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A Masochistic Heresy

IT IS A MASOCHISTIC HERESY, THIS SECULARIZED BELIEF IN A BIB-LICAL DELUGE THAT IN OUR TIME HAS TAKEN THE HEARTS AND MINDS OF OUR ADMINISTRATORS, A MANIA, COMPARABLE TO A CULT OF DEATH THAT ONCE RAVAGED THE EASTER ISLANDS. [1]

—THIERRY BAUDET

It is Wednesday, March 20, around 11 p.m. Elections have been held in the Netherlands, and I decide to watch the "victory speech" of the party that gained the most seats. These are not general elections, which decide the composition of the House of Representatives and, by extension, the government, but rather elections for the Provincial States. [2] Yet these are also significant on the national level, as the elected members decide on the makeup of the Senate—the body that has to approve all new legislation.

These elections are also a barometer.

Listening to the twenty-minute speech of the victorious party's leader, I am struck by the rhetorical role given to architecture in the pursuit of

[1] Victory speech held after the elections on March 20, 2019, translated by the author. Following passages are cited from the same speech.

[2] There are twelve provinces in the Netherlands, and the Provincial States constitute the body of representatives for each of these provinces. They are elected every four years, after which coalitions are formed that will decide on the provincial governments. Together with representative bodies from the Dutch Caribbean, the representatives of the Provincial States also elect the members of the Dutch Senate (the so-called First Chamber), thereby making these "provincial" elections significant on the level of national politics.

Thierry Baudet, leader of the Forum voor Democratie, delivering his "victory speech" on March 20, 2019.

a xenophobic and anti-European agenda. The roles that architecture plays in such politics are well known—yet it is not the rhetorics of a "wall" that strikes me (although to be sure, there's plenty of border closing in the party's agenda), nor does the speech rely on the architectural metaphors (the houses, chambers, and commons) by which politics often operate. Rather, the architecture and urbanism that is discussed in these twenty minutes is discussed primarily through its *aesthetic appearance.*

Thierry Baudet, a thirty-six-year-old politician who holds a PhD in the philosophy of law from the University of Leiden, is giving the speech. He is the leader of the Forum voor Democratie, the party he founded in 2016 and that—based on this election, almost three years after its founding—is the largest party in the Netherlands. [3] Right-wing populism currently counts for over a fifth of Dutch votes, beating the previous "record" achieved in the 2002 elections, which followed the assassination of Pim Fortuyn. [4]

Standing on the steps of Hotel Figi's atrium in Zeist for a crowd of supporters, Baudet mentions the word *architecture* for the first time about one and a half minutes into his speech:

> [WE ARE STANDING] IN THE MIDST OF THE DEBRIS OF WHAT WAS ONCE THE GREATEST AND MOST BEAUTIFUL CIVILIZATION THE WORLD HAS EVER KNOWN, A CIVILIZATION…THAT REACHED ALL CORNERS OF THE WORLD, THAT WAS FULL OF CONFIDENCE, AND THAT CREATED THE MOST BEAUTIFUL ARCHITECTURE, THE MOST BEAUTIFUL MUSIC, THE MOST BEAUTIFUL PAINTING THAT EVER EXISTED UNDER THE STARS.

This civilization, Baudet argues, is being destroyed by those who ought to protect it: universities, journalists, recipients of subsidies for the arts, those "who design our buildings," and the current administrators (generally dubbed the "party cartel" in Baudet's appearances, although not this time).

Those who design our buildings.

For the most part, the logic is all too recognizable for anyone who has followed populist resurgences across the globe these past few years. The creation of an "elite" enemy and the equivalent Bannonesque foes—safe spaces, the media, the (Dutch version of the) NEA, the proverbial "swamp"—go hand in hand with the rhetorics of decline, of what Baudet once controversially called a "homeopathic dilution" caused by immigration. [5] What seems different in the case of the Forum voor Democratie, however, is the way in which architects are specifically called out and directly implicated in this perceived decline. If you, the architect, feared for the real agency that *you-who-designed-our-building* have in the world—fear no longer. It seems architects are still as implicated as any other elite. (And so, by the way, are urbanists: "People don't believe in the Netherlands anymore… People don't believe anymore in our official holidays, our heroes, our traditional urbanism.") [6]

These ideologically driven attacks on architects and architecture did not emerge all of a sudden with Baudet's recent political successes but fit within an overall pattern that can be traced throughout his earlier career characterized by polemics, sexism, and hyperbole. [7] (He once remarked, "[Rem]

[3] The Netherlands has traditionally been a coalition-led country; no party has ever held an absolute majority in over a century. That the Forum, with 14.4 percent of the votes, is the largest party is exemplary of the fragmented nature of the multi-party landscape.

