Editorial: danse macabre

My native country, the Netherlands, has just been sucked into its next cycle of popular culturalist violence. Last week (November 2, 2004) in Amsterdam, the filmmaker T. Van Gogh was shot from his bike, his throat slit, and stabbed through the heart by a 26-year-old Dutch Moroccan. Van Gogh had recently produced (with Hirsi Ali, see *Focaal* 42) an intentionally offensive and facile drama, *Submission*, broadcast on television, about perceived Islamic intrusions on the female body. His columns to the street newspaper *Metro* also used to be wildly acerbic, raging about Islamic 'goatfuckers' and similar things. The Secret Service has claimed the killer was part of an emergent network of Islamist terrorists in the Netherlands. The Dutch government, in the person of G. Zalm, well known in Italy for his drive to keep it out of the euro for its supposed penchant for spending unearned money, immediately boasted its tough stance on terrorism, while his party threatened to dismiss its own minister of internal affairs for a lack of rhetoric. The police force repeated its offer to protect individual Dutch citizens under threat, day and night. Subsequently, Dutch groups committed more than sixteen violent attacks on Islamic objects, including a veritable bomb on an Islamic primary school. The country is now second after Bosnia in the frequency of attacks on mosques and churches. Later, special military forces engaged Islamists in a four-hour-long fire-fight in a migrant neighborhood in The Hague; Moroccan and Dutch boys fought each other outside the police lines.

Predictably, we never learn whether 'self-defending' Dutch citizens are organized into networks, too. Nor are they ever called terrorists. After the collapse of third-way social democracy into the enigmatic rise and death of Pim Fortuyn, this whole danse macabre is little surprise. The Fortuyn spectacle faded

into the confused resurgence of the Dutch right, now in alarmist cultural fighting form, sporting the collective angst of comprehensive crisis, financial and existential. Immigrants, security and threats to Dutch culture became the overriding issues ("Assimilation now!"), while hardly discussed pro-cyclical budget cuts further reduced what was left of social rights and unnecessarily magnified the local effects of global crisis. The public, meanwhile, became steadily more indulged in its own great history – history books are best selling. This week (two weeks after the assassination of Van Gogh) there was the election of the 'greatest Dutchman of all times'. The outcome was as baffling as predictable: next to Churchill and Adenauer in the European parade will sit the decadent gay opportunist Pim Fortuyn! The nation narcissistically celebrates its supposed liberalism while it systematically segregates, marginalizes and now also consciously chases and humiliates large segments of its immigrant population. Institutional exclusions had been sharper than elsewhere in Northern Europe; the culture war has added a profoundly existential twist.

A friend from India asks whether the filmmaker was indeed a relative of Vincent Van Gogh. A Czech acquaintance inquires whether he was truly an activist for women's rights. No, I have to explain, this is not Salman Rushdie revisited nor the stoning of an original genius. No, he was not a principled defender of anything. Western mythical templates do not apply. He was above all a failed and confused journalist with a pathological penchant for humiliating others in the name of free speech – before his eye fell on Muslims, he used to rage against Jews. Fundamentalism, moreover, is on all sides. For Van Gogh it had even turned into '*fun*-damentalism'. I wonder how many little sleeping

prophets of the blunt liberalism *à la Hollandaise* can be woken up by current Dutch political culture.

Security Services proclaim that the next generation of terrorists will not be directed by Osama but will be home grown. European collaboration is intensified, and they tell us they are identifying important knots in networks. They sound confident about their mapping capacities. But if the Dutch right in culturalist fighting form becomes the European norm – the Dutch minister emotionally told her European colleagues: “Immigrants must assimilate” – the knots and networks could multiply at a dizzying rate.

Anthropology: an uncomfortable profession. David Harvey reminds us of the letter of the Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in 1947 (Harvey 2000: 87):

“[The letter] began by pointing out that, in the world order, ‘respect for the cultures of differing human groups’ was just as important as respect for the personal individual. Respect for the latter must construe the individual ‘as a member of the social group of which he is a part, whose sanctioned modes of life shape his behavior, and with whose fate his own is thus inextricably bound.’”

The letter worried that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights would appear as “a statement of rights conceived only in terms of the values prevalent in the countries of Western Europe and America”. But it was no plea for thorough cultural relativism. On the contrary, it argued that “the hard core of *similarities* between cultures [had] consistently been overlooked” (*italics in original*). The AAA statement had little effect, though it may have strengthened the resolve of the Chinese member of the Commission in stressing the notion of human dignity next to individual rights. Cultural rights did not become a strong concept in the Universal Declaration. It took fifty years for it to resurface again, in some of the deliberations of UNESCO. But the contradiction between the

liberal conception of human rights as individual rights and the romantic conception of cultures bearing rights will probably prevent the latter from achieving much beyond areas such as indigenous rights. Compromises are only conceivable if cultural rights are framed as individual rights of recognition but not group rights.

But what is the use value of having cultural rights inscribed in the Declaration? In the fifty-six years since its publication, all actors have increasingly neglected whole sets of rights in the Charter, as Harvey rightly notes. Article 22, for example, about the right to social security and “the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for [everyone’s] dignity and the free development of his personality”; or Article 23 about protection against unemployment and equal pay for equal work; or Article 24 about the right to leisure and holidays with pay; Article 25 about the right “to a standard of living adequate for (...) health and well-being (...)” (*ibid.*: 89–90). Social rights, an achievement of the twentieth century, have everywhere lost out against the mere juridical rights of the nineteenth century. And all rights have receded in the face of the one royal right of liberalism: the right to unencumbered disposal over individual and corporate property.

What else, then, were the options for UNESCO but to adjust to the powers that be and develop the oxymoron of ‘cultural property’? It reminds us of Bill Roseberry’s remark that in order to be understood, subalterns must learn the language of their oppressors. While the West has been zealously pushing the protection of its intellectual property rights worldwide to exert tribute from its users (the ‘Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights’), it is now conceding to local elites in the peripheries the right to cultural property: a reincarnation of the old divide between reason and individualism in the West versus culture and tradition in the rest. The linking concept, necessary in the new global world of unlimited exchange, runs predictably through the idea of property. Kaneff and King’s theme section on cultural property shows why elites in transition countries and elsewhere need

the legitimization of shared and revered cultural symbols; what happens when such symbols become 'authenticated', reified, bounded, commodified and manipulated as cultural property on the markets for tourism and prestige; and what it means when you fail to have a local totem of your own. Kaneff and King move the anthropology of cultural property far beyond the field of indigenous peoples, present illuminating case studies and offer a basic course in the relevant juridical debates.

Two keywords for the other contributions in this issue: 'concrete abstractions' and memory. Both Giordano and Humphrey inquire into the social life of two other celebrated liberal abstractions next to property – citizenship and cosmopolitanism – and root them in concrete and situated practices and relationships in, respectively, Malaysia and the Soviet Union. Rebel shows, among other things, how instances of recent historical science in Austria have been based in uncritical appropriations of historical memory, and how this has served further historical misrecognition. Other

instances of inward-looking and blocked memory making: Volčič shows how participants in the Belgrade marches against Milošević were hardly concerned about Bosnia or Kosovo. Carbonella explores John Kerry's and the US's inability to discuss imperial violence in Viet Nam and Iraq. Choltaev and Pohl highlight the forgotten Chechen genocide and the functions it served behind Russia's response to the Beslan massacre. Dramas of incomparable magnitude to the Dutch predicament, surely, but with comparable mechanisms of willed and manipulated popular amnesia of initial injustices intensified.

– Don Kalb

Reference

Harvey, David 2000. *Spaces of hope*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.