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## Demons

### The Utopian Dream of Safety

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*Society is faced with huge problems: needless violence, criminal refugees, and sex criminals who rape children. These appear to be separate problems calling for separate solutions. But one has to question whether they are really unconnected problems, indeed, whether these are problems at all. The actual problem is broader, more general, and is rooted deeply in the whole of society. Pointing out scapegoats as an excuse for a failing society is a well-known and apparently still successful way to exercise the law of the jungle.*

We humans are being rough on ourselves. Despite great prosperity at present, there is considerable economic uncertainty, we sense a big threat of violence, and things happen around us that are too gruesome for words. This, by the way, isn't new to anybody. The Second World War was a dramatic catastrophe, the result of the global economic crisis in the preceding years. The Cold War, which lasted from the fifties to the eighties, was a period of insecurity and fear. In addition to that, the sixties and seventies were marked by a commotion about young people rallying against the establishment. The eighties saw opposition inspired by the threat of nuclear violence. A threatening situation persisted in the nineties, not despite but because of the downfall of the Iron Curtain and the ensuing economic chaos.

Now, in the year 2000, times have changed. Technological progress and other factors have made life better than ever. Many live in prosperity, the battle against injustice and crime is being fought better and more fervently all the time, and there are no more major wars. We live in a time of relative security. Do people therefore feel safer now than they used to? No, not at all. There is still fear and a feeling of insecurity. There is the idea of a degenerating society. The prevailing morality has shifted: society is becoming more conservative. Old norms that dictated life in the fifties have been restored. The highest ideal is once again a family with two kids. A well-paid job, a house of one's own, and the ability to pay one's way are highly esteemed. The creed: personal happiness lies within everyone's reach. In itself, this is a perfect ideal. Many manage to attain it to some degree. But the fare is high. Considerable pressure at work, the fear of losing one's job, and stress.

In order to keep up socially, people have to perform to the maximum degree. Outside this excessively busy personal life, countless events and developments occur in society. Sometimes things happen that cause much unrest. These things are very remote to most people's lives, but yet they are experienced as undesired and even threatening. Now it's happening to someone else, tomorrow it may well be me. This is not a reassuring notion.

Society is in a perpetual state of flux. Research is carried out in various fields to analyze social changes. Dutch research, for instance, shows a slight but steady decrease in crime, and especially violent crime, in recent years. The number of offences is declining, but crimes are becoming graver in nature and are committed by a smaller group of people. At the same time, there is a sharp rise in feelings of insecurity among the Dutch population. It has to do with the notion, the idea: not with the actual situation, in which the chance to end up in a dangerous situation has actually become a lot smaller.

Feelings among the population do not match reality. Several reasons can be indicated for this. One of these is conceptualization. As years go by, one's conceptions change. The fear to be suddenly confronted with violence is a good example. In the past few years, some young people were killed in The Netherlands as a result of knifings, shootings, or other forms of violence, without there being a clear and direct reason. From these incidents the remarkable term 'pointless violence' has evolved. In fact, violence never occurs without a reason, and the term suggests that there would also be such a thing as sensible violence.

### **Fear of the unknown**

There is not only fear of this 'pointless violence', but also of the unknown, which is anything not belonging to the familiar, accepted way of life that's reckoned safe. Foreigners are unknown, especially people from different cultures. With time, those people who were known in the sixties as 'immigrant workers' have become a common sight in Dutch society as well as elsewhere in Europe. While integrated, in many cases these people are anything but accepted. In some big cities there are even black (allochthonous) schools and white schools (with white, Dutch children). The arrival of refugees in Western Europe is considered by many to be a downright threat. It is an invasion of foreign fortune hunters ('economic refugees') and criminals who are endangering typical Dutch culture - or so many people believe.

Another seeming danger undermining Western society is posed by sex criminals, a term applied to men who lure away little children, sexually abuse them, rape them and then kill them. An unstable person committing a horrible crime: this, too, happened a few times in The Netherlands in recent years. Commotion about these cases is understandable. But by now, any man entertaining erotic or even just friendly relations with children or young people, or trying to establish such relations, is viewed with the same disgust. It's all unknown,

unwanted, and such people will be birds of a feather, it is thought quite generally.

## Fears

Primitive fears, and an aversion to things happening outside familiar life, are not only found among the poorly educated, the 'simpletons'. They exist in all ranks of society and among all ages. Similar thinking inspired by fear existed in previous decades, always centered around something else in accordance with current affairs of the time. Fear of the neutron bomb and cruise missiles caused two gigantic demonstrations in The Netherlands in the eighties. Fear of the end of time, when Christ is thought to return, may be reserved for sectarian followers but it also got less fanatical people to try their luck at meditation or other more moderate forms of mystical living. The approach of the year 2000 certainly played a part in this trend.

Fear is a bad counselor, or so the saying goes. It's also not a good feeling to base one's actions on. Yet, many are led by fear. The media play a very questionable role in this. There has long been a distinction between the quality press (for the intellectual upper class) and gutter journalism (for the 'ordinary', simple part of society). The gutter press is particularly good at stirring up the population, and magnifies feelings of anxiety and fear in a highly cunning way. The quality press used to cry out against the cheap and crude behavior of those 'less' esteemed colleagues.

## Media

The main goal of the media, daily papers, radio and television is to bring the news. This can be world news, reports on social and political developments, but also regional news. People representing those media have a goal besides bringing the news: they need to attract the largest possible audience and make money. Entertainment and amusement are claiming a more and more important share of the news brought to us, as this appears to appeal to a large audience. This is shown by the circulations of magazines and by television and radio ratings. Until the eighties, there used to be a fairly strict separation between political news, social developments, sports, entertainment et cetera. The quality press also made a distinction between reporting and commentary. Ever since the arrival of commercial television channels, news coverage has changed. These stations have an even bigger interest in making money, where state-funded channels still aim at informing viewers, and 'ideological' channels - as exist in The Netherlands - want to spread certain views.

