

# Critical Notes on the New Transitions in the Social Domain in the Netherlands (CONCEPT)

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## Preliminary quotations

### Article 25

“(1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.(1948)”

“[Alan Greenspan](#), from 1987 tot 2006 chairman of the Federal Reserve, the American system of Central Banks, said in October 2009 that he had discovered ‘a mistake’ in his conviction that the free Market could regulate itself better than State Control. ‘I am very sad about that’, Greenspan said.”

“Wir werden dabei in jeder Hinsicht ein Mehr an Verantwortung brauchen: Mehr Eigenverantwortung jedes Einzelnen und mehr gemeinsame Verantwortung für die Chancen unserer Kinder - nicht zuletzt durch Stärkung der Familien. Sozial heißt für mich: Jeder hat gleiche Chancen. Das heißt aber auch, jeder hat die Pflicht, seine Chancen zu nutzen. Wer Solidarität ausnutzt, gefährdet das soziale Miteinander.”(Schröder, 2003)

## Abstract

In recent years the Dutch social domain was profoundly reformed and at the same time this change was accompanied by a major austerity. My contribution will sketch the outline of this transformation but also gives an insight in the underlying political, sociological and philosophical ideas. My point will be that this neoliberal changes in the social domain have grave consequences for a large part of the population in the Netherlands and in particular for the most vulnerable in our society. Their (human) rights have been transformed into provisions. The change as such has been sold to the public as a major improvement because care is now organized in the municipalities, close to the citizen and social workers pay more attention to the strength of the clients to take care of themselves than to the problems they have. Although this rehabilitating strategy has advantages, it also leaves the most vulnerable on their own. It is a rather individualistic and liberal approach that leaves much to freedom of choice. In short the welfare state retreats and leaves it to the big society. Finally I want to pay some attention to the broader picture in which this transformation can be situated with authors like Klein(2017), Kleinpaste (2017), Kok (2017), Wolin (2010), Luyendijk (2017) and others.

## Key words

Neo-liberalism, Big Society, Inverted democracy, objectivism, solidarity, human rights, social work.

## 1. Introduction

The three transformations in the social domain in the Netherlands consist of a decentralization of the Exceptional Medical Expenses Act from the central government and the Juvenile Law from the provincial government to the municipalities with an austerity of around 25 %. Instead, care is now regulated on the municipal level by the Social Support Act from 2007 and the renewed version from 2015. Some of the social entitlements are also subsumed under the

privatized health insurance companies. These laws and regulations now form the framework for what later on in the King's Speech of 2013 was called the 'participationsociety' (in Dutch: participatiesamenleving). The general idea of the concept is that the ordinary citizen has to do more for the care of others so that less entitlements have to be made available by government agencies; social workers have to be generalists who assess with a matrix form the degree of self-reliance of those seeking help. It is generally accepted that the 'participationsociety' did not deliver on its promises, due to the fact that social infra-structure and system world has not been sufficiently modified (Hilhorst & Van der Lans, 2015a, 2015b).

Moreover, the concept of the 'participatiesamenleving', often used by Dutch policymakers and professionals in the social domain, is a contradiction in itself. Every human being and certainly Dutch citizens are taking part in their society from birth. The suggestion that the 'participationsociety' is something new and that there are people not participating and should do so, is exclusive thinking. The term and how it is elaborated, shows a normative and political approach. Although you are born into a family, a community, a city and in the Netherlands, still you do not take part, you are not participating. You are as it were outside, because you have no job or lost it, you have a disability, a migrant background, or you are sick, old or otherwise vulnerable. According to these policymakers you should participate. But you are already doing that, but apparently not enough. After all because you have a vulnerability you participate the way you do. To participate is an obligation in order to get social welfare, if you don't, you do not behave responsible, you get a fine, you are punished. In paragraph six I will elaborate further on this idea of punitive responsibility (Mounk, 2017). To what extent is the citizen responsible for circumstances beyond



his control? The movie [I, Daniel Blake](#) by Ken Loach(2016), illustrates this very beautifully. Is this circumstance in line with article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? The key words in this article are: 'that everyone has the right to security ....in circumstances beyond his control'(UN, 1948)

After all people who have a job, enough money, no migrant background or serious vulnerabilities for the time being, they participate automatically. These citizens are free and left alone, they get by and rely on themselves: they are self-sufficient. The state or the policymakers and politicians do not have to worry about them. Moreover they are more or less invited to help their neighbor in need. That is the dichotomy that the idea of the 'participationsociety' creates.

