Soured Tolerance
The Dutch are Losing Their Way

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The trend towards 'interpassive citizenship' that legal philosopher Gijs van Oenen wrote about in *Open* 6, is leading to a radical change in the way we behave in the public domain. [1] Because of this, tolerance is in danger of sliding into an ever wider two-way split between assertion and presence, in other words between citizens who emphatically demand their rights and citizens who avoid making a choice. An important task in the coming years will therefore be to halt this process and to look for alternatives.

Like God, tolerance is never there when we need it most. Wherever and whenever tolerance is generally accepted, it attracts little attention and causes little commotion – and a good thing too. Tolerance is soured by too much attention, just as muscles are soured by overexertion. The more people write and talk about tolerance and forbearance, the less there is of it in practice. In fact, concern for tolerance is in itself a sign of intolerance.

'We've Been Far Too Forbearing!'

This is the theme on which the 'new radicals' in Dutch politics and public opinion-making have been ringing the changes for some years now. From Pim Fortuyn to Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the refrain is always the same: their radical, intolerant message must be accepted as inevitable, for just look where tolerance has got us. The so-called debate escalates rapidly because listening and considering are regarded as signs of weakness by the new radicals. The debate deteriorates into an inquisition in which the hardliners sit in judgement over the moderates.

What applies to tolerance, applies equally to 'respect'. The more frequently it is invoked in public discussions, the less real evidence there is of it. From a duty, based on a consciousness of one's own and other people's dignity, it has become a virtue that is chiefly attributed to oneself. That's to say: I think I'm pretty decent when I manage to show 'respect' for someone else, because that other person is actually a prick who is totally undeserving of respect. By the same token, anyone who fails to show me respect can expect to be thumped. I'm really not such a bad chap, because I often restrain myself when irritating 'others' make me see red.

In this regard, the current discourses about 'respect' and 'tolerance' run parallel to one another and are expressions of the same phenomenon. Short-temperedness or, in more elitist terms, the sense of urgency, reigns supreme. There is no longer the time or inclination to convince the other party. To the extent that debate or dialogue still play a role here, it is mainly as a media show or a means of coercion.

This situation of recrimination and lack of understanding between parties makes any return to classic notions of tolerance, in particular those of the French philosopher Pierre

Bayle (1647–1706), difficult or even impossible. Bayle's idea was that reasonable people appreciate the limits of their own reason and (thus) also the inevitability of religious disputes; but at the same time, this insight was in his view no reason for distrusting one's own faith. [2] For our hardliners, however, Bayle's view is not the dream of Enlightenment thinking, but a veritable nightmare: it leads precisely to the sort of tolerance and passivity that we must abandon forthwith. The proper outcome of Enlightenment thinking is for prejudices and other deviations from rationality, such as religiosity, to melt in the scorching light of reason. *Écrasez l'infâme*, as Voltaire put it; religious conflicts are simply about nothing. For hardliners, using the power of the Enlightenment to safeguard the continued existence of stubborn irrationalities is a perversion – a mockery of the Holy Scriptures, you might say.

The moderates in turn view this hard-line position as a prime example of 'Enlightenment blackmail'. [3] It forces people to make a radical choice: with me or against me. Though the 'against me' choice will be tolerated – as in the famous declaration attributed to Voltaire: 'I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it'– it will also be stigmatized as poorly thought-out, biased, absurd, and perhaps even as 'feebleminded', or potentially dangerous. The contested opinion will be tolerated in order to be able to criticize it more severely. Tolerance here is in the service of scathing criticism rather than the reverse. When all's said and done, the Enlightenment shines by the grace of prejudices, just as cosmopolitanism can only flourish by the grace of the particularism of local cultures.