News, including world news, has increasingly become entertainment. 'Stars' such as performers, actors and sports heroes have always been people like you and me. They are still shown in all their plainness. Since the existence of commercial media, Joe Average can also be a star, even

if his stardom lasts only throughout one television show.

A theme like this, the average citizen as a superstar, became so popular that it was flogged to death, and its popularity has still not waned. Examples are unlikely rescue operations; fighting, yelling, weeping people in emotional talkshows; elated people playing bizarre games on camera in lottery shows; and 'offenders' (i.e., suspects) in crime shows. The media, including news coverage, are getting closer and closer to the individual man and woman. It seems that quality with respect to content of the programs that go on the air no longer matters: their grossness flies in your face.

Remarkably, the banal gutter media, the simple people's media and the so-called critical, balanced quality media are growing closer to one another. War, violence and natural disasters need to have a certain amusement level; otherwise they're not news. The quality press, too, now have an interest in subscriptions and ratings, if only to survive commercially. News is no longer news. Entertainment value means news value. The media also portray a lot of suffering, suffering coming straight to us. It's frightening because this suffering appears to be spreading and getting worse. It seems innocent people are beaten up or murdered without there being any motive. Refugees enter the country and nobody knows if they will ever leave. They don't speak our language and their cultural standards are wholly alien to us. It seems children are threatened everywhere by men out to harm them. Horrible, and there are so many of them, those weird guys with their dubious motives.

### Utopian dream of safety

The man in the street is becoming a more active participant in the news. He is granted a more prominent role on television. Thanks to the Internet and portable phones he is also becoming more mobile and he can be reached faster. People are taking more action themselves. Provided the goal is popular enough, an action group or lobby has much more scope than it used to have some years ago. People are standing up for their rights. Dissatisfaction or anxiety about social developments is voiced more easily. It is thought that politicians are doing nothing, or too little. In relation to this, some social scientists speak of a 'utopian dream of safety': the general public has started to assume that all danger in society can be eliminated, while politicians try to make it look like they are able to do this.

But sometimes, there is such an outrage about certain events that civilians themselves take action. Politicians respond and call it improper interference. The tumult following such interference - for instance, a turbulent meeting convened to 'discuss' the arrival of a group of refugees, or the storming of the house of a supposed sex offender - makes for more news to be covered by the media. The public react to this news and get politicians to promise action. In this way, one event fuels the other, and vice versa.

Politicians are bound to the legal rules of the game, but they are also confronted with the people who elect them. Political decisions are often taken in order to humor an electorate. In other words: a banal submission to the coarsest sentiments. In the middle of the field of tension between politicians and civilians are the media, who don't quite take the position of impartial messengers but instead keep a close and lewd eye on what's happening. Thus arise volatile political measures: legislation based on a few events. It's the result of an opportunistic, short-sighted mentality. The fears among the public, created or stirred up by the media, cause more harm than that which is feared. Someone who is the subject of an incident becomes a model for an entire category. A young man who commits a murder 'just like that' becomes proof that similar youths are liable to kill someone. A few refugees who commit illicit acts, who present a story about political oppression to cover up criminal activities in The Netherlands, cause people to think that all refugees are like that. And all men, even those who have never been convicted, who are 'interested' in children have but one goal: to satisfy their own desires by having sex with them. What it amounts to is a black-and-white line of reasoning. The citizen who chants along with this twisted reasoning is good. All those who fit certain stereotypes based on incidents are evil. Anyone who speaks in their favor is suspicious, because there must of course be a reason for such a deviant point of view. In this way, demonization arises: I'm good, you're bad!

## Repression

Politicians in The Netherlands (certainly not the only Western country where these topics have been discussed extensively the past year) have reacted by taking severely repressive measures. In order to increase a feeling of physical safety, video monitoring is being introduced in various places, powers to search people are extended and people with certain characteristics can be shut out more easily. Foreigners, who are after all not from here, are forced by a series of measures (decrees) to conform to the Dutch way - if they don't, they can be smoothly removed from the country. Refugees have less freedom of movement all the time. 'Sex criminals', 'child rapists' and 'pedophiles' - it's all become synonymous - are to be dealt with, monitored, and treated with every allowable means, to the extent that they will never do 'it' again. If they object: lifelong incarceration.

Do the measures further the goals which have been set? Naturally, they don't. What they're about is the new, modern way of life: everything revolves around money and a fast career, preferably with some lucrative options. 'Pointless' violence, foreigners and sex criminals are all considered to be separate, huge problems. They have only been defined as such because they divert from the prevailing norms, and therefore threaten the status quo. There is no solution in repression, subversion or elimination.

## Dissidents

The solution to the 'problems' mentioned here is relatively simple: actual violence must be combated in accordance with existent laws, and groundless fears will have to be refuted systematically with verifiable facts. It's no use warding off foreigners; integration is the way to understanding and reconciliation. As for moral offences: rape, assault and coercion in relations should and can be countered effectively. This is not the same as lumping together all those who have, or want to have, some peculiar 'bond' with children. So the solution lies in the awakening of independent thinking. It seems people have to learn to be more critical towards their own opinions, but also towards the information that reaches them, in order to become more independent from it.

Alas, this solution is probably a mere utopian dream: contemporary society isn't hot on critical, independent and self-aware individuals. They are quickly regarded as dissidents and are under suspicion. Without dissidents, however, the spirit of these times will not dissolve in the long run, either.

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