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Introduction

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The wonder of all their neighbours

The United Provinces were, in the celebrated phrase of Sir William Temple, 'the fear of some, the envy of others and the wonder of all their neighbours'.[1] Travellers from England, France, the Holy Roman Empire and many other regions in Europe were often fascinated by what they saw once they had entered the territory of the Dutch Republic. Englishmen in the seventeenth century were especially impressed by the ability of the Dutch to turn virtually everything into a source of wealth, and the more so as the country itself was reported to be almost devoid of natural resources. Yet the proliferation of riches in their view did not appear to give rise to grave inequalities. Charity seemed to be exceptionally well-developed.[2] Frenchmen travelling through the United Provinces in the eighteenth century were particularly struck by such qualities as commercial acumen, the high level of technological achievement, the degree of political and religious liberty, the importance of bourgeois values and the advanced state of social security.[3]

Germans, who in the early modern period put their impressions of a visit to the Northern Netherlands on record, singled out thrift, diligence, greediness for money, coarseness and love of liberty as quintessential traits of Dutchmen. It was not until the close of the eighteenth century that German observers increasingly laid stress upon

another putative feature of Dutchmen's behaviour: an all-pervasive sluggishness. The Dutch were increasingly perceived to be as lethargic as the Chinese. They were even dubbed 'the Chinese of Europe'. If the prototype of a Dutchman was still taken to be a merchant, it was now a very un-Schumpeterian merchant indeed: a torpid, taciturn, tobacco-addicted creature who grew rich while being soundly asleep.[4]

Many historians of a later age have propounded that the evolution of the Dutch Republic was in more than one respect out of step with developments in other countries in Europe during the early modern era. 'The Dutch Republic', as Jan de Vries has put it, 'simultaneously floated on the tides of the secular trend and "precociously" explored uncharted social waters':[5] the Dutch were both normal and ahead of their time. Present-day observers of the Dutch Republic moreover have made determined attempts to pinpoint exactly where the Dutch struck out in new directions and to explain why such specific developments actually occurred. A few examples from recent work by historians from the English-speaking world illustrate the point.

The exploration of novel routes is held to have begun even before the Republic itself had come into being. The astonishing growth of the Dutch economy up to the late seventeenth century, De Vries has argued, was in part based on a radical and enduring transformation of the rural sector in the seaward provinces of the Northern Netherlands during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which went further than any agrarian change in any other region of western Europe at the time. Responding to a growth in population and the emergence of trading opportunities with a burgeoning urban sector, the rural sector in the maritime parts of the northern Low Countries – Zeeland, Holland, Friesland, Groningen and western Utrecht – shifted towards an economic system in which the farming population wholly specialised in agricultural production, instead of combining agricultural and non-agricultural activities, and thus managed to enhance productivity and wealth.[6]

The Habsburg Netherlands, according to James Tracy, in the decades preceding the Dutch Revolt (1515–65) also pioneered a revolution in public finance. The country of Holland saw the establishment of a long-term public debt in a way and on a scale that had never been practised before, namely by the sale of annuities on the open market for which the provincial States assumed full responsibility by funding them with revenues from provincial taxes. The system of

public borrowing applied in the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century (which after 1690 spread to England as well) was thus already essentially in place in Holland before the outbreak of the Revolt.[7]

Further novel features of developments in the Netherlands have been discerned in the period after the Revolt which had given birth to the Republic of the Seven United Provinces. As Charles Tilly has noted, the Republic was an extreme example of one of the three main routes along which the process of state-formation in the early modern period has unfolded, namely the capital-intensive path. In the Dutch case, the financial leverage and war-making capacity of the state depended to an exceptionally high degree upon on-going negotiations between, on the one hand, the holders of capital and, on the other hand, a plurality of city governments which together made up the confederate body that was the Dutch Republic.[8] In contrast with England, this financial revolution was, in the case of the Netherlands, not attended by the growth of a national state.

