

The Common People

By

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Editorial Comment—Kuyper exerted himself not only to give every Tom, Dick and Harry a political voice, but he also sought to make them politically responsible. That has been the emancipating power of the term “common people”¹ who are now so badly missed, according to Hoogland.

I am writing this article during the inauguration of Joe Biden as President of the United States. Trump has had to leave the White House. Trump has resigned himself to the turnover of power, though he is certain and convinced that Biden’s victory is stolen. A section of Trump’s supporters, encouraged by the allegations of fraud, even perpetrated a violent attack on the Capitol. For these Trump supporters “democracy” has become a dummy concept: only the elite is interested in it.

The indignation about this action was widespread. Trump himself denied having called for this attack and dropped his support of the people who thought they were acting in his name when he openly disapproved the violence. If you can believe the media, those who participated in this attack and who can be identified will not avoid punishment. However much I disapprove of their antics, there is something moving about it. In the full conviction that they acted in the name of their deceived President, many hardly masked their participation. The confirmation that this election outcome that would take place on this historic January 6, was a huge election deceit in their eyes.

Who are these Trump supporters who allowed themselves to be swept up by his transparent lies to carry out this attack on the Capitol? Are they fools? Extremists? Criminals? Or could they be thought of as the “common people?”

The Common People

While the elite were becoming increasingly left-liberal, the common people allowed themselves increasingly to be taken in by rightist politicians, as I wrote in

¹ The original Dutch term is “kleine luyden,” a term that is a central sociological term in Anti-Revolutionary as well as in Reformational jargon

the previous edition of *Sophie*. The common people want to distance themselves from the elite who are not concerned with their problems but do have the power and set the course.

The retired sociologist Arlie Hochschild, already before the election when Hillary Clinton was still expected to win by a wide margin, asked attention to the reasonableness of Trump supporters. In 2016, she published her *Strangers in Their Own Land*. As established academician in Berkeley, California, she realized that she constantly found herself in a bubble of the like-minded. She then decided to go live in one of the poorest and most underdeveloped regions of the US, namely, Louisiana. She wanted to step out of her comfort zone to become widely acquainted with the people “on the other side” of what she called the “empathy-wall:” people without higher education, usually working hard for their money, but at the same time not getting ahead in a society focused on success and self-development.

She observed that she was not confirmed in her expectations about the people she contacted. She expected to meet resentful and angry people, but instead they were outspokenly friendly. As a progressive intellectual, she expected to be viciously rejected by these people, but in fact was received with utter friendliness. By so breaking through her own “democratic” prejudices, she discovered that behind the perspective of Trump supporters there was a completely understandable notion that was fully rational from different angles. Therewith she differentiated emphatically between on the one hand the concept of generating an emotion and, on the other hand, the justification for that emotion. In either case, Hochschild sees nothing in the manner in which Trump treats and manipulates his sympathizers. According to her, Trump’s supporters make no progress with the way in which Trump manifests himself, but she can definitely generate understanding for their hidden emotions.

Stupid Redneck

To make the anger and frustration of these people understandable, Hoichschild appeals to our ability to empathize. Imagine yourself lined up for the American Dream. You are white, a man, working with your hands. For years you have received no wage increase, even though you work yourself to the bone, but you stand patiently in that lineup. Yes, you, but not the others—women, immigrants,

refugees, Afro-Americans all force ahead. The Government does not intervene, but gives them a place at the front of the lineup. Worse, President Obama, himself one who pushed himself ahead, beckons them to come near. And this is definitely the epitome: one who managed to get ahead turns around and says to you, “Stupid redneck.” With this she states that the people who pay the price for the “politically correct” measures taken by the rational elite are not themselves from the elite, but from the social classes just below them. Their careers, homes and salaries go to those lagging behind, who, according to the elite, have a right to equal opportunities.

According to Hochschild, this is about people with strong feelings of shame and guilt. For the first time since long, large groups within the society are no longer getting ahead. To the contrary, from many points of view they are worse off than their parents. Their income is constantly under pressure; they need to work harder and harder to meet their living expenses; their collective amenities fall away and everyone is held responsible for his or her own success. Additionally, through individualizing and emancipation dynamics people become increasingly empowered, relations become more vulnerable and people are increasingly addressed according to their independence. That is why people become more ashamed for their own inability to keep afloat.

Prince Willem of Orange

I used the term “common people” above. This term was used frequently by Abraham Kuyper and, according to him, came from Prince Willem of Orange. However, one does not find this term in the extant writings of the Prince. It is a typical rhetorical term by which Kuyper wants to commemorate the origin of the Dutch nation. According to some, the use of this term even has populist overtones.

It is definitely clear that Kuyper used the term emphatically for ideological purposes. He used it to refer to people who had low aspirations and ambitions, who worked hard and dutifully took up their task in the family, the household and work. Often it would refer to small business people, craftsmen and caregivers. They were people with vital occupations who through hard work supported themselves without belonging to the elite.

The term also naturally resonates somewhat with the Biblical message in which the common people would often be pitted against those who strive after honour, status, money and power. Think, for example, of Mary's song, The Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), and Jesus' Beatitudes (Matthew 5).

Nickname²

In other words, "common people" is a kind of nickname comparable to what Dutch politician Buma used to refer to as "ordinary Netherlanders" or "common Dutch folk." Others talked of the "good people," those who worked hard and behaved as decent citizens; who were offended by all these people who failed to take their duties as citizens seriously and remained disintegrated but were skilled at taking advantage of the amenities our country offers.

However, no matter how some discover parallels between these forms of populist rhetoric, Kuyper's term has also a different reference from the way populist politicians like Trump and Wilders address the people. Obviously, Kuyper also uses the term against the dominant elite, but without opposing them blindly. He also uses the term as an appeal to the elite to take responsibility for a just organization of society.

In addition, the term is also an appeal to the very people meant by it. They are not to passively watch the governing style of the elite, but are to demand their own voice to manifest themselves in politics. He does not address them as victims, but as people who have to play their own active role and take their responsibility. Even more, it could be said that Kuyper wanted to make the common people conscious of their role as a moral example, as people who exert themselves and accept accountability, to become a stabilizing factor in politics. At its deepest, it is even a religious calling; it is about people who want to live in imitation of Christ and who want to contribute to a just society.

It is to be deplored that people like Trump, Wilders and others who apparently also appeal to many Christians, are not capable of adopting this tone of Kuyper.

² Original: *Geuzennaam*. A pejorative term originally referring to so-called "Sea Beggars," but that later on took on an air of pride by the common people opposing the powerful.