

Jan Terlouw in Groningen

A voyage from age to age; analysing the story of a giant. Or at least of a friendly grandpa.

Jan's personal story

In what follows, I will begin with recounting the talk of Jan Terlouw. Concluding, I will post some awkward questions.

In what age do we live? We live in an age of change. Some 400 years ago, the scientific revolution started. No longer would received authority reign supreme over the domains of knowledge. Observation became the key to scientific progress.

But also in the domain of public morals, enormous progress has been made. Women's rights have improved tremendously from the 1950's onwards. Slavery had been eradicated (right?).

Anywhay, there has been an "exponential change", without it being made clear what is the independent variable nor the dependent variable. There's change.

A pillar of Jan's story is the French revolution of 1789. The three constituent ideals are liberty, equality, and brotherhood. The story of Jan's working life is elucidated corresponding to these three notions.

To begin with, Jan did research in particle physics. The experience here was one of (restricted) liberty. The creation of knowledge requires a strong form of liberty.

Secondly, Jan became the minister of economics (yeah, something like this exists). At this point, Jan emphasises that it is to be understood as an *honour* to represent the people in co-forming policies, even when the majority is against a decision you make; i.e. In the face of popular opposition. Leadership is thus conceptualised as the capacity to argue against the flock if the situation requires it. The primary ideal of politics is equality (of opportunity?), which is why Jan designates this period as the enactment of the second ideal of the revolution. Jan did not comment on (the viability of) a distinction between equality of opportunity and of outcome, though he did assert that equality is never fully realised.

The final career stage of Jan was occupied by writing children's books. You might know "De Koning van Katoren" and "Oorlogswinter".

At this stage, Jan experienced the importance of brotherhood as an ideal. Without it, liberty and equality don't get very far.

Overview of what happened

Besides Jan's life story, he had more to say. An important part is that climate change is real. Ever since the '70's, reports have come in with increasing certainty: anthropogenic climate change is real. Only recently the world has started to take it seriously, however. Thankfully, we have the technical and economic means to combat it effectively, in fact is a piece of cake. The example he gave as a promising possibility is concentrated solar power. By this method, the entire world's energy needs can be met at a very affordable price.

The problem is political. People just don't know about the problem. What makes things worse is that the public has attained a distrust of experts. This is brought about by populism.

To combat climate change, we need to make the market ``honest". Jan has a great faith in the capacity of government action to tame the market effectively. Nevertheless, he also states that money buys political power. How to resolve this paradox is an exercise left to future philosophers, if there will be any.

The costs of the energy transition will be paid for by the people, in the forms of (initially) increased prices for products. We will need to be honest about this too.

Reflections and questions

Jan laments the fact that his party participated in a wave of privatisations in the 1980's. He is now of the opinion that (at least some) forms of government-based production are more efficient, kinder, and all-in-all better than their privatised counterparts. Perhaps this late reversal of position is what he meant by the rather late acceptance of the notion of ``brotherhood" in his years of writing. Nevertheless, the talk hasn't elucidated the question of how to develop the production of sustainable electric energy. In particular, whether to leave it to the market, or to do it as a government-based initiative. In many private goods and services that link to universal needs (e.g. water management), companies have proven to be exceedingly slow in developing and using new technologies. Is this just another matter of ``civilising" private industry or ``making the market honest"? Do we have the time for this?

In general, the strategy for dealing with markets has not been clarified sufficiently.

Also, Jan brought forth the new data on wealth inequality. The top 26 persons in the world currently own just as much as the bottom half of our species. How to tackle this will require more than a mere allusion to ``brotherhood".

The notion that capital, with its intrinsic propensity to increase itself at the cost of everything, can be managed by the state seems exceedingly naïve, in particular when we take into account the substantial influence of lobbyists. It seems that Jan wants to refrain from addressing this problem in detail in order to retain the virtue of optimism.

The immediate answer to the problems at hand require not just a redistribution of wealth, but also, and more fundamentally, of power.

The idea of an intellectual elite as having certain responsibilities is, on the one hand, obvious. One should always try to be as clear and truthful as possible, in particular when one encounters someone less lucky than yourself. In another sense, however, it is extraordinarily patronising to say assert that some people should be led by others. What is this guy thinking?

All in all, I was very disappointed with the talk. So much so that I'll leave it here.

Byebye.