

## How the Dutch Remember 1968 The Mysterious Disappearance of the Women's Movement

Esmeralda Tijhoff

I am a child of the Sixties and I had the idea that sexuality would never be a problem again after those liberating years. But of course, this turned out to be false.<sup>1</sup>

In the past decade, a shift occurred in the attitude towards the Sixties. The memory of these so called joyful years is disturbed by a new view identifying this period as the root of today's hedonistic and selfish society. What can be said about this interpretation of the Sixties? How are the Sixties envisioned today and which hierarchies can be found in this national process of remembrance?

1968 was not a particularly violent or disturbing year in Dutch history. The most important rebels, the *Provos*, were mainly active until 1967, and it wasn't until 1969 that students began to collectively protest.<sup>2</sup> Still, 1968 is a key year in the collective memory and in order to map this remembrance culture, I have analysed how '68 was presented in the Dutch media in 2008.<sup>3</sup> By identifying the historical characters present in the memory of '68, important hierarchies concerning characters and events became apparent.

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1 Interview with Bas Levering, Radio 1, November 11, 2008 (translation E. T.).

2 Cf. Hans Righart, *De eindeloze jaren zestig. Geschiedenis van een generatieconflict* [The Endless Sixties. The History of a Generation Conflict], Amsterdam/Antwerpen 1995, 189–200, 234f; James Kennedy, *Nieuw Babylon in aanbouw* [Building New Babylon], Amsterdam 1995, 130–136.

3 I used "LexusNexus" to find articles that refer to 1968 and were published in Dutch newspapers in 2008. "LexusNexus" is a database that archives most Dutch national and local newspapers. I selected 158 articles that mentioned 1968 as a historical year.

## A non-Dutch Happening

Two historical portrayals of the year 1968 can be observed. The most dominant one is to take 1968 as “May 1968”: as a French revolution that had an impact on the rest of Europe. In second place is the image of 1968 as represented by the “Prague Spring” and the Soviets’ invasion. And finally, the year 1968 can be remembered corresponding to the murder of Martin Luther King, and the *African-American Civil Rights Movement*.

To call the commemorative 1968 articles and documentaries to witness: nearly half of the 158 analysed newspaper articles referred to Paris and France (41.1 %) and slightly more to the student protests (41.8 %). Almost a third of the contributions combined the two notions by introducing 1968 as the year of the French student revolution. In these articles, ‘Paris’ and ‘student protests’ are interchangeable with ‘May 68’. The terms collide and form a new idea which pinpoints the year 1968 to the protests in a particular time and particular place. It is amazing that the strikes of the French workers are only mentioned in 16.5 percent of the articles, while almost two third of all of the workers were involved in the protests that broke out throughout France.<sup>4</sup>

Surprisingly, Germany is hardly touched upon in the Dutch newspaper articles (14.6 %). And when discussed, it was not the events themselves drew the attention, but new books about them for in April 2008 there was some coverage of the renaming of Berlin’s Kochstraße after Rudi Dutschke.

The “Prague Spring” is quickly mentioned as one of a list of historical events in 1968 that are supposed to be connected and embody some kind of European revolution. Only seven articles elaborated on the Soviet invasion in Czechoslovakia in August 1968 in connection to the students and workers’ protests.<sup>5</sup> With the Soviet invasion in Georgia in August 2008, however, the focus on Prague in 1968 grew to one fifth of the total number of articles studied. In the news coverage, the events in Prague provided some historical background to the invasion and furthermore was used to compare the two Russian invasions. In these articles, however, the invasion of Prague is no longer presented as part of the revolutionary year 1968, but as part of the history of the “Cold War” and the Russian influence in Eastern Europe.

In a small part of the articles, Martin Luther King and the *Civil Rights Movement* are mentioned as part of 1968. Here, a paradox occurs in that the memory of King is both strengthened, as well as pushed aside, by Obama. The murder of Martin Luther King

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4 Cf. Hans Righart, *De wereldwijde jaren zestig*. Groot-Brittannië, Nederland, de Verenigde Staten, Utrecht 2004, 11.

5 This is especially true for the articles featuring or written by Martin Šimek, who fled from Czechoslovakia in 1968 and has become a well known television and radio host in the Netherlands. The television programme “Andere Tijden” [Different Times] also broadcasted a documentary about “Prague Spring”: *Praagse Lente*, in: *Andere Tijden*, April 10, 2008.

on the fourth of April 1968 is often mentioned in the context of Barack Obama.<sup>6</sup> To be precise, in articles about King, Obama tends to take over, but in articles about Obama, King is also often mentioned, and thus remembered. Still, King and the *Civil Rights Movement* seem to be excluded from the series of revolutionary happenings that make up “1968”. The topic is barely mentioned in articles set up to discuss the memory or legacy of “1968” and is almost never present in the list of events used in the introductions to the very articles about this year.