[4] The assassination of Pim Fortuyn was in many ways a watershed moment in Dutch politics, and the rapid emergence and intellectual foundations of his politics resemble those of Baudet. The 21.3 percent now held by rightwing populists is the combined votes for Geert Wilders' Freedom Party and Baudet's Forum. See Tom-Jan Meeus, "En daar is de nieuwe Pim: Thierry Baudet," in *NRC*, March 21, 2019.

[5] During a campaigning event in March 2017, Baudet remarked, "The self-hatred that we try to transcend… by diluting the Dutch population homeopathically with all the peoples of the world, so that there will never again be a Dutchman." The outcry over these remarks was widely covered in the Dutch Media.

[6] Thierry Baudet, victory speech held after the elections on March 20, 2019. By "heroes," Baudet most likely refers to recent and heated Dutch public debates on statues and street names of former members of the slave-trading East-India Company. Although a full elaboration remains outside the scope of this essay, it is worth noting that it was in part because of the continuing influence of the architects who defined the architecture of the postwar welfare state (Aldo van Eyck, Herman Hertzberger, and others) that historicist postmodernism, with some exceptions, never really took off in the Netherlands during the 1980s.

[7] Baudet is featured regularly in newspaper op-eds and has published a number of novels and nonfiction works, including a version of his dissertation *The Significance of Borders*, which he defended at Leiden University in 2012. His novel *Voorwaardelijke Liefde* (2014) caused an uproar because of its depicted sexism.

Koolhaas in my eyes is the biggest criminal against humanity.") [8] It is a history in which a number of people played key roles, but one clearly stands out: Roger Scruton. As the recently appointed (and more recently sacked) chair of the UK government's Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, Scruton claimed that the Grenfell Tower fire wouldn't have happened if the Tower "hadn't been so ugly" in the first place. [9] Scruton is also the British philosopher of aesthetics who was one of Baudet's advisers on his 2012 dissertation, *The Significance of Borders.* [10]

A review of Scruton's writing on modern and contemporary architecture reveals a limited awareness of modernist historiography and a particularly singular and aesthetic view of modernism. [11] His perspective can effectively be summed up as opposed to most things that do not feature the "classical vernacular," and with the certainty that buildings should have boundaries. That he would advise on a law thesis titled *The Significance of Borders* thus seems fitting—it might well have been the title of a book on his architectural principles.

The argument that Baudet developed under Scruton's supervision holds "that representative government and the rule of law require nation states." [12] Its purpose is "to reconsider the significance of borders." Scruton's influence emerges in particular when it comes to the agency given to architectural policy in the development of nationalist identity formation: "Whether in the form of a language, or through the upkeep of architectural heritage, rarely have states remained indifferent to the way or ways of life of which they are the ultimate herdsmen." [13] Furthermore (and in a remarkable twist that seems to defy his argument), modern architecture is given a pacifying role in postwar Europe, though not the one that postwar modernists, and those extolling the possibilities of European integration, had called for. It is an argument that goes something like this: Because the modernist architecture that defined postwar European reconstruction *is so ugly*, people would never make the mistake of bombing out their cities again. [14]

Who needs the European Union when modernism safeguards our peace?

The argument is ridiculous, of course, and only enabled by a reduction of policy to appearance—a reduction that becomes politically instrumental in breaking down existing institutions, which is precisely the agenda of parties such as Baudet's. [15] As such, it fits well within a global populist pattern, described by Reinhold Martin in the American context, through the creation of theatrical props intended to "sustain the nationalist bond as a form of aesthetic experience." [16] But if the postwar European welfare state and its corresponding architectures did play a pacifying role in preventing a return of both right- and leftwing extremism at all, then it was through policies of security and reduced inequality, shaped by the perceived threat of a communist alternative and assisted by early models of European integration—*not because of the way they look*. Baudet's reduction of modernity's many complexities to a singular aesthetic, following Scruton, creates a binary. [17] There is modern architecture and there is classical architecture. "*Fuck de context? Fuck de Koolhaas!*" [18]

In his victory speech of March 20, Baudet stands in front of a semicircular background screen featuring the party's symbol and name. On the Dutch multi-party spectrum, one can find a full range of political brands,

[8] Interview in *Algemeen Dagblad*, September 30, 2017. This was later dismissed by Baudet as "mere hyperbole."

[9] See Richard Waite, "Traditionalist Roger Scruton to Chair Government's New 'Beauty' Watchdog," *Architect's Journal*, November 5, 2018, link. He was sacked in April 2019 due to unacceptable comments made in an interview with the *New Statesman*. See write-ups in the *Guardian* and *Dezeen*.