This singular territorial entity proved meanwhile to be extremely successful in the international economic arena. Immanuel Wallerstein has claimed that after Emperor Charles V's failed attempt to turn the newly emerged world-economy into a world-empire under Habsburg leadership the United Provinces were actually 'the first hegemonic power' to realise '*simultaneously* productive, commercial and financial superiority *over all other core powers*' in the period between roughly 1625 and 1675.[9] From a different starting-point Jonathan Israel came to the not-so-different conclusion that the Dutch Republic grew in fact into 'the first, and for most of the early modern period, the only true world-entrepôt' in the sense that it managed to join hegemony in the bulk trades with dominance of the rich branches of commerce. Israel was at pains to point out that this exceptional achievement was not only due to the vast capacity of the Dutch shipping industry, the extensive financial facilities, and the high productive efficiency of the farming and manufacturing sectors, but also to the crucial role of the Dutch state in promoting and protecting the growth of trade.[10]

The peculiar physical circumstances of the Netherlands and the formative experience of the protracted struggle against Habsburg Spain, Simon Schama has suggested, made for a context in which the immense wealth created by the stunning expansion of the Dutch economy was not accepted without qualms. In the face of the dangers that time and again seemed to threaten the country's very existence,

citizens of the newly created Republic during the Golden Age never felt it quite proper to enjoy their luck with complete ease of mind. Their prosperity rather caused them perennial anguish. Their affluence produced everlasting moral pain. The hallmark of Dutch culture in the seventeenth century, in Schama's view, was a perpetual embarrassment of riches.[11]

The Dutch found themselves again in uncharted waters when, in the age of economic stagnation in the later eighteenth century, which left such an indelible impression on the visitors from Germany, the political order that had been in place since the Revolt finally came under wholesale attack. One of the main aims of the Patriot movement, which spread like wildfire through the United Provinces during the 1780s, was precisely to lift the Republic out of the lethargic, 'Chinese' state into which the country seemed to have lapsed during the previous few decades. But, as the polity that had emerged out of the struggle against Spain was essentially decentralised, Wayne Te Brake has pointed out, any attempt to transform its structure from within could only proceed little by little. Power in the Republic rested in the last instance largely with its individual cities. In contrast with France, in the Netherlands a widespread revolution could only be effected by a whole sequence of localised revolutions. A major overhaul of the system depended upon a series of successful changes at the level of single municipalities. Municipal revolutions, Te Brake asserted, were in the Netherlands 'a necessary precondition' of any larger political reform. And such a course had never been attempted until the 1780s.[12]

The theme of this volume

The issue of the originality of the Dutch Republic which recurs again and again in eye-witness accounts and writings of present-day historians, forms the basic theme of the present collection of studies. This volume aims to explore the topic in two complementary ways. Firstly, it seeks to determine to what extent the course of economic, socio-political and cultural developments in the Northern Netherlands was actually different from the path taken by other areas in western and central Europe during the later Middle Ages and the

early modern period. Did the Dutch Republic really strike out into 'uncharted waters' or did it, on closer inspection still, conform to a greater or lesser extent to patterns that had already been firmly established in other parts of Europe? Where did the Republic follow a different historical trajectory? 'While it is true that every society's history is indeed unique', John Elliott has written, 'the special concern of historians should be with the particular nature and extent of that uniqueness.'[13] Divergence can only be established by comparison. And to what degree was the evolution of the Republic itself replicated in other areas of Europe?

Secondly, this volume is concerned with the inter-relationships of developments in the economic, socio-political and cultural domains. The theme of the originality of the Dutch Republic seems to crop up everywhere. It fascinates experts in economic, financial and political history as well as cultural historians, general historians and historical sociologists. It evidently cuts across very different fields. Is there perhaps a link between these spheres in historical reality? How were changes in the socio-political field in fact intertwined with the evolution of the economy and in what manner were these changes related to cultural transformations? A comparative perspective may again be useful to clarify whether the Dutch Republic indeed showed a peculiar set of inter-relationships or rather displayed a pattern that was also evident at other times and places in European history. This may help us to explain *why* the historical trajectory followed in the Northern Netherlands was in fact different from, or similar to, the trajectories followed in other areas of western and central Europe.

Taking the history of the Republic as a focal point of inquiry instead of the evolution of a region that formed part of it (like Holland or Gelderland), or on the contrary covered a much larger area (like the Low Countries or north-west Europe), is not as self-evident today as it probably may have been twenty or thirty years ago. Regions are now often put in the forefront of historical analysis. The regional approach has firmly established its credentials.[14] Following the trail blazed by eminent scholars such as Sidney Pollard, Pierre Goubert, Emmanuel le Roy Ladurie or Bernard Slicher van Bath, many historians have chosen to concentrate on sub-national regions or on areas that straddle national borders to answer questions about the origins and spread of industrialisation, changes in the standard of living, the growth of labour movements or the diffusion

of cultural innovations. Others, in a more Braudelian vein, have turned to large geographical areas conceived to have been moulds that gave a basic coherence to the histories of the peoples they embraced and brought into mutual contact. The *Méditerranée* has thus inspired companion studies on the Baltic, the North Sea and the Indian Ocean.[15] A choice for a territorial state as our prime unit of analysis thus calls for some justification.

