

Culture blind social justice: leftist politics in practice

Francio Guadeloupe

I could not help thinking on the day of Papa Rien's (1914-2006) funeral that an ambassador of Dutch multiculturalism had died. The funeral home reflected the Netherlands Papa Rien stood for. Native Dutch, Surinamese-Dutch, Antillean-Dutch, Indo-Dutch, and their mixed *ethnies*, of various social stations and economic classes, had come to pay their last respects to a man who had contributed so much to multicultural conviviality. Not a wishy-washy harmonious multiculturalism but an unruly one, based on a fair fight! For Papa Rien unconditional acceptance of all newcomers to his Rotterdam was an obligation. It was what made one a true Dutchman: a decent human being that accepts that we need to right colonial wrongs. And a decent human being Papa Rien was.

It is a reminder that culture blind social justice never meant the downplaying of culture in relation to socioeconomic explanations. It meant willfully blinding oneself to positive versions of culture, as in, "the culture of the native Dutch is characterized by X as opposed to the culture of the Moroccan-Dutch which is Y." It meant instead recognizing that culture, understood as materialist and ideational advices and enticements located in our manifold institutions and our speech, is conflict ridden and always in the process of being contested. It meant articulating these contestations to socio-economic inequalities. It meant, in short, acknowledging politics with regards to culture.

In these turbulent times, characterized by the name calling of the political left as politically incorrect and naive!, we must look deep within our midst in an effort to recognize the little man and woman on the streets who made culture blind social justice an everyday practice. Men and women who sought in their failures to never make any hierarchical distinctions between oldcomers and newcomers; men and women who stood for all belonging equally. We need to bring the Papa Riens to the fore.

Papa Rien's dramatic conversion to the Left

As I looked across the room in the funeral parlor and saw the grief consuming the

carefully groomed faces, I had to think back on Papa Rien's words, 'All my life has been dedicated to destroying the guns of the white man and healing the wounds of the Zulus who fought back with spears. I believe in a fair fight. Men will fight, but let them fight fairly.' He was referring to an illustration he saw in the Christian library of the **knapenvereniging Timotheus**, the Christian young men's auxiliary Timotheus, of the Dutch Reformed church in the **Oranjeboomstraat** in Rotterdam, which he frequented while coming of age. It signaled his conversion moment to leftist politics.

He was reading a book on the civilizing missions when his eyes were drawn to a drawing transfixed of Transvaalse gunning down Zulus. He was 14 years old. It changed his life. While many of his peers saw brave white Christian men being besieged by hordes of so-called pagan blacks with spears, Papa Rien saw something else. Being a streetfighter, someone who could throw a mean punch, he looked into the eyes of the anonymous mass of men being gunned down and saw an unclean fight. This was no fight whatsoever! This was abuse. He had known his share of abuse when bullies had made it a routine to gang up on him until he had learnt to defend himself. He imagined breaking the guns of the Boers and allowing a fair fight to take place. The illustration meant to defend the civilizing mission, converting the heathens and educating them in the ways of the modern world, was for Papa Rien an image that allowed him to glimpse colonial barbarism

Papa Rien was to be forever haunted by this image of the unfair fight. His had been a life of trying to redraw that drawing. His first deed in that direction was that he went and bought himself a broche in the form of gun and took it to the next bible study. While the elder began talking about the civilizing mission in Africa, Papa Rien got up demonstratively took out the broche and broke it in two. He began to rant and ask **zijn de zwarten geen mensen dan**, aren't the blacks human too! Needless to say, the elder was taken aback. Yet interpreting the outburst as a threat to his authority, and a questioning of the wisdom of the church, he summoned Papa Rien to leave.

No one in the church hierarchy questioned the decision for Papa Rien was known as a **straatschoffie**, a street hoodlum, which the dedicated were trying to bring into the fold. It was a favor to his stepmother. The elder had done his best. It was now up to God to work his mysterious ways so that Satan would not have Papa Rien's soul.

His stepmother was furious and wanted him out of her house. She scolded him and told him that she should have known better than to think that she could refine him.

Papa Rien went to live with his grandmother in Sliedrecht, a small town adjacent to Rotterdam. Life there was not easy as he was accused of being a vassal of the Devil. He had never truly known home. Like the Zulus, Papa Rien too was an effect of an unfair fight.

Papa Rien's unfair life

You see Papa Rien's biological mother died when he was 3 years old. His father, a blacksmith, who drank to much, could not take care of him. His relatives did not have the means to do so. Like so many boys born in the early 1900s Papa Rien ended up in an orphanage called *Kindertehuis Welkom* on the kortekade street in Rotterdam. Due to the rod of corrections of the staff, the fists and boots of older bullies, and malnutrition, Papa Rien became somewhat of a ruffian.

His father eventually remarried when he was ten years old and took him in. He was ten years old. His stepmother, a domineering protestant woman, ruled his father. Devout as she was she sewed clothes for the local protestant church and its affiliations. Since her stepson's ways would reflect on her, she tried beating discipline and good manners into him. It was to no avail. Seeing that the rod did not do the job, she changed tactics. She persuaded his father that Rien was too old for school (14 years!) and he needed to learn a trade and get a good Christian upbringing. As far as learning a trade was concerned, his stepmother reckoned he should become a painter. She had noticed that Papa Rien could draw and had artistic inclinations, yet she felt that such was not for people belonging to his station. With his father's approval, usually too drunk to talk back to his wife, Papa Rien was put into apprentice and was soon earning a meager living painting houses and buildings.