It foremost creates social inequality and division in our society. And as a consequence a great number of people have to go to the food bank and live in poverty. Something that you might not expect in the Netherlands. But what are the underlying reasons and philosophies behind this approach? I start with a short history of the welfare state from the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards in our western hemisphere, so that it becomes clear what the main tendencies are.

## 2. Short History of the Welfare State: the Affluent Society

In the thirties of 20<sup>th</sup> century there was a deep economic crisis mainly due to the aftermath of the First World War: protectionism and nationalism. Unemployment was high, poverty was all around and there was not much of a welfare state. Unemployed people in the Netherlands got some benefits, but were mostly obliged to work on public projects like the “Amsterdamse Bos”(A large park in Amsterdam). After the Second World War, in 1945, people found that there should be a new start in the sense of a humane society. After all poverty was one of the main causes of the rise of National-Socialism. Broad coalitions <sup>1</sup>between social-democrats and Christian-democrats were very common in the fifties and sixties in the Netherlands and there was consensus in the way the welfare state should be build. Numerous laws were passed such as the Old Age Pension (AOW), Welfare Unemployment Benefit (WW), Health Insurance(Ziekenfonds), Disability Insurance(AWBZ). Because of the steady economic growth, rising wages, the finding of a large field with natural gas and the tight labor market the expenses for these laws were affordable. It was an era of prosperity and progress. We came to live in the so called ‘Affluent Society’(Galbraith, 1958/1998).

On 15 August 1971, the United States unilaterally terminated the convertibility of the US dollar to gold, effectively bringing the post-war Bretton Woods system from 1944 to an end and rendering the dollar a fiat currency. This action, referred to as the Nixon shock, created the situation in which the US dollar became a reserve currency used by many states. At the same time, many fixed currencies (such as the pound sterling, German mark and the Dutch guilder) also became free-floating (Wikipedia, 2017). This measure was taken because of the enormous US deficit caused by the expenditure for the Vietnam war. Naomi Klein (2007) asserts that major changes in societies are created by shocks, such as this one. In the early eighties this led to the first major post-war economic crisis.

The answer to that crisis was brutal pragmatism and austerity. Although the crisis did not last as long as the credit crunch from 2008 (Kosters, 2017). In the United States Reagan became president and in Great Britain Thatcher, [the iron lady](#) became prime minister. In the field of economics the Chicago School under Milton Friedman was dominant, which meant a liberalization of the free market, deregulation of government agencies and privatization (Blond, 2010). In the public sphere many institutions were run by a concept called New Public Management. Schools, Universities and Hospitals were managed as commercial companies: profit, efficiency and competition are the main traits accompanied with control and bureaucracy (Runia, 2018). An era of neoliberalism had begun.

In 1989 the Berlin Wall was teared down and the Soviet Union and its satellites broke down. The notion in the West was that capitalism and the free market was the only viable social structure. History had ended as Francis Fukuyama (1993) had claimed in his famous book of the same name. This capitalism was put into practice in the countries just freed from communism in the form of a shock therapy that created poverty for the many and wealth for the few (Klein & Stoltenkamp, 2007). Today Russia of Putin is the example of the oligarchy and kleptocracy that developed from this therapy. The former German chancellor Schröder, whom I just mentioned, has associated himself with the Russian oil company Rosneft which is firmly under the control of the Kremlin. What the economy and judiciary is concerned, there are not

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<sup>1</sup> Cabinets Drees -Van Schaik, Drees 1-3

many rules in Russia and Schröder undermines with his association the credibility of Western democracies.

In the next paragraph I will give some thought of how this ideology of neoliberalism and the free market philosophy came into being and instigated the concept of the 'participationsociety'.

### 3. Big Society

[Philip Blond](#) (Dijk & Panhuijsen, 2011) is director of the think-tank Respublica and calls himself a progressive conservative and a Red Tory. He is the main advocate of the idea of Big Society that inspired Dutch policymakers around 2013 to promote the concept of the 'participationsociety' (Franklin & Noordhoek, 2013). [Blond](#) is and was an advisor of David Cameron former Prime minister of the UK. Although Blond wasn't a supporter of Brexit, he still has a significant influence in British politics.

'And he[Blond] explained why he supports Mr Cameron. He said: 'I'm a little bit Red and a little bit Tory. That is the best way to help the poor.

'Margaret Thatcher wanted to create proper Victorian values but she also created the "loadsamoney" generation that destroyed those values in working-class life.

'Labour policies make individuals the slaves of the State. We have to liberate people and at the same time recreate the sense of community.'