This decision can, in our view, be fully warranted. First of all, developments at the level of states in the early modern period had many ramifications for the evolution of social, economic or cultural life at the level of regions, as for instance the work by Jonathan Israel or Hugo de Schepper has shown.[16] States plainly *did* matter. Secondly, the approach adopted in this book does by no means imply that the emergence of the Dutch Republic itself is seen as a kind of preordained creation. De Schepper has neatly demonstrated that the formation of a separate state in the northern half of the Low Countries did not appear to be inevitable during the early decades of the sixteenth century. In so far as the Burgundian-Habsburg Netherlands *did* evince any interior dividing-lines, these rifts occurred between the highly urbanised and commercialised zone in the middle and the west containing Holland, Zeeland, Flanders and Brabant, on the one hand, and the more agrarian regions lying to the south and east, on the other hand, rather than between the north and south.[17] The very appearance and persistence of an independent state in the north thus should be regarded as a phenomenon that requires explanation, and will indeed be treated accordingly. Thirdly, concentration on the Dutch Republic as a whole does not imply that any variations within the borders of that territorial entity will simply be ignored. On the contrary, regional differences in developments in the Republic, notably between its seaward and landward provinces, will be more closely examined in various contributions to this volume.

Key problems

The authors of this volume have not aimed at writing a comprehensive, all-embracing history. If one wants to understand the similarities and differences between developments in the Dutch Republic and

those taking place in other areas of Europe, and to unravel the inter-relationship between changes in the socio-political, economic and cultural fields, it may be rewarding to start by addressing a few key problems as to attempt at the outset to produce an all-encompassing overview.

A similar approach has already been applied, or advocated, in the historiography of various other countries in the western world. In historical studies on Germany some of the most fascinating and thought-provoking work in the past three decades has concerned key issues like how and to what extent the rise of Nazism and the collapse of the Weimar Republic were prefigured in the development of the Second Empire, why the revolution of 1848 went wrong and why cities in South Germany in the sixteenth century did not follow the path of confederate state-formation.[18] In order to overcome the 'exceptionalist' tendency in the interpretation of their national past, John Elliott has called on historians in Britain to tackle the task of making systematic comparisons between aspects of the development of their own society and those of societies on the Continent of Europe and overseas, for example the nature of early modern monarchy or attitudes towards slavery.[19] Similarly, Carl Degler has pleaded for the history of the United States to be studied consistently from a comparative perspective. 'The purpose of comparison would be', he has written, 'to see aspects of our history that differ where we might have expected similarity.' Among these aspects were in his view, for instance, the weakness of the labour movement, the presence of slavery and the central role of religion in American life.[20]

Like Degler, Elliott and the historians of Germany we have chosen to concentrate on a limited number of key issues. Our first criterion for selection was the importance of certain issues in the work of present-day historians of the Dutch Republic and early modern Europe. We have aimed to single out problems which are not only deemed significant for the understanding of the history of the Republic, but also possess an obvious relevance for the history of Europe. Secondly, we have decided to focus upon issues which are more or less mutually related. The themes are interlinked; none of the subjects concerned can be fully grasped without taking one or more other issues into consideration. The selection of problems is of course far from exhaustive. Issues such as the relationship between the Dutch Republic and the overseas world, the development of a

material culture, the evolution of science and thought, or the pattern of gender relations, will only be touched upon in passing. Each of these issues deserves a treatment on a par with the problems which we have actually selected for closer scrutiny. The reason why we have not given them pride of place is partly practical: lack of space. But there is also a more positive motive: several of these issues have been the subject of other collective studies or research projects in the past few years, or will achieve that status in the near future.[21]

Which problems did we eventually select? The first issue is the emergence of the Republic itself. The Dutch Republic came into being in the very age, in which, in Richard Bonney's words, 'the sense of dynasty was of enormous importance everywhere'.[22] Republican states had of course been established before, and some of these creations were still in existence when the Revolt in the Netherlands produced the Republic of the United Provinces. Venice is an obvious example and so are Genoa, Ragusa and the rural and urban republics in Switzerland. Yet, as Bonney has written, 'almost everywhere else in Europe, ruling dynasties were in place by 1660, if not by 1494, enjoying greater or lesser power in accordance with the prevailing rules of succession, the governmental system and the cultural values both of the dynasty and its subjects'.[23] Of the few states that did not fall in with this dynastic chorus, the United Provinces were the only Republic to emerge in the period that the dynastic states enjoyed their heyday. How did this remarkable outcome of the Revolt come to pass?

