” and “the environment”. The Centruumpartij claims to be in favour of a “well-balanced combination of representative democracy and direct democracy” (with a referendum about the installation of nuclear weapons), “modernization” of the country’s defence, in terms of making it more versatile and small-scale and, with respect to the environment, “strict government control, small-scale industry and recycling”.

It is generally noted that the Centruumpartij’s standpoint about foreigners can not be viewed as a utilization of any innovative ideas produced in the political past. To me, it does not seem warranted to make this exception. In its standpoint about foreigners, I feel the Centruumpartij also utilizes ideas and concepts once viewed as being progressive and innovative. One example is the concept of *cultural identity*, which played a role for a long time in a progressive line of reasoning. In an effort to increase the tolerance of the Dutch population, the fact was emphasized that foreigners were “different”. The Centruumpartij has now taken this apparent difference between Dutch and foreign culture as basis for the proposition that the differing cultures should be kept separate.

The Centruumpartij emphasis on the differentness of foreigners is also referred to as “new racism”, a term taken from Barker’s book *The New Racism* (1981). The “old” racism, based on the notion that other races are inferior, has put on a new face: blacks, Muslims and other foreigners are not inferior, they are different[3]. The idea frequently expressed in the seventies that – driven by poverty and misled by the capitalists – foreigners had come to the Netherlands totally against their own will has also been welcomed with open arms by the Centruumpartij: every effort should be made to help these poor proletarians return to their homeland.

By working from “information” known as progressive, the Centruumpartij has even been able to present itself as a party that is essentially anti-fascist and anti-racist. The slogan of the Centruumpartij, and the one it is named after (as Centruumpartij means “party in the centre”) is “We are not right-wing, not left-wing, we stand up honestly for *all* the Dutch”. In a Centruumpartij folder, this

slogan was elaborated upon as follows:

“We are not right-wing, not left-wing, we stand up honestly for *all* the Dutch. The Centrumpartij was founded on March 11, 1980. The founding represented a clear act. It emphasized the fact that, solely in a way that is totally democratic and respectable, the party aims to approach a wide range of issues that other parties have always hushed up. We, the democrats of the centre, do *not* go along with the fashion of throwing stones or using our fists or curse words to get our way. Instead, we rely upon the strength of our arguments.

The name *Centrumpartij* expresses our aversion to the pigeon-hole mentality of contemporary Dutch politics. Nowadays everyone is pigeon-holed as being ‘left-wing’ or ‘right-wing’, though the distinction is often quite meaningless. This is why we make such a point of being *neither left-wing nor right-wing*. We aren’t just saying this for the sound of it. In everything we write and do, we back it up. This is why we are often so harshly and unfairly criticized by the right-wing as well as the left-wing press. Not that it bothers us. Because no matter what anyone says about us, *The truth will come out in the end*”.

In this text, a clear distinction is drawn between the “centre” (we) and the left wing/right wing (they). To recapitulate:

CENTRE	LEFT WING/RIGHT WING
– honest and clear	– saying things just for the sound of it
– for <i>all</i> the Dutch	– pigeon-hole mentality
– democratic and respectable manner	– throwing stones or using fists or curse words
– approach a wide range of issues	– hush up issues
– the strength of our arguments	– harsh and unfair criticism

To the Centrumpartij, the nice thing about “politics” is that it constantly confirms the “rightness” of the notions listed above. The fact that the right wing and the left wing are joined in their condemnation of the Centrumpartij’s racism, the competition and differences of opinion between the two and the ineffectiveness of their joint efforts all simply go to confirm these notions.

If we examine the contents of the two lists, it is striking that whereas the centre is honest, clear, democratic and respectable, both the left and the right wing use stones, fists and curse words. Anyone asked which of the columns the word “fascism” belongs in would be sure to say the one on the right. And this is indeed not only what the Centrumpartij suggests, but what it actually does. Even though the Centrumpartij can be said to organize and/or produce hatred of foreigners, and this hatred can even be said to be a leading principle in the interpellation by the Centrumpartij, it is still *essential* to the political/ideological interpellation of the Centrumpartij that this is done under the guise of anti-fascism and anti-racism.

