Hatred against 'the system' among Dutch youth

An inventory and a first attempt to explain

Summary

Dr. A.J.J. Meershoek

Dr. P.W. de Vries

For some time, relief workers are spotting adolescents that are deeply suspicious of institutions and that radically turn away from governmental agencies and social organizations, for fear of being controlled and disciplined. Against the background of individual, rudely violent actions like those in Norway in 2011, the question was raised if these incidents reflect a significant social phenomenon and, if so, how these should be denoted and explained, and which social impact these might have.

The Institute of Governance Studies (IGS) of the University of Twente conducted a rapid investigation into the phenomenon of hatred of 'the system' among adolescents, with the aim to determine its scale, character and possible social impact. This investigation was carried out by a survey by phone among key persons in youth welfare work and by a study of empirical social-psychological and historical studies.

The main question was formulated like:

Are there in the Netherlands adolescents that turn away from all institutions and societal organizationsout of hatred of 'the system', and, if this is the case, how can this phenomenon be denoted and explained by the existing historical and social-psychological knowledge and what might be its social impact?

There are indeed adolescents that are driven by hatred of 'the system' and radically turn away from all institutions. However, relief workers experience great difficulties contacting them. These adolescents are between 16 and 27 years of age, move in loosely connected circles, and have different social backgrounds. They are not criminally active. Although in their worldview elements of Islamic anti-Americanism/anti-Occidentalism can be found, religion does not bind them together. Although an incidental contact with extreme rightwing groups was spotted, they do not have an aggressive group spirit. They are bound together by music (rap, hip-hop), movies, video-tapes on internet and (arguably) online games. Radical distrust of government, institutions and strangers is a common denominator. They perceive themselves to be the underdog, to be victim of conspiracies. The Internet is used to watch movies and videos but the use of mobile

phones andsocial media like Hyves and Facebook are shunned. Their preferences in music are extremely eclectic: rap, hip-hop and techno very rapidly alternate.

A historiographical survey for Dutch radical youth shows that the spotted group of youth shows much resemblance with the Rode Jeugd ("Red Youth", 1967-1975) and parts of the Punk-subculture. Like the latter, it is a small, loosely connected group that is motivated by a radical kind of conspiracy thinking. The social background of the adolescents involved is mixed as well. Unlike the mixed youth of the Provo movement (1965-1967), they do not actively engaging with new social media, like the mixed youth of Provo; rather, they tend to withdraw from society, fearing the world outside. Although they share an inner drive for destruction with the Rode Jeugd, they lack the Rode Jeugd's sense of being able to succeed. In contrast to the Punk subculture, they hardly display public activities.

Social-psychological research shows that human beings need social relations and social exclusion can have a significant impact on individuals. It can result in defensive behavior, a defensive attitude and aggression. By lessening the capacity for self-regulation, exclusion can result in risky or self-destructive behavior. Although it is not known if excluded adolescents are prone to radical ideas or persons propagating these, Van den Bos, Loseman and Doosje (2009) indicate that adolescents that consider themselves unfairly treated display a greater tendency to adopt radical ideas.

Distrust, exclusion and feelings of being unfairly treated or discriminated change someone's interpretation of information and of behavior. This might create a vicious circle: feelings of exclusion result in distrust and a defensive attitude towards society, which, in turn, result in changes in perception of the world around, e.g., through counterfactual thinking and a negative interpretation of signals from society. This changed interpretation might, for its part, may result in a strengthening of the feeling of being excluded and of distrust of the world around.

Conclusion

Hatred of 'the system' among adolescents seems to be a small scale social phenomenon that might be an excrescence of a more widespread distrust against institutions among youth. Because of the small number of respondents, statements about this phenomenon can only made with strong reservations. Most responding relief workers indicated not to know this kind of adolescents but indicated to have spotted a strong distrust among their clients. One respondent reported to have known these adolescents for some six years; a few others could not provide indications as to how long they have seen these youth around, but estimated at least for a period somewhat shorted than this. All indicated that it is very difficult to get and stay in contact with

them. Police indicated that this group has not appeared on their radar, another indication that they are not criminally active.

Most respondents indicated that contact with relief work, streamlined according to modern managerial standards (exchanging information, restricting the duration of the contact) strengthened adolescents in their conviction that they are facing a powerful, threatening adversary. From a social-psychological perspective, this might be an itself reinforcing process. However, according to the available information, there is no reason to expect harm to society.