## Dutch Eye-Witness Reports

When pushed to compare Paris and Berlin to the Netherlands, a couple of interviewees in the articles studied pointed out 1969 as ‘the 1968 of Holland’ since in this year, the administrative centre of the *University of Amsterdam*, the Maagdenhuis, was occupied for weeks. Similarly, 1968 is presented as an ‘in-between year’, with *Provo* having left the scene in 1967, and the Dutch student movement emerging in 1969.<sup>7</sup>

Because the protests in 1968 took place ‘elsewhere’, Dutch media wanted to bring the subject ‘home’ by looking for ways to be able to connect 1968 to the Netherlands. Thus Dutch people present in Paris at the time were invited to share their experiences. The main topic is how they did, or did not, notice the protests. One of these people is the Dutch singer Ank Reinders who responded to the call from a national newspaper to share her personal experiences of 1968. She stayed in Paris in May 1968, but she states: “I was not at all involved in politics or student riots. Now, so many years later and confronted with all these reflections about that time, I am surprised about my own ignorance regarding those exciting years.”<sup>8</sup> In fact, all the respondents to this particular call presented themselves as people ‘looking in’ on the happening, as outsiders, watching – with a little disbelief or excitement – huge and violent protests in non-Dutch cities.

This non-Dutch character of “1968” is also the main theme in the news or documentaries broadcast on television. The history programme “Andere Tijden” [Different Times] showed Jacqueline de Jong, a Dutch artist in Paris, standing in front of a French bookstore glancing at the books about “1968”.<sup>9</sup> She was part of the protests in Paris at the time

6 About 20.3 % of the articles mentioned the *Civil Rights Movement* or Martin Luther King; concerning this strong connection eg. cf. Frank Hendrickx, Obama Martin Luther King de zwarte Mozes [Obama Martin Luther King the Black Moses], in: Nederlands Dagblad, April 3, 2008; Albrand Leeuwe, Obama kan de nieuwe King worden [Obama Could Become the New King], in: Algemeen Dagblad, April 4, 2008.

7 An article is even called: The Dutch year in between ’68. Hubert Smeets, Het Nederlands tussenjaar ’68. Voor het eerst waren man en vrouw elkaars gelijke [The Dutch Year in between ’68. For the First Time, Men and Women were Equals], in: NRC Handelsblad, May 5, 2008.

8 Ank Reinders, Concert, in: NRC Handelsblad, May 23, 2008.

9 Parijs ’68, in: Andere Tijden, May 22, 2008.

and produced posters for the students. “NOVA”, a Dutch news programme, opened its broadcast with “May 1968, 40 years later” with the French/Dutch couple Annette Lévy-Willard and Ludi Boeken who also glanced through a French book about “1968”.<sup>10</sup> In this episode, Lévy-Willard was interviewed about her involvement in the student protests during May 1968 in Paris. She sat behind her desk, a pile of books almost obstructing the view of her. The emphasis on the French books suggests that the reason for these television shows is not so much the anniversary of protests that have supposedly ‘rocked the world’, but the rather odd commemorative practice of the French who seem to proudly cling to protests that happened forty years ago. Dutch bookstores do not have such window displays cluttered with “1968”-books, as there is no deluge of books. The bookstore in the television shows, therefore, is an important clue, precisely because it refers to a commemorative hype not present in the Netherlands.

“NOVA” actually tried hard to link “1968” to the Netherlands. In 27 episodes the station claimed to “bring back 1968” by “shedding light on big and small events”.<sup>11</sup> To do this, they desperately dragged topical issues into their programme, varying from the first inhabitants of the Bijlmer, then a promising new district of Amsterdam, now a criminal neighbourhood, the first heart transplant, and the visit of the pop-band “The Supremes” to the Netherlands. The series finished with an episode about the protests in Paris “where it all began”.<sup>12</sup> Of course, how the episode about the first heart transplant conducted by the surgeon Christiaan Barnard, “began” in Paris 1968 does not become clear.

## The Women’s Movement

There was, however, a historical event worth remembering that took place in the Netherlands in 1968: the foundation of *Man Vrouw Maatschappij* (MVM) that is generally seen as one of the origins of the second wave of feminism in this country.<sup>13</sup> Still, the women’s movement is mentioned in only fourteen of the 158 analysed articles (8.9 %). Women in general are mentioned in 11 percent of the articles, while sex and the sexual revolution are mentioned in 12 percent of the articles. The *MVM* is conspi-

10 Saskia Dekkers and Menno de Galan, Mei 1968; veertig jaar later [May 1968; Forty Years Later], in: Nova, May 2, 2008.

11 “NOVA” started each episode with these words; cf. Het jaar 1968 [The Year 1968], in: Nova, July 7–August 19, 2008.

12 1968: Studentenrevolutie in Parijs [1968: Student Revolution in Paris], in: Nova, August 19, 2008.