We Are Worn Out by Our Concern with Social Norms

What is the reason for the current hot-temperedness, the lack of tolerance? According to the hardliners it is the inevitable but salutary reaction to the sustained domination of the moderates. Among ordinary people it finds expression in a 'short fuse' and among the elite in new radicalism, which is to say elitist intolerance of tolerant elites. Some (erstwhile) moderates feel driven into a corner by this and are apt to agree either partly or wholly with the hardliners. This is manifested, for example, in exhibitionist self-criticism, or in acknowledgements that the right has now taken the lead in politico-philosophical thinking. [4]

My own explanation – although I would, if asked, identify myself as moderate – is of a more cultural-philosophical nature. Briefly put: we are living in a post-interactive age. We have become so accustomed to an interactive relationship with all manner of institutions, including the public administration, that we can no longer imagine any other kind of relationship with such institutions. The ability to enforce our own interests, to negotiate in order to get our own way and realize our own concerns, is taken for granted. Skilled in communication, we bombard both commercial and government organizations with our preferences and desires, complaints and frustrations. From pawns we have become players, no longer burger or housewife, but freeman and smart young woman prepared for the future.

This process is now nearing its physical and psychological limits. Ever more freedom of choice and participation do not lead to ever more self-fulfilment or autonomy. On the contrary, there is a sense of 'interactive metal fatigue'. [5] We have grown tired of the exponential growth of personal input and choice. Day after day, night after night, we are expected to be busy choosing the cheapest telecommunications provider, the most reliable utility company, the promptest taxi driver, the most competent care provider, and so on and so forth.

Thus, for the first time in history, people are starting to question the limits of interactivity. How much interactivity is desirable, advisable or bearable for citizens? Or for the public administration? To what extent can interactivity still be regarded as a manifestation of involvement or social engagement? Cultural philosopher René Boomkens recently argued

that 'A fundamental belief or trust in more far-reaching emancipation or democratization is practically nowhere to be found. . . Engagement. . . has taken on a defensive form.'[6] So have interactivity and engagement become more a matter of 'going through the motions'?

A good example of changing attitudes is a television ad against the ban on smoking that was broadcast some ten years ago. Its motto – 'We'll work it out together' – marks the transition from interactive to post-interactive. On the one hand it expresses a classic faith in reasonable, 'interactive' dialogue leading to a rational consensus. But there is also a hint of a relativistic 'we'll see', primarily prompted by weariness in the face of yet another new regulation that has to be internalized and actualized. So yes, we can work it out, but not through any kind of intrinsic conviction or commitment.

My thesis is that we are indeed increasingly just 'going through the motions'. That is to say, we still deport ourselves in public space with a semblance of interactivity, but that interactivity has little practical significance any more. It no longer drives our public conduct. We may still call for interactivity and appeal to our interactive status, but in fact we are no longer willing or able to live up to the consequences of that status.

In other words, we can still be fiercely engaged, but not with anything concrete. Only in the most literal sense do citizens still have a 'standpoint'. Whereas a standpoint in the interactive era was still a stand taken for or against something, now it is simply a matter of being 'there'. As such, involvement is turning into mere presence. Presence in public space is turning into 'hanging around', or 'lingering'.[7]

Something similar is happening to political 'presence': people are no longer especially 'left' or 'right', but simply 'there'. Since the liberal-socialist coalitions of the 1990s, and the ultimately unsuccessful attempt to form a centre-left coalition which saw the Labour Party agree to nearly all the spending cuts and reform measures later adopted by the successful centre-right coalition, there has been scarcely any question of a clear left-right polarity in Dutch politics. Likewise, in a recent volume of essays published by the Green-Left party, one is hard put to find an identifiably 'leftist' ideal.[8]

What does this exposition of the 'new intolerance' from the viewpoint of interactive metal fatigue mean for the issue of tolerance? To begin with, it means that we should not simply interpret the current lack of tolerance as a consequence of successful internalization of the emancipation norms of the last thirty-odd years, or more bluntly put, 'three decades of repudiating interference and abolishing morality'.[9] That would still to some extent be an optimistic view: we have simply endorsed the wrong norms or done so for too long. But it is not a question of good versus bad social norms. Rather, as already noted, it is a question of norm fatigue. As a result of the steady advance of the paradigm of interactivity, as a result of the insatiable demand for more 'democracy', 'greater freedom of choice' and 'self-determination', modern citizens have been interactively stupefied. They are the victims of normative overkill and they just can't take it any more.

