

Provo!

Hank Malone

1967

Part I

Provo! Provo! Provo! Provo! Provo! Provo! They used to be called “Nosems,” the Dutch beatnik. The new word rides out of France. The Provo is the new young style in Holland—the Provocateur—the Hipster. They stopped being Nosems when the big changeover came about a year ago; when the kids started paying more attention to style than to content.

The Provo is a kind of social protest creature in a sterile, non-violent, economically-viable, reasonably just society. He is impotent, in a political sense. He is a rebel with a very ambiguous cause, and more important, he seems to know it. He knows his protest is symbolic, but that’s part of the unholy idea.

Holland has never seen anything like the Provo. Dutch sociologists say that with the Provos came the first historical (and hysterical) appearance of the street gang in Holland. They first crashed (POW!) into the international headlines when they began to interrupt the orderly business of the Amsterdam underworld, which is very thriving.

Amsterdam has a very well organized underworld, catering to the prurient boredom of the local adult population, as well as to millions of sailors. It is a very groovy scene, except to the most unmitigated Puritan, and everyone secretly loves it.

The Amsterdam police, who are basically typical human beings when it comes to a certain style of corruptibility, would always look the other way whenever the thousands of well-organized prostitutes and petty criminals of every sort would carry out their various enterprises in their own style. This seemingly harmless hypocrisy didn’t seem to offend anyone (that’s what they always tell you) until the Provos came along.

The Provos changed things.

One night, according to legend, they came en masse into one of the more familiar turfs of the Amsterdam underworld, and raised holy hell! They made a terrific noise. No more cool discretion with the prostitutes. They broke the scene wide open, scandalously yelling it from the rooftops.

HEY? LOOK AT ALL THIS HYPOCRISY! LET’S DO THIS THING UP BIG AND TURN IT INTO A REAL GANG-BANG! ORGY! HOORAY FOR SEX AND DOPE AND FREAK-OUTS AND EVERYTHING! In short, they were very indiscreet.

Aha! The fuzz were alerted. They swarmed into the Red Light district and beat the shit out of all the kids... for disturbing the peace? Now that was the straw that broke the camel’s back in Amsterdam. The episode reached the front pages of the newspapers and everybody was outraged, and confused. The old folks seemed stunned by the antics of their offspring. Why the hell did these self-appointed Provos have to come in and blow the whistle on this nice quiet groovy sort of double-standard thing? There was a dilemma here.

How do you justify beating up a group of teenagers for saying out loud what everybody else merely whispered? When it came to justice, who was the biggest offender; the criminal, the hypocrite who lived by a double standard, the cop who looked the other way, or the big-mouthed kids who went around shouting HOORAY FOR SEX AND DOPE and all those other good things?

The instincts of the Provos were sound. If you're really going to have all these things (on the sly), then why not legalize it? Stop degrading the human spirit by forcing it to sneak around in back alleys under the cover of darkness. Haven't we learned enough about guilt and the long-range damages of hypocrisy in our society? Well, that's how it all began, sort of. The Provos made the headlines, and they began to rally around the banner of that name that was given them by a local journalist during the incident.

The next chapter tells the story of the young Provo girl in Amsterdam, attempting to exercise her freedom to express her love for mankind. She bought a box of chocolates and took up a conspicuous position on a crowded downtown street in Amsterdam. She began to give away the chocolates to people passing by. That's all, she just gave away chocolates, allegedly exercising her freedom of religious self-expression.

Well, she was promptly arrested, unlike Allen Funt and his Candid Camera. The police examined her for concealed weapons, as they told the story, and during the process forced her to take off all her clothes. (Third-degree fetishism in Amsterdam?) This little incident, the upshot of a little Provo demonstration of love for one's fellow man, supposedly cost the police chief of Amsterdam his job and his ass to boot, once it hit the press. Made headlines everywhere in the area. A strange guerilla warfare then began in Holland.

