

China

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The past week I was in China, together with colleagues from a few other Dutch universities. The day we left, Klaas Dijkhoff - party leader of the ruling party in the Netherlands - made headlines by mocking other party leaders for taking the preservation of the planet and the related environmental agreements seriously. He thought the "ordinary man" should not be the victim of the costs involved in preservation and must be able to continue his life, including the pollution ...

I confess, at such a moment an inner voice says democracy is dead. Guiltily, I board the plane to Beijing to talk about developing an artificial brain. The evening before my departure my wife and I went to the theatre show *Save the Earth* in Groningen, in memory of the astronaut Wubbo Ockels. With regard to the environment it is, as we heard during the show, 5 to 12. Immediately after arriving in China I notice that practically no one goes on the street without a mouth mask. The smell of pollution is omnipresent, the atmosphere is filled with exhaust fumes and substances. In China it is about a quarter past 12, with smog everywhere. Cars washed longer than a day ago are covered with a layer of regularly distributed dust. Unintentionally I think of the Disney film Wall-e.

At all addresses we visit we are received with all respect. Likewise by the Chinese colleagues from one of the top universities in the country. Very nice and surprisingly open people. Environmental policy is also discussed during the meal. Precisely because it has come this far, everything is done to regain control over the environment. Environmentally neutral policy is inadequate, and a negative CO2 policy is being pursued. I tell the Chinese colleagues about Dijkhoff. They look at me seriously and say that the swabbing policy is characteristic of the West: "By the time the first steps have been taken, everything will be turned upside down again because a new government is taking office. The first steps in a necessary new policy threaten to be completely undone when a new board takes office".

Thinking of Holland, I hear populists who over-whistle feelings of inferiority with an inappropriate delusion of superiority. Sometimes I fancy about depriving them of their communication channels, because they destroy more than their right to speech is worth. It is a difficult issue, because I am very much in favour of this right, and believe that at most in case of terrorism this right can be temporarily subordinated to the general interest. But then again, is not the preservation of the planet our greatest interest? May a politician who is taken seriously behave as Dijkhoff did? So far from home I dream away, I still think about Holland, but now from my new Chinese perspective. My hosts break through my train of thoughts. They are fortunately still talking about "our" pivoting political system. "Only multinationals can largely ignore this short-term policy, and that is apparently your greatest support", they say.

The night before the return to Europe I reflect on the week in my hotel room. It feels like I have new friends, besides my travel companions the Chinese with whom we were so intensively in conversation. At the university we saw young people and PhD students, with an excellent mind and a large degree of openness and individuality. In a games factory we saw employees who almost certainly all had ASD diagnosed at home. I mentioned this to the boss. He laughed and said that this is indeed the case with us, but that people with such great talents are by definition special and that is why he hires them. Of course I also see shadow sides. Matters such as human rights have completely disappeared from my vision during my journey and I can not say anything about that. Working from home does not exist, the days at the office are very long. In the game factory, some "nerds" (including graduate programmers, musicians, graphic designers and mathematicians) sleep with their heads on the keyboard. The boss does not look at it.

A strange feeling comes to me. Until the Enlightenment China was in many ways the most developed culture in the world. I have always thought that the Chinese do not understand our democracy and culture and that's why China has become a third world country. Now I begin to understand that they have caught up with us for a long time. In the west, all of us, including our "rulers" - the politicians, journalists and (other) populists including the yellow vests organizers - have to feel ashamed. If it hadn't been 12 o'clock at first in China, the planet was definitely lost. Fortunately, China is very big and what is set in motion is continued with great patience and understanding. Maybe it is not too late!