The end result is an attitude I characterize as 'interpassivity'. Modern citizens are beyond interactivity. Increasingly, they are declaring themselves incompetent to act in accordance with the very norms they profess to endorse. In other words, they are exhibiting a Kantian incompetence.[10] Their competency has been outsourced to a variety of authorities who undertake to keep 'watch' over our undirected and undisciplined conduct. This is an echo of the liberal logic of the 1980s and '90s whereby citizens are given 'leeway' to determine their own course while the government or some supervisory body monitors the limits of that freedom on their behalf. In other words, citizens are deliberately encouraged to develop what in Kantian terms could be called a heteronomous view of the self or, in free-market jargon, to become more or less successful 'market players'.

We've Lost Our Way

The implications of interpassivity for tolerance can be nicely illustrated by what at first sight might seem an odd analogy, between the aforementioned disappearance of the old left-right divide in political orientation, and a comparable tendency among road users. The fact is that there have been two striking developments on the roads in the past few years – all the more striking in that they seem to have been ignored by politicians, the media and the police. In the first place, motorists have become increasingly negligent about indicating direction. They make turns as and when they please without letting other road users know their intentions.

As to why, we can only guess. The fact is that indicating direction is chiefly in the interests of others, so some measure of indifference to other road users would seem to be involved at any rate. This is in line with the growing popularity of SUVs and, ultimately, Hummers – supposedly safe vehicles, but only for the passengers, not for everyone else. So to some extent this tendency is part of what Lieven de Cauter has called 'the capsularization of civilization', armouring oneself against the unsafe outside world.[11]

But more important for my argument, is the possibility that the decline of direction indicating is a manifestation of a more fundamental 'loss', namely of 'left' and 'right' as basic orientations in the public sphere. Might it not be that people no longer indicate direction because the left-right distinction has ceased to have any clear meaning for modern citizens, citizens who have grown used to mapping out their own course, no longer having to worry about 'limits' and leaving questions of general interest to regulatory watch-dogs and domain managers?

The second striking development is that in the space of scarcely a year it has become more or less accepted practice to cycle on the left (that is the wrong) side of the road. Not as an exception, or only when and where it doesn't inconvenience anyone else, but without the least embarrassment and seemingly without the least idea that anyone might object to this. To take just one example from my own experience: on a dedicated cycle path in Amsterdam, an adult man cycling in the wrong direction tries to overtake two boys who are also cycling in the wrong direction. The boys ride too boisterously and fall. The man can't avoid them altogether and also falls. I approach from the other (correct) direction, am forced to brake hard, and fall half on the pavement. Fortunately nobody seems to be seriously hurt. I start to bawl the man out. He is neither aggressive nor contrite, more surprised and resigned. His attitude is one of: such things can happen, and we all came off OK didn't we?

Now one could ask whether this indifferent or 'jaded' road behaviour is not simply a reaction to the many dug-up streets, detours and delays that the travelling citizen has to put up with. There's some truth in that. Indeed, society's permanent state of being 'under construction' is a direct reflection of our increasingly interactive concept of self.[12] A lot of things are 'under construction' in our modern notion of society. Airports, roads, streets – but also, as we have seen, services, offices and public facilities: they are for ever being 'revamped' in order to supply our interactive lifestyle with more space and greater speed, but at the same time we are increasingly annoyed by all those revamps because they interfere with our interactivity.

Interestingly, these trends do not concern particular sub-cultures, such as groups that are naturally antipathetic to rules and regulations, or deviant individuals. They appear to apply to a cross-section of the population; you will find the oddest – and the most normal – people cycling on the left side of the road. Although they must have some awareness of being on the 'wrong side', this awareness does not lead to any adjustment of their behaviour. On the one hand this is an expression of interpassivity: an inability to adapt their behaviour to norms they themselves endorse. But on the other hand a conviction (if you can call it that) seems to be taking root that distinguishing left from right is no longer

so important.

Left, right – we can still name and distinguish them, but the notion that this entails certain behavioural consequences appears to be fading. 'Why should I still keep to the right? It's not really so important, is it?' There is no open, explicit protest against the obligation to keep to the right – the kind of protest that was common in the politically and socially aware 1960s and '70s. No, the contemporary protest is more diffuse, vaguer, and much less focused on concrete social points of reference – such as left and right. Instead it takes the form of a 'forgetting' or 'forgetfulness': people try to avoid the constant burden of the norms they have had to endorse in recent decades, including under the auspices of emancipation and interaction.