Everywhere there were these fragile little flowers of symbolic demonstration and protest. And the police couldn't understand why the kids, rallying around the banner of the Provo, kept on testing their liberties. Answer: it is reassuring, Mr. Policeman, to know they're still there. Or are they?

PART II

Anyone generally under 30 can be a Provo in Holland. It is something like the so-called New Left in America. But the Provos seem devoid of a zeal for passionate organization. They lack anger. It is creativity, and an outlet for love that seems to impel them. In a sense they are part of a new kind of Leisure Class, searching for a way to live with their greatly-expanded free time.

When you get off the train in Amsterdam you're more or less in the center of the city, a place called Damrak. Thousands of Provo-types seem to hang around the train station. Are they thinking of escape? Many of them feel they are behind a Windmill Curtain of soft taffy-like traditions of cultural sterility.

There is a part near the train station. We begin to get the drift of things. It is a kind of meeting ground for the Provos, a sort of eye-meets-eye Hyde Park where everybody stands up on their furtive soap-boxes, telepathically communicating with one another. With the Mod-outfitted crowds drifting around the park and the nearby canals. Amsterdam has more canals than Venice.

The Provos, despite their blond and blue-eyes idealism, are still not able to walk on water. But there are plenty of boats, and lots of money and time, which is almost as good.

Who would expect all this in Amsterdam? You make the groovy London scene two months before, then this Paris scene, which is a bit of a bloody drag now that the hippest place in the world is Bulgaria. You think you've really gone on THAT kind of trip. No more Freak-Outs, as we say in Detroit, not in northern Europe.

Then you tumble off the train with your baggage of dirty underwear after the great journey up the Rhine. And here is Amsterdam. You expect something like Hans Christian Andersonville, you know? Smallish, quaint, sort of rustic and quiet. You've never been there before and you haven't read anything about Amsterdam since the sixth grade, right?

Instead... ZAAMMM! The Provos!

The Kids! All over the place. Amsterdam is a giant city. And the kids are all strange and hip-looking. Wow. You begin hearing the word. Slowly at first. Provo. Provo. (what did he say?) PROVO!

An enormous city bursting all its valves with the frantic results of a post-World War II sexual and economic apocalypse. Teenagers! Money! Guilders! (3.60 guilders—one buck) Wealth! Leisure! Motorbikes! Zoom! Plenty of Zoom, at first. The strangest-looking, most self-conscious kids in Europe. The Provos. Plenty of Zoom, at first.

But then something seems to fade, or pass over. The slippery and vague excitement of it all is too anxious. The Dance of Life is missing. People are dancing, you might say, because other people are shooting at their feet.

It becomes very jiggedy. Amsterdam is overrun at the end of summer, a very bad time to be there. Everyone seems to be in Amsterdam waiting to catch a plane to go home. When we arrive in Amsterdam we cannot locate any living quarters at any cost, and we spend two hours collecting bad impressions till we are shuttled off to a shiny new suburb where we take up residence with a family in their home.

The suburb is called Amstelveen. It sounds romantic enough, but it is a tedious carbon copy of the area around Northland, here in Detroit. As we say, "Oak Park."

Homes built around shopping centers. Plenty of visual noise. The Northland-like creature is called "Plein 1960." This ultramodern "miracle" is built with "Bathroom Architecture." Everything is very smooth and made of tile. You have the impression that somewhere there is a great pull-chain, and at night they "flush" Plein 1960. Imagine tons of water cascading all over the porcelain surfaces of the shopping center, and down into little drain holes. architecturally there is a kind of built-in finality about the whole place. The surfaces are hard and impregnable. All you can do is wash them. They defy the idea of change or revolution. No individual could possibly destroy anything here without the aid of a pile-driver or a tank. Imagine how the kids feel about this inhuman permanence. I know how I felt. Go out to Northland and feel the same way.