Source: Walter (2009)

Most of the above statements of Blond are exaggerated, except maybe the last one, which is untrue, because people are not the slaves of the state but of corporate business (Wolin, 2010). The concept of 'Big Society' is often contrasted by the controversial quotation of Margaret Thatcher 'there is no such thing as society' (Franklin & Noordhoek, 2013; Koole, 2018, p. 21). She created the impression at the time that society consisted of atomistic individualism whereby the principles of community and solidarity have no place.

There is however no simple line from Thatcher's quotation to the concept of Big Society, but the present Conservative Party used Big Society as a political message to promote social justice, although they could not put it into practice. In the end the policy failed which is visible in the recent near collapse of the National Health Service of the UK (NHS).

But is Big Society (or the 'participationsociety') a red left policy or a right wing conservative policy or is it neutral? It depends in my view on the interpretation of the concept. In the era of neoliberalism many of our concepts are quite fuzzy or empty. Because everybody explains these concepts as they see fit. So the left finds it democratic because it involves and invites the citizen to participate and the right agrees with that but supposes that services therefore can be made cheaper and produce austerity. So there seems to be no alternative which can be characterized as a TINA-argument (There Is No Alternative). It is certainly not a win-win situation between left and right for society as a whole, because the material demand to do more with less money only benefits the rich. It advances social and economic inequality which is now clearly visible (Piketty, 2014a). It is an old conservative standpoint to have a small state that will thrive the larger society, as I will show later on.

I will now discuss some of the original sources of these prevailing conservative opinions that sometimes also have been applauded and still are by left wing politicians such as Schröder, Kok and Blair as they proclaimed [The Third Way](#). First we will go back a little further in history.

### 4. Edmund Burke: the first conservative

The 18<sup>th</sup> century in England witnessed the rise of liberal individualism (Burke, 1757/2004). Burke (1757/2004) resented the French Revolution because of the bloodshed, he was a proponent of the abolishment of slavery, but his main point was that the state should impose as little economic constraints such as tax, subsidy, tariff or market intervention as possible (Norman, 2015). Burke welcomed free markets, but for him the individual is morally

fundamental and individual freedoms are paramount. He promoted liberal individualism with emphasis on mutual tolerance, civil rights, competitive markets and popular sovereignty (Norman, 2015). It is not left or right per se, but liberal individualism was inspired by a wide range of thinking from Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau (Oudenampsen, 2018). Burke had a crucial influence on the work of Jeremy Bentham. On the one hand Bentham was moved by his anger at what he saw as the obscurity, irrationality, unfairness and corruption of the systems of power, but on the other hand he founded an ethics called utilitarianism that promoted the idea of the greatest happiness of the greatest number as the measure of right and wrong (Norman, 2015). Every rule, practice or institution in society should be subjected to an quasi objective test to its value or utility, in effect a cost-benefit analysis (Have ten, 1986). In Bentham's footsteps John Stuart Mill created his version of utilitarianism with his Harm Principle: 'The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant'(Mill, 1859/1978; Norman, 2015, p. 243). Burke also inspired a revolution in economics as the individual pursuit of wealth. Adam Smith (1780) was one of the representatives of these classic economists and supposed an invisible hand at work in the economy, so that free markets should do their work. An ideology in which Greenspan discovered a flaw as we have seen. In the quotation below from Mill one sees the overall perception of liberal individualism which has partly survived in the present Western neoliberal societies (Cited in Norman, 2015, p. 244):

Economics does not treat of the whole of man's nature as modified by the social state, nor the whole conduct of man in society. It is concerned with him solely as a being who desires to possess wealth, and who is capable of judging of the comparative efficacy of means for obtaining that end. It predicts only such of phenomena of the social state as take place in consequence of the pursuit of wealth. It makes entire abstraction of every other human passion or motive.

But not everybody will be wealthy and as competition and markets were the only regulation in a liberal economy and not the state, the income of the working masses would be pressed down and down: a race to the bottom (Galbraith, 1958/1998). Adam Smith (1780) wrote:

A man must always live by his work, and his wages must at least be sufficient to maintain him. They must even upon most occasions be somewhat more ; otherwise it would be impossible for him to bring up a family and the race of such workmen could not last beyond the first generation.

For the philosophers Edmund Burke (1729-1797) and Adam Smith (1723-1790) however social justice was a conservative issue, but in the nineteenth century the socialist movement captured the issue from the conservatives. Especially British Conservatives failed to develop an ideological response. Because the conservative party in the U.K. is not a confessional party, like the Christian-Democrats in Europe, it could not draw on Charity in that sense(Franklin & Noordhoek, 2013).