A good example of a faulty analysis of current traffic irritations is SIRE 's 'short fuse' ad. [13] It shows a narrow Amsterdam street in which various hot-headed locals shout abuse at one another over minor traffic incidents. The punch line, delivered in a sultry, mocking female voice is: 'Sometimes we have a rather short fuse in this little land of ours'. Then there are the 'anti-lout courses' (officially known as 'compassionate confrontation') conducted by Paula Gruben and Simone van Slooten, in which people can learn to tackle others tactfully about their asocial behaviour. Understandably, the course leaders are occasionally asked why their courses aren't directed at the louts themselves. Gruben's initial reaction was, 'There's something in that'. But then she realized this was not the right response: 'We ourselves are those louts, of course'. [14]

The diagnosis in both cases boils down to: 'it takes two to make a quarrel'. And of course people do often unjustly blame everything on others. There's always something to be said for the classic dictum: 'If you want to change the world, start with yourself'. For example, a recent survey found that the number one annoyance among motorists is tailgating – closely followed by unnecessarily driving in the left (the fast or passing) lane. The loudest complainers are themselves often the worst offenders.

All the same, I think that these popular diagnoses of the problem will serve to strengthen rather than mitigate the trend of interactive metal fatigue and associated 'disorientation' and detachment. It will confirm citizens' impression that in terms of reproachableness, there is not much to choose between their own failure to live according to self-endorsed norms, and the vituperation this elicits from others. In other words, that one cancels the other out.

In short, what the average, interpassively-inclined citizen will take away from the SIRE ad is not that you shouldn't give offence to others, but – at best – that you should calm down after having giving offence. Or that you shouldn't be too hard on people who offend you. In other words, understanding is requested for norm violations – not only for those on the receiving end, but also for the perpetrators. Or perhaps understanding is not the right word. It is more a case of acceptance or, better still, resignation.

This is not so much a solution to the current problem as an expression – both effective and unintended – of that problem. Both the SIRE ad and the anti-lout course tell us that the lout is within all of us and we can't really do much about it. Lengthening our fuse is asking too much – on that score, the SIRE ad tends to sanction our own Kantian incompetence.

What we may still be able to do to our short fuse is to fit it with a silencer. We see this in road traffic today. Of course, there are still large numbers of 'assertive' citizens who vehemently and resolutely demand their 'rights' on the principle that 'society is other people'. But at the same time there appears to be a trend towards a more 'passive' experience of such social indifference. This is not aggressive but rather regressive. Such citizens, like the cyclist in my own example, seem to live in a little world of their own which makes them disoriented in society and traffic. In fireworks jargon, their problem is not so much a short fuse as a lack of direction or orientation. Like a firecracker, they zigzag

through public space. You could say that they are actually looking for the norm, but are unable to adjust their haphazard course sufficiently. They have no expectation, either of themselves or of others, that a collision might be avoided by following the rules. They are on a regressive, rather than aggressive, collision course.

Tolerance's Two-Way Split: How Can We Keep It All Together?

Here's how I see the immediate future of tolerance in the Netherlands. Thanks to growing interpassivity, tolerance will come under pressure from two sides. On the one hand, citizens will make a point of 'demanding their rights', that is to say aggressively demanding that allowance be made for their desires. We could call this *assertion*: it is a perverted form of citizenship, because while people consider themselves emancipated, they simultaneously declare themselves incapable of acting in accordance with self-endorsed norms. On the other hand, citizens will increasingly tend to sink into a kind of oblivion. This too is a perverted form of citizenship, of the 'not right now' variety. Whenever the question of acting in accordance with self-endorsed norms arises, people appear not to notice. We can characterize this as *presence*: unthinking involvement that is neither for nor against, neither left nor right, but simply present, 'there'.

In traffic and in politics, many people nowadays have passed beyond left and right. They express their criticism of the culture of tolerance, the accursed legacy of the 1960s and '70s, in the form of assertion or presence. If the new culture of assertion gets the upper hand, society and public administration will display more repressive and authoritarian traits in the (idle) hope of nipping social conflict and norm violation in the bud. Greater demands will be placed on the registering, detecting and punishing of norm violations. The problem of interactive overkill will be resolved by 'discipline': hammering away at the basic social norms that must be observed or there'll be hell to pay. Society will be ruled by 'punitive desires'. [15] Insults, threats and inquisition will increasingly replace dialogue. Judges will enjoy greater confidence than politicians. 'Zero tolerance' and 'tit for tat' will be more highly valued than tolerance.