[10] His other adviser was Paul Cliteur, the Leiden University professor.

[11] In Scruton's writings, any complexities and developments within the modern project are generally dismissed, and seem to be stuck within a specific functionalist discourse that was already questioned after WWII. To give but one example, he seems to deny discourses such as those of Team X on "the threshold" in favor of a totalizing view of modernism: "The most important feature of the Gropius housing estate, one that is copied by all the modernist schemes from Corbusier to Koolhaas, is the dissolution of the boundary. … Doors and windows are no longer ceremonial thresholds, but simply functional apertures, cleaned of their liminal character." Roger Scruton, "Aesthetic Education and Design," *ISPA Journal*, vol. 3, no. 2 (Fall 2018): 220–221. Furthermore, contemporary architecture is equated with cheapness: "If you build in the Koolhaas way, you can make two million on every building," Scruton remarks during a panel with Baudet in 2011. See link.

[12] Thierry Baudet, *The Significance of Borders: Why Representative Government and the Rule of Law Require Nation States*, PhD diss., Leiden University, 2012, xv–xx.

[13] Baudet, *The Significance of Borders*, 231.

[14] For example, "The scale of destruction brought about through modern warfare is unbearable—and since modern architecture has declared it impossible to rebuild destructed houses and city-centers but has consistently replaced them with the most horrific building-blocks in Novosibirsk-style, it is clear that no one is prepared to pay the price of war anymore." Or, "Combined with a highly prosperous population with, moreover, declining birth-rates, as well as the horrors of modern architecture that can surely be expected to replace every destructed building, there is simply no impetus to militarily solve problems anymore." Baudet, *The Significance of Borders*, 201 and 202.

[15] To dive into this Benjaminian aspect of Baudet's rhetoric is outside the scope of this essay. However, for a take on the matter, see Sven Lütticken, "Cultural Marxists Like Us," *Afterall* 46 (Autumn/Winter 2018), link.

[16] Reinhold Martin, "The Demagogue Takes the Stage," *Places Journal* (March 2017), link.

[17] Jacob Moore has unpacked attacks on architects by the NRA and *Infowars* that follow similar strategies. In particular, the *Infowars* example is striking in this context, as it features footage of Roger Scruton. See Jacob R. Moore, "Info Wars," the *Avery Review* 27 (November 2017), link.

from the Labor Party's rose-and-fist logo to the Freedom Party's seagull and the Socialist Party's red tomato. [19] Other parties go for solely typographic solutions, generally of the sans-serif type.20 In the case of the Forum, its logo is a building. It is an image of a temple—presumably—made up of an abstracted pediment, entablature, four columns, and three steps.

This temple could be Greek, considering that the Forum's political message is composed of a perfect rhetorical storm of the threats to a centuries-old Western democratic civilization. Or it could be Roman—the party, after all, is not "Agora for Democracy." Perhaps it is *neo*classical, given Baudet's oft-stated admiration for the nineteenth century, including its nation-state and colonial emphases. [21] It could, of course, also be simply an abstraction of a historical postmodern building in the 1980s Leon Krier/Prince Charles sense—team Scruton. In any case the temple, in its abstraction, collapses all classical architecture into an image.

Standing in front of these mini temples, Baudet appropriates Hegel (he opens by saying "Minerva's Owl spreads its wings"), echoes Jean-Marie Le Pen's ideas on racial purity (he uses the term "boreal world" to describe Northern Europe), and asserts the Spenglerian decline of the West as the contemporary human condition. [22] In all his rhetoric of nostalgia and nationalist homecoming, a clear solution for the "problem" posed by "architecture"—let alone a definition of the term—is never given. [23] Unlike such "problems" as the "horrible" European Union (solution: get out); cultural insecurity (solution: nationalistic pride); immigration (solution: close borders); and the "party-cartel" (solution: direct democracy), Baudet's speech offers no direct solution to the perceived problem of modernism. Baudet, like Scruton, is simply "against" modern aesthetics, and one is left with the assumed solution of a return to "tradition." [24]

But perhaps there is another point to be made. It might very well be that the return of classical architectural aesthetics to the nationalist political stage can be explained by the emergence of *another* enemy—one that is, in fact, real and not imaginary, and one that Baudet addresses in the next part of the speech. Added to "all the left-wing indoctrination in education, all the ugly architecture, and the increase in power of the European Union" is "all the climatic heresy." [25]

The Forum's campaign was largely run on the grounds of countering the so-called energy-transition—the Dutch response to fighting climate change legally defined by the "climate-law." [26] With the dust from the election now settled a bit, it appears to be more and more the case that what pulled voters to the Forum, less than an anti-European or anti-immigrant rhetoric, was the *financial* cost to society associated with the energy transition and with the need for the transition in the first place. [27]