Elsewhere in the same folder, the Centrumpartij openly enters into the debate about what fascism and racism might be and where these phenomena are most likely to be found. In the process, use is made of the notion developed in the Cold War that (like communism), fascism is a form of totalitarianism. It is characterized by the existence of one strong political leader, a desire for world rule and the use of violence. According to the folder, these features are more characteristic of the present-day Dutch state and the parties behind it than of the Centrumpartij. Racism is also attributed to the opponents of the Centrumpartij. In the opinion of the Centrumpartij, racism is discrimination. And if there is anyone or anything that discriminates, it is surely the Dutch state, which discriminates against its own citizens in favour of foreigners. A world-view is thus actively constructed in which the Centrumpartij itself occupies an anti-racist position. This construction mobilizes anti-fascist and anti-racist “information” that is already in existence.

It is easy enough to simply refer to the Centrumpartij’s use of this “information” as misuse, but the important point here is that to the people interpellated by this propaganda, no misuse has taken place. This is why exposing the party for what it is tends to be so ineffective. The exposure strategy only presents, and not very successfully, a different world-view to rival the one created by the Centrumpartij.

“The Netherlands is not an Immigration Country”

As previously noted, it is my contention that the Centrumpartij’s racism is not as new an element in Dutch politics as it might seem to be. I shall now try to make it plausible that this racism can be viewed as *one possible interpretation* (in addition to other ones) of the world-view constructed by the *environmentalist movement* (in the broadest sense of the term) in the seventies. The central theme of this world-view is *over-population*. The statements made by the environmentalist movement, and other movements as well, about over-population were so successful that they soon penetrated into the educational system. A secondary school textbook published in the early seventies about environmental hygiene can serve as an example[4].

The book’s preface states that “One of the world’s greatest problems is the present-day pollution of the soil, the water and the air. Together with an *alarming population increase*[5], it constitutes a threat to the survival of mankind.” The book soon goes on to add that “In itself, over-population is already a form of environmental pollution”. A separate chapter is devoted to this form of environmental pollution. There the reader is informed that “The world population ... initially grew quite slowly, but is now increasing *at breakneck speed*. This is why we speak of a population *explosion*.” These fearsome words are illustrated by a photograph of a modern residential neighbourhood. The picture has been taken with a telelens so that it evokes associations with a huge chicken coop; there is no escaping the shortage of space.

The textbook notes that “The growth rate is much higher in poor countries

than in rich ones. (...) In the near future, hunger, poverty and unemployment in the poor countries will create an *army of millions of revolutionaries*." The possible effects of this ominous development are illustrated by the results of an experiment with animals. "For example, a number of rats were confined to a space of 3 by 4 metres. (...) Various of the rats became *apathetic*, some of them exhibited *sexual aberrations* and others resorted to *cannibalism* even though there was enough food. (...) If the experiment had continued, the entire rat population would have *perished*."

In an article, the Centruumpartij notes that "It is no wonder that nowadays there is an alarming rise in the number of divorces and broken families. And in the number of provincial brothels, massage parlours and other commercial establishments where surrogate love can be purchased. *There is no way out!*" And we are indeed trapped *like rats*, powerless to combat psychological disturbances, crime, sexual aberrations and cannibalism. At any rate, that is the message conveyed by *this textbook*. The textbook just fails to mention one thing: the rapidly multiplying army of millions of famished revolutionaries is in the process of emigrating to the cities of Western Europe! Once they get there (and that means *here*), they will cause psychological disturbances, sexual aberrations and cannibalism. Thus the Centruumpartij should really be referred to as a "Green" party. It presents itself as the party that is "really" going to save the country from the downfall that *others* have described as being inevitable.

My proposition must be clear by now. The effectiveness of the Centruumpartij's racist propaganda can be partially explained by the continuity existing between this form of "environmental consciousness" and the Centruumpartij's politics. What is more, if there is any *breeding ground* at all for the Centruumpartij's racism, then it should be sought in the fear and the world-view formulated earlier by the environmentalist movement.