13 Anneke Ribberink, Leidsvrouwen en zaakwaarnemers. Een geschiedenis van de aktiegroep Man Vrouw Maatschappij (MVM) 1968–1973 [Leaders and Agencies. A History of Action Group Men Women Society], Hilversum 1998; Vilan van de Loo, De vrouw beslist. De tweede feministische golf in Nederland [The Woman Decides. The Second Feminist Wave in the Netherlands], Amsterdam 2005; cf. also: the article by Mineke Bosch in this issue.

cuously absent, while only one of the founders of this organisation, Hedy d'Ancona, elaborated the importance of *MVM* and of the women's movement as part of 1968 and the Sixties and Seventies in general.<sup>14</sup> What does this lack of interest tells us?

Firstly: when women are referred to at all, they are most likely to be mentioned in relation to the changed sexual behaviours and the introduction of the pill which is supposed to have 'liberated' women in general. In one of the articles, an extensive Dutch review of an interview with historian Götz Aly in the German newspaper "Tageszeitung", women and sex are even seen as the root of the protests in 1968. It states that the low number of 'available' women in the movement, in conjunction with the pill and the sexual revolution, caused male students to start the riots of 1968 as a 'monkey dance' to gain female attention for males engaged in a protest, according to Freud, to obtain sexual attractiveness.<sup>15</sup>

Secondly, women are mentioned in conjunction with their underprivileged position in society 'back then'. Yet, how and why their position changed is not discussed in most of these articles. The notification that women were once suppressed is self evident for these authors and does not need further explanation. However, in the other articles that do elaborate on the origin of the changing position of women in society, it is disturbing to see that the women's movement tends to be kept out of the picture. The difference in the social position of women then and now is presented simply as something that just happened, as if there was some natural drive, like 'modernity', that caused society to change. By not identifying the historical characters, the struggle of the women's movement is not just overlooked, but eventually pushed out of collective memory. Even worse, in many articles the Sixties are presented as the liberator of women while the women's movement is not mentioned at all. One article actually identified this problem, but still failed to correct the myth: "They [the people of 1968] unleashed the sexual revolution, they 'liberated' women. Their deeds were a turning point in history. They freed society of its rigidity. That is the myth anyway."<sup>16</sup>

It is interesting to see how, in the 14 articles that do mention the women's movement, this movement is presented as an outcome, as the result of 1968. According to multiple articles, the events of May 1968 were of immense importance to the women's movement, or as the newspaper "Telegraaf" put it, of "decisive importance".<sup>17</sup> One author, the sociologist Anton Zijderveld, believes the second feminist wave was perhaps

14 Cf. Marieke van Twillert, *Vrouwelijk onbehagen is terug. Dertigers van nu hebben het zwaarder dan dertigers van 1968* [The Return of the Uneasiness of Women. People in their Thirties have a Harder Time than People in their Thirties in 1968], in: NRC Handelsblad, May 8, 2008.

15 Peter Giesen, *De dans om de erfenis van 1968* [The Struggle of the Heritage of 1968], in: Volkskrantblog, January 8, 2008.

16 Joost van der Vaart, *De taaie Duitse 1968'ers. Van APO naar RAF loopt een rechte lijn* [The Tough Germans of 1968. A Straight Line Leeds from the APO to the RAF], in: NRC Handelsblad, May 5, 2008.

17 *Idealen ebben weg. We hebben belachelijke dingen geroepen* [Ideals Disappear. We have Demanded Ridiculous Things], in: De Telegraaf, May 4, 2008.

the most important part of the revolution. In his article in “Financieel Dagblad”, he not only uses the term ‘second feminist wave’, but he also gives this movement credit for the changed position of women in society. But then he takes this credit away by stating: “This emancipation has still not been completed, but without ‘1968’, it would never have come this far, although in certain groups of migrants the women’s emancipation still needs to get started.”<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

The urge to write about “1968” was motivated by its fortieth anniversary in conjunction with the cult created around this year in France. The drive to produce articles on this topic has led to multiple ways to incorporate this year as an historical character. In consequence “1968” or “May 1968” has pushed away other historical characters, such as the second feminist wave. This has led to a small series of articles explicitly written to draw attention to the events other than the student revolution in Paris, such as “Prague Spring”, the *Civil Rights Movement*, but also the Fifties and of course the women’s movement. Hedy d’Ancona’s article is one of those ‘what about us’ contributions as she asks: “Where is women’s emancipation in the articles recalling May 1968?”<sup>19</sup>

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18 Anton C. Zijderveld, Niets mis met spruitjeslucht. Jaren vijftig waren niet stoffig en saai [Nothing Wrong with the Smell of Boiled Sprouts. The Fifties were not Boring], in: Het Financieele Dagblad, March 1, 2008.

19 Twillert, *Vrouwelijk*, see note 14.