

## Heritage as Ideology

### *Big thoughts, small steps and rich ideas*

The city of Leeuwarden has a tower called De Oldenhove, once part of a large church. The main building destroyed in a storm, the tower remains. The story goes that during the first stages of building the foundation failed. Builder Jacob van Aaken was used to rock and not the clay he found in Leeuwarden. He started experimenting with new techniques but when the tower had reached ten metres, it began to lean in a north-easterly direction.

The prolapsing tower-to-be was seen as the result of Jacob van Aaken's lack of competency. The commissioning city and church elders were furious and ordered Van Aaken to be punished. But he argued that here was a situation in which competence could not be other than insufficient. There was no experience with building huge towers on clay. Building on in an experimental way would help provide others with meaningful knowledge and the elders with a tower, perhaps.

Jacob van Aaken built on, unfortunately not seeing the end result as he died before the tower was finished. Leeuwarden now has a tower that not only is a leaning one but also shows a curve as the builders thought they could compensate for the fault by building in such a curve. They were successful.

To me De Oldenhove is symbol for an approach in which a normative ideology, that of what is to be taken as right—in this case a tower that is straight, and in stature matching the one in the city of Groningen—is countered by a descriptive ideology that is grounded in the need to use human inventiveness to add to what we know, by experimenting.

De Oldenhove as a symbol is now the illustration of a prescriptive ideology, a narrative on how to learn in fact. No constructional engineer can do without it.

This links to what Slavoj Žižek says in a recent lecture at the European Graduate School on *Ideologies and Modalities of Not Knowing*<sup>1</sup>. As often, he elaborately addresses the need of transgression as an—almost inherent—aspect of any ideology. Unsurprisingly Žižek illustrates the rules in the Yugoslav army he was conscripted into by telling us about those concerning the use of alcohol. Use was forbidden; however, not getting drunk in the weekends was seen as a lack of comradeship. This was considered a more serious misdemeanour. Here a normative ideology, which keeps 'army' together, is confronted with the descriptive ideology that governs tribal governance. A tribe is seriously in danger when rules are normative only.

Žižek considers normative ideology as required for the act of transgression. Moreover, transgression is the product of an ideology itself, needed for such things as comradeship, and in the case of De Oldenhove for learning.

It needs no argument that without comradeship an army cannot exist, nor that building can exist without leaning towers. This then leads to the argument that army rules are instrumental, not just in forbidding certain behaviour only but also in creating the need to transgress.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBa-pCmuBHU>. For the uninitiated: Žižek has habits that distract hugely from what he is saying. Perhaps look at the clip twice. First to get used to the man, and then to hear what he has to say.

I spent two and a half years at boarding school. It taught me a lot about transgression. Rather than becoming anecdotal here it is worth mentioning the 1968 movie 'If...'<sup>1</sup> by Lindsay Anderson as a reflection of that time.



In "If..." transgression evolves into a revolutionary and extremely violent uprising. It is the threshold taken from transgression to violent resistance that has intrigued me from seeing the movie onward.

"If..." takes place at a British boarding school. I saw the movie during my boarding school time, being 15 years old. It left a lasting impression. A large part of my academic, artistic and professional life revolves around the question of what ideology can do in all three of these aspects of life. Violence and the cruel nature of ideological concepts such as justice and safety are themes that run through my work.

I have had a fair share of direct confrontations with both situations in which violence was a chosen change agent and with people who had been or were involved in a violent struggle. The artistic impressions of violent struggle in "If..." eerily sound through what happens and happened in regions such as Namibia and South Africa, East Timor, Guatemala, Afghanistan. There is a normative ideology that resists being part of a narrative ideology as a whole, or perhaps rather an ideological narrative as a whole. What there is to do then cannot be transgression but sheer resistance. Resistance until the world opens up<sup>2</sup>.

Having said that I cannot escape the reality that Christine Noonan –whom you see in the picture above—might have had a more serious impact at the time than the whole storyline put together. She is one of two women in what is otherwise a very male enterprise, both in terms of moral and of narrative ideology. The other woman is the nurse who operates as an extension of the suppressive boarding school doctrine.

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<sup>1</sup> For the full movie: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PmoHv8Mf\\_-o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PmoHv8Mf_-o)

<sup>2</sup> In Namibia I interviewed a police officer, now head of the police dog training facility. His name is Piet Steenkamp, which to the initiated signals his side in the conflict that was now over. He feared for his life when the freedom fighters had liberated Namibia for South African *apartheid* rule in 1990. With tears in his eyes he told me that the victors had told him that he was not only to live, but also stay within the police, serving his new nation.