If we incline more towards presence, a kind of 'interpassive tolerance' may well develop. That is to say, a tolerance based not on moral principles and on behavioural capacities like self-restraint, but on their very absence. Instead of punitive desires, there would be a sort of ineptitude. Or even an *affirmation* of interpassivity: why should we still expect anything – punitive or otherwise – from a sense of standards? The problem of normative overkill is in effect adjourned. Why not just let ourselves drift and see where the ship runs aground? Theatrical skills become more important than moral or discretionary ones. Courtroom and parliament turn into forms of television. Volatility, whether of the 'hard' or 'soft' variety, is valued above consistency.

The most important task for the coming time will be to stop tolerance from sliding into an ever wider two-way split between assertion on the one hand and presence on the other. This is what Amsterdam's mayor Job Cohen and the minister of justice Piet Hein Donner are trying to do. It arouses a lot of resistance and incomprehension because it reminds citizens of the tradition of high-handedness that for centuries characterized Dutch public administration. The underlying non-partisanship or impartial benevolence sits just as poorly with the partisan belligerence of assertion, as with the democratic populism of presence.

So where a direct appeal to 'high-handed' values will not succeed in halting the widening two-way split, indirect methods may prove more appropriate – methods that are more in tune with prevailing interpassive practices but which also appeal to or recall the more classic values and powers of self-restraint, and which are themselves able to lay down the law. I am thinking here of forms of mediation which are not aimed purely at pragmatic

conflict resolution ('We'll work it out together' – together with the mediator), but also at stimulating the self-regulating and self-correcting capacities of the participants. They must once again be able to call up the supra-individual strength that is the essence of interactivity. That can sometimes be done very simply by taking a slightly longer breath before angrily stepping on the accelerator, or just by waiting a fraction longer at a (red) traffic light – literally in road traffic, metaphorically in social intercourse. That would already be a good start at 'keeping things together'.

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Footnotes

1. Gijs van Oenen 'Languishing in Securityscape. The Interpassive Transformation of the Public Sphere', *Open* 6, 2004.
2. Rainer Forst, *Toleranz im Konflikt. Geschichte, Gehalt und Gegenwart eines umstrittenen Begriffs* (Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 2003), 334.
3. Michel Foucault, 'Qu'est-ce que les Lumières?', in: Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits II, 1976-1988* (Paris, Gallimard, 2001), 1390-1391.
4. The most recent example is the 'Pietje Bell lecture' by Hans Goedkoop: 'De vernietigingsdrift van de overheid maakt het weefsel van de samenleving kapot', *NRC Handelsblad*, 26-11-2005, 15-16.
5. Gijs van Oenen, 'Interactivity fatigue', *Happy Magazine*, September 2005, 73-75.
6. René Boomkens, 'Engagement *after* progress', *New Commitment* (Rotterdam, NAi Publishers, 2004), 25.
7. Van Oenen,'Languishing in Securityscape', op.cit., 6-16.
8. Bart Snels (ed.), *Vrijheid als ideaal* (Amsterdam, sun, 2005).
9. Bart van Oosterhout, 'Land van korte lontjes', *Intermediair* 17-11-05, 14-21.
10. Gijs van Oenen, *Ongeschikt recht. Anders denken over de rechtsstaat* (The Hague, Boom Juridische uitgevers, 2004), 151-156.
11. Lieven de Cauter, *The Capsular Civilization* (Rotterdam, NAi Publishers, 2004).
12. Thanks to Elke Müller for this insight.
13. SIRE is the Dutch acronym for the Foundation for Non-commercial Advertising; the ad in question can be viewed at www.sire.nl
14. Van Oosterhout, 'Land van korte lontjes', op. cit., 25.
15. Gijs van Oenen, '"Hit Me with Your Rhythm Stick!" De moderne burger vraagt om straf', *Filosofie en Praktijk*, 25 / 5, 2004, 50-62.

Tags

Philosophy, Public Domain, Public Space, Urban Space