To purify his soul Papa Rien was made to join the young men's auxiliary of the Protestant church she attended. It was here that he saw the graphic illustration of the 'civilizing' mission that led to his expulsion. What to do with such a boy! Nothing. One could do only hope that he would keep his job and eventually meet a Christian woman. The Lord would work in his mysterious ways.

Where the Lord faltered, the socialists did not. It was at the work place, recalling his run-in with the pastor, that a colleague inducted Papa Rien into what he termed the Truth. During a lunch break a known socialist handed him a copy of the *Vrijdenken*, a leftist newspaper dedicated to unveiling the workings of global capitalism, religious obscurantism, and Western imperialism. Usually he would never have accepted such atheist tracts, but he was starving for knowledge. He longed to

discuss his misgivings with his fellow church members. No one in the church spoke to him. His father was too drunk to care and his stepmother, well... So Rien took the newspaper to distract his mind. It was an eye opener. The words in that newspaper gave him an interpretative framework with which he could make sense of the anger he felt broiling up whenever he thought about the illustration of Zulus being massacred by Boers. He was right! It was an unfair fight. In fact the wealthy few of the world were fighting an unfair fight with him and the majority of his country men and women. It was the proletariat against the bourgeoisie. The Zulu's were a kind of proto proletariat.

From that day on Papa Rien became an avid reader of the *Vrijdenken*. He bought the works of Karl Marx and began educating himself in leftist politics. Whenever he could, he attended the public lectures of renowned leftists such as Anton Constandse and Sam de Wolff. But he also let himself be instructed by local organic intellectuals such as Willem van Iependaal and the avowed Anna Blaman who would entice the workers to strike and be critical of big business and government. Never a talker, and not very visible in worker's strikes, he would sit in the back of the room and take notes while worldly intellectuals spoke about global and local injustice. Papa Rien became an atheist and a socialist.

Putting leftist politics into practice

Ideologically strengthened, Papa Rien was still nevertheless itching to make his mark on the world. He longed to redraw the colonialist depiction of Zulus and Boers. Some years after his conversion to the Left, thanks to his encounters with newcomers from the Global South, Papa Rien was able to truly practice what he believed.

His doing leftist politics in the field of multiculturalism was based upon repaying a gift to Joyce, a Surinamese newcomer. His wife, Tante Nel, befriended nurse Joyce, who had tended to her when she laid ill at the hospital. Joyce had given his wife such good care, refusing to neglect her because she was poor, and even visited their home to help his wife recover from a fibroid operation. In Papa Rien's mind, this was the opposite of the illustration that had haunted him for so long. Here was, figuratively, a Zulu making sure that his wife regained her health. Here was a colonized Other that he felt he should be helping out, helping his wife and children. Here was Joyce helping him fight a fair fight. Joyce taught him that it was not about Them and Us and the lesser Us-Zulus and Boers and Dutch workers-but about the exploitation of all working poor and their existential misrecognition of each other.

The latter they shared with the bourgeoisie. Joyce gave socialism a human face. His encounter with Joyce allowed Papa Rien to become a socialist that could see and accept the fragile and crooked wood from which all human beings are made.

Knowing Joyce, led to Papa Rien becoming acquainted with the many Surinamers, Indos, and the handful of Dutch Antilleans and Arubans, who were making Rotterdam their home in the 1960s. He was able to see the structural discrimination they faced, he was able to see the way they oppressed each other, and he was able to see their struggle to get in a better off position so that they could fight a fair fight. Being a painter he had very little but what he had he shared with them. His home became a resting place and information centre for newcomers. In an effort to help these newcomers find their way in society, he schooled himself on the functioning of the institutions and bureaucracy of his country. He read up as much as possible about their countries of origin so that he could establish the right contact. He got to see the human behind the masses depicted in colonialist representations as Zulus (sometimes as Indians, sometimes as Orientals, etc).

In Papa Rien's mind he was redrawing the illustration he encountered in the church library. Papa Rien was breaking the white man's gun so that the Zulus and Boers could meet on equal terms. All his life he believed in a fair fight. Through his activism in defense of our acceptance of a multicultural Netherlands he was making culture blind social justice an everyday practice. As his two oldest grandchildren came out of the womb of a Curaçao woman, this practice had also become a personal matter

...But like all of us Papa Rien also demonstrates why leftist politics must constantly interrogate itself. Be self-reflective. Papa Rien was a decent man, but he remained a man who could never accept that many of the newcomers he helped and befriended remained religious. He never said a word of it to them. To me, knowing I practiced humanism, he would carefully utter that he hoped that one day they would throw away their false gods and accept that Man was his own God. This was his religion! A truth that rendered all other opinions misguided. Perhaps the road forward is to secularize the atheism in our leftist politics.

Secularizing our atheism is a metaphor for a mode of dwelling in life whereby we recognize our leftist politics as forever partial; forever bound up in time and space; forever unacceptably situated. Our task is not to proclaim the Truth, but to widen and qualify our partial truth by the voices of all others-newcomers and oldcomers alike who hold contrasting views. Then the old leftist business of demolishing false

consciousness-is this not what in our topsy-turvy world the conservative pundits accuse the political left as having-will give way to the more worthwhile project of practicing a culture blind social justice.

Francio Guadeloupe is docent Development Studies aan de Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen.