

Letter from Amsterdam: March 18-21

by James Como



We arrived on Thursday morning, my wife and I, one full day after the troubling national elections: Would Geert Wilders' ("I don't hate Muslims, I hate Islam") PPV party prevail? More generally, would the 'Far Right' – what in the Netherlands is called by the Far Left the 'alt-Right' – rise significantly? In short, would the rising European (and, of course, American) tide of anti-globalist, pro-border cultural protectionism rise even further? Statistically, the answer is Yes. (Note: the independent Parliamentary Documentation Center of Leiden University characterizes the party's platform as running from conservative, to populist, to liberal, to left.) In a parliament of 150 members Wilders' party gained five seats, whereas the governing party, the VVD, lost eight, a swing of thirteen votes. Moreover two new parties on the Right, DENK

and FvD picked up a total of five (three and two, respectively), unprecedented for new parties. It gets worse. It seems that Mark Rutte's VVD was helped by two factors, without which the party would have done even worse: 1/ Turkish cultural aggression (happening in many European countries) allowed Rutte (and local authorities) to take steps that made his party seem strong, and 2/ Wilders, who apparently is lacking in concrete plans and was, in effect, an absentee candidate, "makes Donald Trump sounds [I was told] like Winston Churchill." Still, the far Left PvdD lost a staggering twenty-nine seats. Of the twenty-nine parties on the ballot, sixteen won no seats. The country did indeed move Right, but the next day no one seemed to care.

My particular interest lay (and lies) in the question of assimilation, what there is called 'integration': I abhor the very idea (let alone the actuality) of a nation-within-the Nation, for diversity is *not* multi-culturalism, and a Melting Pot is *not* the same as a Great Mosaic. This stance, it seems to me, simply is not a matter of Left-Right, but of the integrity of nation-states, no matter how opportunistically and disingenuously the Left seeks to frame the question. (Here I regard the charge of Xenophobia and anti-immigrant against people who believe as I do as nothing more than a strawman, though some mud-slingers are too unthoughtful to rise even to that height of dishonest polemic.)

In that light I spoke with a handful of informants. One, an observant Muslim, is a young Dutch-born son of Moroccan immigrant parents. (Moroccans make up the majority of Dutch Muslims and have a troubled history of immigration, at first fine, then not.) He teaches Arabic, attends his mosque, and sees no problem whatever: "I am Dutch," he insisted, though he had no comment when I asked about a poll that showed Moroccan Dutch feeling more loyalty to King Mohammed VI than to King Willem-Alexander. The second, a non-observant Dutch-born Muslim, son of Turkish immigrant parents, similarly saw no

problem of integration; his tattoos, drinking habits, and his absence from any mosque since early childhood made him, he pointed out, fully integrated, and so he feels when interacting with any and all Dutch people.

Both of these young men (like the other informants and, in my experience, like the Dutch generally: this was my fifth visit) were courteous, articulate, helpful, of good cheer, and apparently well-informed. When I asked if they (like all my informants) minded a political discussion they were immediately willing. (The Dutch evidence enormous equanimity, except when on their bicycles.) From the tone of our conversations you would think that nothing was at stake: they are not an intense folk (except when on their bicycles), and it can't *all* be owing to the wide-spread, legal use of marijuana. A third informant, about to get his university degree, is Dutch-born and of the Right. He sees a problem but could not vote for Wilders, choosing instead Theo Hiddema, of the new FvD. (This person particularly bemoaned the near-bankruptcy of the Dutch military: soldiers are so lacking in bullets that when they train they must say "poof poof" while pretend-shooting.) Hiddema's right hand – the real attraction for my informant – is Thierry Baudet, whom I had seen interviewed in (perfect) English): possessed of a keen, analytical intelligence, poised, and forthright. He is man to watch. (And his youthful good looks don't hurt.)

By the way, this young man was the only informant who asked me about American politics. He was very surprised when I corrected some of his misconceptions, demonstrating again the usual morphology of information across the mass media of communication: diffusion, dilution, diminution, distortion.

Another informant, Raul Marroquin, an upper-crust immigrant from Colombia who has been in Holland for over twenty years and enjoys dual citizenship, is a video artist, a well-known and respected TV journalist, and a self-described Leftist. I asked him if Holland had an integration problem. In response

he began to explain the origins of Moroccan discontent. I reminded him that he hadn't answered the question. He began to explain the "Turkish situation." Again I reminded him that he hadn't answered the question. He talked of intolerance. This time I said, "since you keep explaining the presumed origins of the problem I'll assume your answer is 'yes'." He smiled. He had voted for the devastated PvdD, but . . . "the son he never had" is the Geert Wilders theorist, the former Leftist (and New School educated) Martin Bosma. The two are great friends, and Marroquin has been accused of fueling the alt-Right by having Bosma (a former anchorman for Marroquin) as a guest on his program: he should not, say his critics, have given such a man – no matter his intellect, articulacy, and reasonableness – a platform. Marroquin seemed to me to be quite enjoying himself in describing this ménage (and I him, until his reference to "white trash" in schools he did not want his daughter to attend).

My post-visit conclusion is nothing special: it all seemed familiar – except for the Dutch press, which is (and by all sides is said to be) fair, balanced, truthful and candid. But my paternal grandfather, whose great loves other than his family were opera and reading, has a conclusion of his own. Over one hundred years ago he emigrated from Abruzzo to Western Pennsylvania (where he would dynamite a KKK headquarters). There and in Harlem he and my grandmother would raise nine children, none of whom would learn to speak Italian. Once, when I asked my father why this was so, he said, "because your grandfather told us that now that he was in America he was an American and would speak English," and – my right hand to Heaven – I would see tears roll down the old man's cheeks when he watched *Yankee Doodle Dandy*. Now, that's assimilation.