This transition is remarkably architectural—although not in the way Baudet has in mind. Solar panels, windmills, and heat pumps are suddenly used as rhetorical and imagistic devices to illustrate not only perceived economic damage but also, and more significantly, are instrumentalized to reveal the emergence of so-called *Oikophobia*—another term Baudet takes from Scruton. [28] Only self-hatred, Baudet argues in his speech, can explain the emergence of the energy-transition as a demigod in the "cultural and spiritual vacuum" enabled by the cultural and political establishment. Only self-hatred, or so it

[18] This was the title of an op-ed piece Baudet wrote with Bastiaan Rijpkema in 2011, rejecting the redevelopment of Rotterdam since its postwar reconstruction. Thierry Baudet, Bastiaan Rijpkema, "Fuck de context? Fuck de Koolhaas!" *NRC*, 5 November 2011.

[19] Political parties across the whole spectrum need branding, of course, and a recent and very public flirt of the Dutch Labor Party (PvdA) with a major advertising agency revealed openly what was, up until then, a public secret.

[20] With the exception of the orthodox reformed party, the serif-logo'd SGP, coincidentally also the only party favoring the reintroduction of capital punishment.

[21] A look at his Twitter feed or speeches over the past years suffices to understand how Baudet sees the century before the First World War as a "time that was better than ours," in which "the whole world was ours." See for these two examples in a field of many his tweet from October 7, 2017, 2:06 p.m., or his speech on November 3, 2017, link.

[22] I am not the first one to make these observations, which were almost immediately picked upon by a variety of media right after the speech, including *NRC* and *RTL Nieuws*.

[23] Unless it is the closing of borders as a project of architectural beautification, of course, if one follows the racist line implied in his equation of poor urban aesthetics with mass immigration of foreigners: "Uncontrolled immigration that distorts the image of the street." Victory speech held after the elections on March 20, 2019.

[24] "I am against the modern art," Baudet claims in a remarkable interview in which he compares the abstract design of a rug to the EU's immigration policies. See "Thierry Baudet: 'Ik ben tegen de moderne kunst,'" *tpook.nl*, link.

[25] Thierry Baudet, victory speech held after the elections on March 20, 2019.

[26] This law would legally oblige parliament to follow the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement, and includes a 49 percent (by 2030) and 95 percent (by 2050) reduction of CO_2 levels compared to 1990. The law has passed the house but still needs to be ratified by the senate—precisely the body where the Forum won in these elections.

[27] These shifts have been shaped by debates on the ability of the Netherlands to have a global impact.

[28] And not coincidentally also the title of a 2013 book by Baudet.

is suggested by extension, can explain the architecture of the new climatic regime.

What emerges out of Baudet's speech is an *us-versus-them* that is framed through architecture. It is an image in which one perceived enemy (the "elite;" including architects) is being attacked for its attempt at tackling an actual enemy (climate change). In doing so, a nationalist agenda defined primarily by metaphors of imagined threats is positioned in opposition to a carbon-based agenda defined primarily by the reality of rising seas. [29] By equating modern, contemporary, and "green" architecture with those responsible for "mass-immigration," while equating "traditional urbanism" with a "boreal" civilization that has "evolved for hundreds of thousands of years and survived ice-ages and mammoths," xenophobia, the modern project's social ambitions, and climate change become fully intertwined.

One could not find a better illustration of a contemporary condition, described most recently by Bruno Latour in *Down to Earth*, in which "migra-tions, explosions of inequality and New Climatic Regime…are one and the same threat." [30] To be sure, Latour's calls for a new terrestrial locality, despite its intentions, would need to be carefully scrutinized relative to the emergence of nationalist politics. But his proposition to consolidate these threats opens up the space for architects to reclaim a political relevance that could counter the Forum's rhetorical enemies—precisely by accepting these complexities as an intertwined reality. That is why such remarks on architecture (whether on Rot-terdam's modernisms, the Grenfell Tower, or windmills) need to be unpacked within a global political and environmental context, even though it is easy—and tempting—to dismiss these as mere hyperbole, desperate postmodern cries for attention in a tiny country that is among the richest and "happiest" in the world. [31] But to paraphrase Latour: Baudet's "significant" borders will have little effect on rising seas.

[29] Like it is for a number of other standpoints, Forum's precise position on the issue can be shifting, ambiguous, or even contradictory, and this ambiguity is often strategic. This essay focuses primarily on the claims made in Baudet's "victory speech."

[30] Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), 9.

[31] Presumably, I would say, and No. 5, as it stands, in the "World Happiness Report".