Under an entire different perspective social injustice and inequality have returned in the twentieth and twenty-first century. Large corporations like Facebook, Google, Microsoft, General Motors, MacDonal, Starbucks, Shell have silently taken over our democratic political processes(Hertz, 2001). Not the nation states are in charge of affairs, but effective large corporations, which operate global.

Even now after the 2008 crisis the wages of the lower and middle class are not rising, because of weakness of the trade unions, but also because of the fact that governments are afraid that corporations will move to other countries, which will have a negative effect on employment (De Rijk, 2018). Governments have made themselves powerless by deregulating the state and economy. The small state has become a powerless one towards privatized institutions and corporate business. In the next section I will discuss an in Europe largely unknown philosopher



who instigated the notion of a small state and egoistic individual which challenges the idea of a real Big Society or “participationsociety”.

## 5. Ayn Rand: the selfish notion in Society

Alan Greenspan, until 2006 president of the US Federal Reserve, was highly influenced by and a pupil and confidant of the philosopher and novelist [Ayn Rand \(1905-1982\)](#). Her book “Atlas Shrugged” is in the United States after the Bible the most popular book (Rand, 1957/2007). Her ideas were not only followed by common people but also very influential on people like Greenspan, Reagan and [Trump](#). But Rand not only wrote novels but also developed a philosophy called *objectivism* that forms the basis of the idea of an unrestrained capitalism and utopianism of the free market that eventually led to the credit crunch in 2007 (Achterhuis, 2010). [This philosophy](#) assumes that human nature is fundamentally egoistic and that altruistic and solidary attitudes are a threat for a free society. The state interference should be as small as possible and people should aspire their own selfish interests (Rand, 1964). [Rand’s influence on American political and philosophical thinking](#) is even today substantial. Certainly the present G.O.P (republicans) and president Trump in the US follow more or less the program Rand contemplated. They adopted a tax plan for the rich and made major cut backs on social security, Medicare and Obamacare.

The deregulated free market ideology in the neoliberalism era sells the idea that people have a free choice and are responsible for their choices, even if there is no or little choice, because there are clearly circumstances beyond their control. It fits in the ideas of Rand, but is it true. In the next section Mounk doubts if this is the case.

## 6. Positive Responsibility versus Punitive Responsibility

In his book *The Age of responsibility* Mounk (2017, p. 23) asserts: ‘that over the last decades, the institutions of the welfare state have to a striking extent, become a tool for rewarding those who have supposedly acted responsibly and punishing those who supposedly acted irresponsibly.’ There is the idea in politics in the Netherlands that those who have fallen behind in society have not acted responsibly and made as an individual somewhere in their lives the wrong choices. Even when most of the circumstances are beyond their control ranging from the bad economic situation, their genes or upbringing and bad education. They still are held accountable for something they could not be accountable for. The ‘participationsociety’ suggests an obligation or even a responsibility to be self-sufficient. This is according to Mounk a narrow conception of responsibility that has guided recent reforms of the welfare state, making key entitlements conditional on good behavior. It is a punitive and normative manner to look at people who did not have much luck in their lives.

Now one could argue that everyone should be responsible for oneself or take responsibility for one’s life. But can we also take responsibility for circumstances that lie beyond our control and if these outcomes are that we lose our jobs can we be additionally punished for it? Mounk shows that this approach is counterproductive, because to emphasize on responsibility is not a panacea for the deep and structural economic problems of the western world. If you want people to take responsibility you have to help them to do so e.g. through education. To prepare as it were the material and educational ground (Mounk, 2017). Mounk’s answer is empowerment rather than normative control or exhortations. But how well-meaning this sounds it does not solve the real problem of those who fall short of their responsibility through circumstances beyond their control. Because it is not a moral problem or category but an economic and political problem. A problem that has to do with power. If the social security net is less reliable and the benefits have become less and more people stand weaker in their demand for fair wages. Wages in most sectors of the labor market have not been increased for years, sometimes even for ten years if you take inflation into account (De Rijk, 2018). Shareholders and large corporations are

profiting from these low wages although many economists argue for higher wages now the crisis is over. In the next section I will explain that the political elite often conjoins with the corporate elite as we already have seen with Gert Schröder. But there are more examples of politicians who join the board of directors of large companies or Chief Executive Officers who become members of government.