The next issue concerns the change, or rather the lack of change, of the political structure that came into being during the revolt against Habsburg Spain. Although the United Provinces were in a sense no more than a composite of many cities, surrounded by rural areas, which enjoyed a wide measure of autonomy, this loose-knit structure nevertheless survived in a changing environment for over 200 years before it finally assumed a shape corresponding more closely to the type that was becoming the dominant mode in the greater part of Europe: the national state. The Dutch Republic thus for a time fulfilled the role of 'counter-model to absolutism' that around 1500 still fell to the Confederacy of the Swiss.[24] It was a living proof that a different species could really exist. How can the nature, persistence and ultimate demise of the political structure of the Dutch Republic be explained? That is the second main question that informs this volume.

It was not just its decentralised structure that for a long time made the United Provinces stand apart in contemporary Europe. It was also the relationship between state and church. The Dutch Republic was a 'Protestant' nation, but of a peculiar sort. Although the rise of Calvinism was a major factor in the making of the new state, and the Reformed Church indeed achieved the status of a privileged church, the state and the public church in the Republic never became as closely intertwined as in other countries of Europe. Religious diversity remained widespread and religious tolerance existed to be a greater degree than anywhere else in Europe. In the relation between religion and state-formation, the Dutch Republic did no more conform to rule than in the pattern of state-formation itself. How did this development come about? Why did the Republic in this respect not fall in line with other Protestant or Catholic states? Here is the third problem with which we will be concerned in this book.

The fourth issue relates both to the beginning and to the end of the Republic. It concerns literacy. On the one hand, the growth of literacy in Europe is often held to have been closely linked with very process that was one of the catalysts of the Dutch Revolt: the Reformation. On the other hand, the spread of literacy was also a relevant factor in the final crisis of the Republic during the 1780s and 1790s. The death-struggle of the Republic was attended by a profound shift in political culture. The rise of the Patriot movement, however steeped in traditional ways of thinking, at the same time heralded the birth of new forms of political thought and action.[25] This transformation in politics was greatly facilitated by the exceptionally high level of literacy prevailing in the United Provinces. 'There is no doubt that the Dutch provinces of the eighteenth century were, in comparison with most other areas of Europe, an area of relatively high literacy, where a substantial percentage of the population participated in print culture', Jeremy Popkin has written. 'This literacy permitted the remarkable growth of the political press during the *Patriottentijd*, making the Netherlands the only Continental country where such a phenomenon occurred prior to the outbreak of the French Revolution.'[26] The fourth key issue addressed in this book is the background of this diffusion of literacy. Why was literacy in the Netherlands so strikingly advanced?

In addition to the wide extent of religious diversity and tolerance and to the advanced level of literacy, another singular aspect of the

Dutch Republic was the production and distribution of art objects. The prime sector of art production in the Netherlands was painting. It is not merely the quality of Dutch painting in the Golden Age that fascinates historians, it is also the sheer volume of production and the demand for paintings among the population at large. Although estimates of the total number of paintings produced in the Dutch Republic still vary widely, there is no doubt that the figure per year must have run into the tens of thousands. Paintings were not only bought by wealthy burghers, rich corporations or well-endowed institutions,[27] but they found their way into ordinary households as well. How can this astonishing outburst of artistic production and consumption after 1580 be explained? How was it organised? How could it happen? Here is our fifth key problem in the history of the Dutch Republic.

No student of politics or culture in the Dutch Republic can afford to ignore the basic truth that Holland was by all accounts an immensely affluent society. Whether Dutchmen were really embarrassed by their riches or not, their wealth itself is a hard fact. Foreign travellers and present-day historians are in complete agreement on that point. The sixth and last problem of this book is thus, not surprisingly, concerned with the development of the Dutch economy. Instead of making Dutch economic growth or Dutch leadership in world trade the central focus of our inquiries – subjects of more than one study in recent years[28] – we have preferred to concentrate on a number of crucial aspects: the supply of capital, the mobilisation of labour, the advance in technology and the standard of living. The final chapters of this volume will describe and analyse the changes in these elements over the course of time and thus attempt to enhance our understanding of the performance of the Dutch economy after the foundation of the Republic around 1580.

A miracle mirrored

These are the issues that form the heart of this volume. To find an answer to these queries the contributors have embarked on what may be called a collective study in comparative history. They have aimed