Proposals for Further Research

What has been noted above can be summarized as follows: *In its propaganda, the Centruumpartij makes use of exactly the same instruments and strategies utilized by other political movements and parties*. The absolute moral reprehensibility of the Centruumpartij's politics (the party platform and the way it is presented) does not necessarily imply that it uses different ("fascist") political ideological instruments than the other (non-fascist) political parties and movements. The powerlessness and ineffectiveness of many of the efforts to combat the Centruumpartij are due, I feel, to the misconception that the (morally reprehensible) racism of the Centruumpartij comes from an essentially different source than "ethical" political views. The difference that undoubtedly exists between the Centruumpartij and other political parties should, consequently, be viewed as a difference which, in principle, is of the same type as the differences between any other political parties.

Returning to this article's point of departure, my criticism of the hypotheses formulated by Van Donselaar and Van Praag, what has been noted above leads

to the following alternative hypothesis: *Voting for the Centrumpartij is not explained by the existence of a “general protest tendency”, nor by an already existing “hatred of foreigners”, but simply by the existence of “information” taken by the propaganda of the Centrumpartij as “raw material” for its political ideological (transformational) writings.*

This hypothesis also makes it easy to understand why the Centrumpartij attracts relatively large amounts of voters in certain areas where the progressive parties have traditionally had a strong following. The fact that the Centrumpartij propaganda makes use of precisely the kind of “information” that is disseminated by these parties might provide at least a partial explanation.

I have very deliberately formulated my last proposition as a “hypothesis”. In this article, I have made an effort to illustrate its plausibility. However, no proof has been furnished. One might wonder how the hypothesis I formulated might be tested. One problem here is the historical nature of this hypothesis, which means that only longitudinal research can provide a decisive answer. The political preferences (and particularly the changes in the political preferences) of a large group of subjects would have to be studied over a lengthy period of time. In a study of this kind, political preferences would not be operationalized as much in terms of voting behaviour (in actual or virtual elections) as in terms of links between different standpoints. This would make it possible to discover the extent to which individual changes in party preference go hand in hand with changes in separate standpoints or in the links between standpoints that otherwise remain the same. The (specified) hypothesis in this type of longitudinal study would be that changes in party preference do not represent changes in separate *standpoints* but rather changes in the relations between them. The confirmation of a hypothesis like this could support my argument that the ideological writings of the Centrumpartij are a restructuration and transformation of already existing interpellations.

My hypothesis could also be studied by way of an experiment presenting various texts to ideologically homogeneous groups of subjects. The texts could consist of Centrumpartij material, but without the subjects being aware of it. They could then be requested to give their opinions about the texts, for example in a short essay. The specified hypothesis in this type of experiment would be that a large number of the passages in Centrumpartij material would not be recognized as such by the subjects, and could even be easily included in texts (essays) of a completely different political tenor. Confirmation of this hypothesis would support my argument that the Centrumpartij takes advantage of this possibility in its propaganda, be it in the opposite direction.

Lastly, subjects with various political convictions (including supporters of the Centrumpartij) could be asked to write a kind of “political autobiography”. This type of research could show in which respects political “conversions” or changes in party preference go hand in hand with breaches in the subjects’ political orientation. Special attention would then have to be devoted to the aspect of the autobiographic material pertaining to the *continuity* existing – according to the Centrumpartij supporters – in their political attitudes before

and after their “conversion” to the Centruumpartij.

NOTES

- 1 In 1982-1986, the Centruumpartij had one seat in the Dutch Parliament. In 1986, it was voted into seats on City Councils in a number of Dutch cities.
- 2 “I shall then suggest that ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: ‘Hey, you there!’ ” (Althusser, 1971, p. 174).
- 3 In an extensive text analysis of a newspaper article, Campschreur and Top (1984) show how a line of reasoning about the difference between Dutch and foreign culture can be utilized in the framework of a (neo-)racist argument.
- 4 Here a schoolbook has been taken as the starting point for the analysis because, even more than the writings of the environmentalist movement itself, a book like this can be viewed as a reflection of the diffuse dissemination of “environmental consciousness” among the population. I would like to stress the fact that this schoolbook (just one of the many ones like it) does not preach racism as such. It should be viewed as a well-intentioned effort to raise schoolchildren to be concerned and responsible inhabitants of the world. The book has this intention in common with hundreds of other ones written in the seventies, all of them more or less inspired by the environmentalist movement. The italics in the quotes from this book are mine.
- 5 This does not mean that these parties have or have had “proto-fascist” propaganda themselves. It solely means that ideas propagated in the past by these parties serve as raw material for the Centruumpartij.

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