## 7. Managed democracy: Automating Inequality

Long before the credit crunch and at the beginning of the Obama era in 2008 the political theorist Sheldon S Wolin wrote a remarkable and visionary book, in which he argued that corporate power no longer answers to state control but instead is a close collaborator (Wolin, 2010). He even goes as far as to say that the United States is an “inverted totalitarianism” (Wolin, 2010, p. 44). By coining this term Wolin (2010, p. 44) tried to find a name for a new political system driven by abstract totalizing powers, not by personal rule, one that succeeds by encouraging political disengagement rather than mass mobilization, that relies more on “private” media than on public agencies to disseminate propaganda to reinforce the official version of events. In classic totalitarianism the conquest of total power is not the result from a coalescence of unintended consequences, but very much conscious and highly personal. The leader was a self-made man, larger than life who led the political mass movement. The system was inseparable from its leader: the Duce or Führer. In inverted totalitarianism things are totally different: the leader is not the architect of the system but its product. According to Wolin George W. Bush was such a leader, but now we would say that Trump fits the bill much more. Inverted totalitarianism is, however, largely independent of any particular leader and requires no personal charisma to survive: its model is the corporate “head”, the corporation public representative (Wolin, 2010). In fact this is something new, a conservative form of *étatisme* according to Wolin. While it is hostile or punitive as we have seen toward social spending, it is eager to intervene in the most personal of affairs: sexual relations, marriage, reproduction, and family decisions about life and death. In most of the western democracies we have seen these type of discussions: gay marriage, gender, identity, euthanasia, and race.

In classic totalitarianism however, there is an attempt to realize an idealized conception of society as a systematically ordered whole. Total power is only achievable from the top. In inverted totalitarianism this works differently. It believes that the world can be changed with a limited range of objectives, such as supplying sufficient energy, that free markets will do their work, that military supremacy will be maintained, that democracy and human rights must be spread worldwide, that people should do more for their neighbors in the “participation society”. As such “democracy” is “managed democracy” democracy systematized, without appearing to be suppressed (Wolin, 2010). Opposition is not eliminated, but certain developments in the economy, integration, rationalization, concentrated wealth are presented together with a faith that virtually any problem from health care to political crisis, even faith itself can be managed that is subjected to control, predictability, cost-effectiveness in the delivery of the product (Wolin, 2010).

Our Prime Minister Mark Rutte is an excellent example of a politician as manager. He stands for having no future whatsoever. Voters on the other hand are made as predictable as consumers; university is nearly as rationalized as a corporation; a corporate structure is as hierarchical in its chain of command as the military. The regime ideology is capitalism, which is virtually as undisputed as the Nazi doctrine was in 1930s in Germany (Wolin, 2010, p. 47). It creates, as Marcuse (1975) would say, the one dimensional man.

An additional tool that supports this form of totalitarianism is the way how high-tech is used especially in profiling, policing and punishing the poor. Eubanks (2017) investigates the role of data mining, profiling, policy algorithms, predictive risk models as means of controlling,

policing and punishing the poor in the United States. But these tools are also in use in other welfare states in the western hemisphere .

In my mind this is the real background in which the transformations in the social domain have taken place. On the one hand there are discussions around civic responsibility, empowerment, improvement of social capital in neighborhoods and the other hand there is the management discussion of cost-effectiveness, market forces, open tender and austerity. Local democracies, municipalities are trying to cope but are hardly experienced in organizing the care in the Netherlands. It is as Wolin stated 'managed democracy' and it is helped by a digital ticket booth (WMO-loket).

## Final remarks

In a largely individualistic society which developed from the 1950s onward, where people have been raised to belief that they have to fight for their position in a meritocracy based capitalistic order, there is not much room for altruistic practices. People have their job , their family, and struggle to get by. Sometimes with more than one job. They are rather driven by consumerism than by idealism or altruism. Especially in middle class families where both men and women are working to maintain their standard of living, there is less room for care. Although there are numerous volunteers who altruistic are committed in helping their fellowmen, they are not, as the philosopher Bergson would say, only guided by moral obligation to help but much more by practical reason (Lefebvre, 2013). Practical reason, however brings about new reasons not to help and therefore doesn't solve the problem of how to let people to do more for next of kin or neighbour.

In a society as ours where the leadership tends to closed, managed democracy, where (social) media and big data not only individualize and scrutinize our private existences, it is not easy to create a more altruistic and collective view on care. The French philosopher Bergson (1954) pleas for an open society where human rights can flourish, but he also asserts that sheer rational instruction is unable to prevail over egoism. Not practical reason in the Kantian sense can overcome egoism, individualism, market fundamentalism or consumerism as a destructive and closed tendency, but open and universal love that is inclusive. But is this feasible. At any rate it is as far away as the realisation of the human rights.

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