The best the young Provo-types seem to be able to do is to crayon and lipstick-scrrawl the names of their favorite folk-rock groups on the white walls of the shopping center. It smacks of something ominous in Holland. Like writing 26 DE JULIO on the chest of the Spirit of Detroit.

The most popular folk-rock groups in Amsterdam were the Stones and the Kinks, though the Sharks (who?) ran a close second. Dylan is also very big.

TOLIETZ EEP. The Dutch word for toilet—paper. That's what they use to clean the lipstick off the porcelain walls of the grocery store. The Provos are a hybrid of the new northern European "Motorbike Bourgeoisie, a burgeoning class of young people who have the money, the time, and the impatience to create their own separate (but in some respects more than equal) style of life. You have to see the physical layout in Amsterdam to understand about the Provos and the motorbikes. On American streets there are two kinds of strips—a road and a sidewalk. You are either a driver or a pedestrian. Two classes, the hunter and the hunted. Very American.

In Holland there are three strips, a road for automobiles, a sidewalk, and a bike-strip. The bike strip was a place for eccentricity, or at least for a very dignified poverty. It used to be that every adult who didn't drive a car in Holland would ride a bicycle.

With the booming economy the way it is, adults on bikes are fast becoming a thing of the past, and this third strip, the old bicycle strip, has been usurped by the young, who use it as a kind of drag-strip for their motorbikes, and as a kind of turf for declaring their identity and status as a new class of motorized (horizontally—socially—mobile, to coin a phrase) teenagers.

Somehow when you get one of these bikes (usually little Honda-types) the whole Provo thing can begin to happen. Like when the American guy gets his first wheels he manages simultaneously to find himself a kind of restaurant-garage, some kind of ambulatory hamburger club. In Amsterdam these clubs are called SNACK BARS written in English—and we found ourselves going frequently to one called the "Keizer Karel."

The snack bar is the cheapest place to eat in Holland, a natural for the young. The food is groovy-style. Lots of tasty carbohydrates. Interesting little borrowed and improvised kinds of teenage soul food.

Like spicy egg rolls, hamburgers, funny little pizzas. The local Provo "gang" (who are usually very blond, very polite, but who move ominously in packs of ten or twelve) seem to adopt a snack bar, and take it over when they arrive.

They load up the American style jukebox, which is spinning strictly with folk-rock, and sit down to develop their philosophy of life around small tables.

The most popular Provo food is called "frites"—the spiritual equivalent of spareribs, steerburgers or pizza. Frites are simply french fries. They eat them by the ton, showered in their favorite sauce, a gluey and tasty mixture of mayonnaise and vinegar. Frites are everywhere among the Provos. Eating frites has become a characteristic spiritual attitude among the Provos.

While you talk you preen your feathers. You are dressed to preen. This season you are very Mod. The styles of dress are more extreme than Carnaby Street. The hair thing is also wild. Some guys look like werewolf-hipsters. And the clothing is sometimes eerie. A common thing to see: a couple of guys, or a whole gang of guys, walking

down the street in pink and orange polkadot bell-bottom pants. They aim at a visual shock value that we didn't see anywhere else in Europe. The Provos are obsessed with "style"—absolutely maniacal about form, as Tom Wolfe has described the Southern California kids.

The Provo is a species of motorized teenager, described by at least one observer in Amsterdam (a Dr. Van Praag) as the most ritually idealistic of this species. Van Praag refuses to regard them as delinquent or anti-social types, but at the same time feels that their style of symbolic and virtually metaphysical protest (such as giving away chocolates) is a rather fragile protest at best.

Perhaps it is not protest at all. Along with others of a former generation he misunderstands the central point; that freedoms must be used, if only by the young people in symbolic ways, if they are to be kept alive. Freedoms cannot be stored away in the attic.

fifth Estate

Hank Malone
Provo!
1967

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/22-january-15-30-1967/provo>
Fifth Estate #22, January 15-30, 1967

[fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/22-january-15-30-1967/provo)