As such Noonan is the attractor in what shows itself as a rather Latourian experiment. Violence and what transpires between the leader of the uprising and what simply is referred to as The Girl cannot be detached; as all other nodes in the intricate network of ideas cannot be seen without their impact upon other nodes. Lindsay Anderson shows how moral, descriptive and prescriptive ideologies in their dynamic can be caught into one narrative ideology, bound into 'art' also through adding to the public enterprise a personal interaction, which might very well be the trigger to it all.

This leads to the notion of 'indigenous governance' as an escape from the inevitability of violent struggle. Famed Canadian philosopher James Tully uses that term amongst other things for the public attention given to the living earth as the ground of sustainable futures. In other words, the attention given to matters that concern us all.

The picture below is of a sculpture by Bill Reid called *Spirit of Haida Gwaii, Black Canoe*. A replica is shown in the Canadian Museum of Civilizations in Ottawa.

As Tully describes in his *Strange Multiplicity*:

"The passengers are squabbling and vying for recognition and position each in their culturally distinct way. They are exchanging their diverse stories and claims as the chief appears to listen attentively to each, hoping to guide them to reach an agreement, without imposing a metalanguage or allowing any speaker to set the terms of the discussion. The chief's subjection to the rule of mutual recognition is symbolized by the crests of the crew's nations and families carved in the speaker's staff."



The chief's role is described as dependent upon 'squabbling' within the constraints of a canoe, requiring specific rules of deliberative engagement. In fact we can speak of the



experiment as Latour sees us in constantly. Experiments are –in his mind—the public enterprise aimed at matters that concern us all, and entered into in a ‘culturally distinct way’. As such the Black Canoe is the ‘Gestalt’ of what is public, both in issues and in processes. It is the Gestalt of all possible categories of ideology. Again it is art that shows us the narrative ideology that brings the parts together.

The Black Canoe could serve as a symbol for the laboratories we engage into. In it we need to position ideologies. One is the taboo of *imposing* a metalanguage, which is in fact the moral ideology discussed above and illustrated through the regents and De Oldenhove commissioning parties. We are to *develop* a temporal metalanguage.

For this to happen public philosophy is required, and not a philosopher prince. The chief is simply the overseer of squabbling, not squabbling him or herself but attentively observing and seizing upon every opportunity to document what the squabbling tell us about who we publicly are.

Talking about governance with a chief of a first nation in the Northwest of the United States he told me that the heritage of –in my words—squabbling turned into public patterns was the ideology he carried and cared for. Heritage as the narrative ideology that produces the ways to deal with what concerns us all; hewn into totem poles and images of canoes. Depictions that serve the same purpose as Greek tragedies you needed to attend if you wanted any position in the city.



In the Dutch Golden Age these rich, upper class citizens took it upon them to govern these charitable organisations motivated by a keen self-interest. Civil unrest could be restrained by providing for both gentle care to the unfortunate and severe punishment to those who showed themselves as criminals.

In my mind there need not be a moral judgement here, and indeed there cannot be. A moral judgement is only justified when we would consider the activities of the regents in isolation. In a sound history of the Dutch Golden Age attention is given to what transgression was generated by regents’ normative ideology. In their being lies the foundation of a state that to all intents, constructions and purposes must be considered one of the most liberal and ‘transgressive’. Somehow, as a whole there was a process of organisation that accommodated for the development of a constitutional democracy. The question now is whether it public domain has ever developed as a Black Canoe. As the Greeks, as the affluent citizens of Amsterdam, as the media elite at this moment, ‘what concern us all’ and –especially—how these things should concern us, seem to still being dictated by a few public figures.

Hannah Arendt took her trepidations concerning the state of ‘public’ as a motive to examine the human condition. Perhaps her subsequent outlines relate to the lack of the Black Canoe in Western ventures. Whether it is the navigation as a whole, the question of safety, the



room taken by individuals, the rules of engagement, all the matters that concern all in the Black Canoe relate to a set of ideological narratives aimed at not just keeping the canoe upright and sailing, but also functioning as a human vehicle. From the personal that is an aspect of 'human', through the social and cultural as aspects of 'human', all must subsequently conclude that there is public as aspect of 'human'; if only because safety within the canoe is the product of making personal and social concerns public<sup>1</sup>.

If there is a distinction within the human condition between the personal, the social and the public, the question then is whether there is a distinction in human reasoning within these domains. There is inevitability in that. Currently the urge is to resist that inevitability, as we are intent to guard our personal and socio-cultural domains and see that as an end in itself. Reasoning within the Black Canoe requires not just improvisation but rules of the game, rooted in heritage.

Ideological is the rule that rules of discussion within the Black Canoe are not set by any single speaker travelling in it. Interestingly, the question is then who sets the rule that not any speaker may set rules.

This relates to the discussion between John Rawls and Amartya Sen. Rawls wrote the epic *Theory of Justice*, implying that rules can be based in a theoretical notion. Sen wrote *An Idea of Justice*, implying that rules can only be based in the practice of attention for 'the living earth', for matters that concern us all. Sen promotes a fleet of Black Canoes as the source of the kind of insight that helps navigate a single canoe. Justice as heritage.

Here we encounter the clash between justice seen as a normative ideology based in the thought that justice is 'something' on the one hand, and a narrative ideology that generates ideas of justice of a temporal nature on the other. The latter must be seen as part of a contemporary view on what 'public' is. 'Public' requires a narrative ideology, for instance in terms of the rules of engagement. These rules are generated by activism. Activism requires a normative ideology, and a game as a whole in which descriptive ideologies and prescriptive ideologies are based in time and place dependent conclusions on doing things right and finding ways in doing things right at the same time. This is the justification of experimenting as a public engagement, and as art. Art being doing things right and finding out what is right at the same time.

Back to building; Jane Jacobs was an activist who took it upon herself to resist the dominant, normative ideology concerning city planning. Triggered by plans to demolish Greenwich Village in the lower part of Manhattan, New York City, she developed a descriptive ideology concerning –amongst other things– safety. This is part of that ideology:

"A city street equipped to handle strangers [...] must have three main qualities:

First, there must be a clear demarcation between what is public space and what is private space. Public and private spaces cannot ooze into each other as they do typically in suburban settings or in projects.

Second, there must be eyes upon the street, eyes belonging to those we might call the natural proprietors of the street. The buildings on a street equipped to handle strangers and

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<sup>1</sup> In a plane once a passenger across the aisle was concentrating on her magazine while the flight attendant was telling us about emergency procedures. Knowing my bit about the possible consequences of not paying attention I asked the lady to pay attention next time. She responded by telling me: "I am responsible for myself." I told her that this was quite obvious but not justified in the given circumstances. She was not happy with my comments, perhaps because I was just another passenger and not the captain.

to insure the safety of both residents and strangers, must be oriented to the street. They cannot turn their backs or blank sides on it and leave it blind.

And third, the sidewalk must have users on it fairly continuously, both to add to the number of effective eyes on the street and to induce the people in buildings along the street to watch the sidewalks in sufficient numbers. Nobody enjoys sitting on a stoop or looking out a window at an empty street. Almost nobody does such a thing. Large numbers of people entertain themselves, off and on, by watching street activity.”

As in the Black Canoe, and in Arendt’s public atmosphere in which we make the world, the sidewalk accommodates the stranger. Perhaps that is what is the ultimate test is of our humanity. As such that accommodation cannot do without an ideology and without the ideological activism needed to make place. Many organisations seem to resist accommodating the stranger and the strange, developing norms so as to explain why strange is synonym to unwanted radicalism.

There would not be a bent tower in Leeuwarden, showing what man can do if there had not been the normative ideology commanding height and straightness as the signs of power. The question then is whether transgression needs to be rooted in an ideology also. In my mind that is inevitable. However, while a normative ideology is exclusive, a narrative ideology is inclusive. Normative ideology has a Weberian modernism to it, in which the goal is to decipher what moves society and appreciating its members as children that need to be taught by those in authority. Authority based in the assumption that having it is based in a rather evolutionist notion of ‘the fittest’ in relation to a repressive sphere. The fittest therefore being relative to a dominant narrative that is not based in what actually happens but in a normative approach to what ought to be, given the interests of a few.

In my mind *change management* must include a common view on what facilitates an organisation, or rather a way of organising, that includes the need of activism. My argument is that this requires facilitating ideology set against the characteristics of ‘indigenous governance’. The Black Canoe is the laboratory of public affairs we are.

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