The International Relevance of Dutch History: Closing Comments

HENK TE VELDE | LEIDEN UNIVERSITY

BMGN | LCHR | VOLUME 125 - 2-3 | 355 - 365

The contributions in this issue discuss the question of the relevance of Dutch history to an international public. The authors wish to avoid 'exceptionalism', but point – with the exception of the piece that examines the Holocaust – specifically to the particular in the Dutch past, focusing thereby on evergreen themes such as the Golden Age, the Dutch colonial empire and the role of religion. A great deal of attention is hereby devoted to the long perspective and the peculiar nature of Dutch 'civil society'. The aim is not so much to focus on what is unique to the Netherlands – and certainly not to hold up the Netherlands as an example – but rather to attempt to explain the Netherlands on the basis of general issues drawn from historiographical debates. In this sense, the yardstick applied is the international world. Another striking feature of the contributions is that an analysis that takes a longer view – path dependency, 'cultural freezing' (Schrover) and traditions – is back with a vengeance.

What is the international – or even global – relevance of Dutch history? Why should people who are not particularly interested in the details of the history of the Netherlands read about this history? The contributions in this volume offer a variety of answers to these questions. They do not pretend to give a definitive set of answers, nor to present just one approach, but are rather a set of explorations. A number of things stand out, nevertheless, and the contributions have a number of things in common.

To begin with, it could be argued that posing these questions says something about the current state of Dutch historiography and about the role of Dutch history in an international context. Dutch historians operate at an international level, write for an international audience and participate in international debates. This volume is a reflection of this situation. The authors do not concentrate on Dutch history as such, but rather place their national history in an international perspective by concentrating on the international relevance of the history and historiography of their country. Perhaps this also characterises the historiography of a comparatively small

country: small compared to the United States or to the major countries in the European Union; the 'most significant others' for Dutch historians and Dutch public opinion in general. American, French, German or British historians may not be so inclined to write about such a theme. Which is not to say that Dutch historiography lacks in self-confidence; rather, it is important to note that Dutch historians weigh the importance of their work against that of their colleagues from these (and sometimes other) countries. They simply wish to be judged by 'international' standards.

Historians and the national bias

This has not always been self-evident. In 1985, the Dutch historian Piet Blaas published a contribution on the 'touchiness of a small nation with a great past'.[1] It dealt with Dutch historiography in the nineteenth century, its nationalism and its frustration about the lack of power wielded by the Netherlands on the European scene. Nineteenth-century historians worried about the relevance of the Netherlands. Although they believed that the Netherlands still epitomised the great values of liberty and morality, they regretted the decline of their country since the Golden Age of the seventeenth century. In 1860, Robert Fruin was the first to hold a chair exclusively in (Dutch) history. He was also the leading Dutch historian of his time. He sometimes daydreamed about the role the Netherlands could have played in the modern world, had it not sold its former colony of Manhattan to the English: New York would still have been New Amsterdam and Dutch instead of English would have been the language of its inhabitants! Fruin admired German historian Leopold von Ranke – he has in fact often been called the Dutch Ranke. He envied Ranke the nationalistic self-confidence of a man who could write the national prehistory of such a powerful nation.[2] Still, he would not have wanted to trade places, as the Germans were too fond of the State to suit his liberal taste.

Nineteenth-century Dutch historians did not doubt the relevance of the Dutch past; as confirmed nationalists they only regretted the lack of (international) relevance in the Dutch present. Maybe they would have liked to be read by an international audience, but they did not make many efforts to reach this audience. Fruin, for instance, never published anything in any

1 P.B.M. Blaas, 'The Touchiness of a Small Nation with a Great Past: The Approach of Fruin and Blok to the Writing of the History of the Netherlands', in: A.C. Duke and C.A. Tamse (eds.), *Clio's Mirror. Historiography in Britain and the Netherlands* (Zutphen 1985) 133-161.

2 Robert Fruin, 'Leopold von Ranke op zijn negentigsten verjaardag', in: P.J. Blok, P.L. Muller and S. Muller Fz. (eds.), *Robert Fruin's verspreide geschriften*, volume IX (The Hague 1904) 433.

language other than Dutch; he was only tardily translated into any foreign language, and he hardly left his beloved Leiden at all. His universe was a national universe, even if he avidly read the international news and historical literature of his day (as did many of his contemporaries). He contributed to what was, in essence, a national community of scholars and opinion-formers.

The national bias has been one of the most lasting legacies of nineteenth-century historiography. And one of the most difficult to deal with (to say the least), especially in political history. The national state is still the ordinary habitat of people in most parts of the world today; it is also the channel through which public opinion has been structured (even within the European Union, with its many incentives to cross national borders). Also, the nation is still the single most important factor – or actor – in politics. Nevertheless, the nation-state has lost its once self-evident position of the inevitable framework for historical writing. In political history in particular, the nation-state used to be the starting point for almost all analyses. In (the middle of) the twentieth century, this approach was often legitimised under the guise of exceptionalism or the *Sonderweg*: for various reasons, the histories of, for example, Britain, France and Germany were considered so 'exceptional' that they merited all the attention historians could possibly give them. This argument has lost its popularity, and in Germany especially criticism of exclusively national history explains to a large extent the current strength and vogue of comparative and transnational history in that country.

So what value does national history retain after (in particular Western) historians have renounced the claims of exceptionalism that dominated their historiography until the 1980s? Nobody would deny the possibility and legitimacy of national history, but the old claims that the history of a particular nation in Europe or America is exceptional because it is not continental (Great Britain), because it is not European (United States), because it brought the ideas of Enlightenment and revolution to the world (France), or because its history is one long *Sonderweg* (Germany) no longer strike us as obvious, or even convincing.[3] When the implicit comparison of exceptionalism was put to the test by placing it in a really international perspective in the case of the German *Sonderweg*, it turned out that the exceptional had sometimes not been a departure for research but was in fact often used as a rhetorical device to skip research altogether. The obvious alternative to this type of history is history that concentrates on generalising comparison, stressing the many things European countries, for instance, have in common. In his contribution about the Holocaust in the Netherlands,

3 Cf. Henk te Velde, 'The Dilemma of National History', in: A. Groen et al. (eds.), *Knowledge in Ferment: Dilemmas in Science, Scholarship and Society* (Leiden 2007) 227-241.

Ido de Haan uses this method in an inventive way. He argues that we should not concentrate on the national differences of the way the persecution of the Jews unfolded, but on the general aspects of this history, which can best be studied as a general genocide, or an extremely violent form of imperialism. In other words, he is arguing that the Holocaust is better understood when studied from a German than from a Dutch perspective. The Netherlands is just one of the European cases in this story, not a 'deviation from' but rather an 'illustration of' a more general pattern.

The approach of the other contributors to this volume is different. In a sense, their ambition is to square the circle by concentrating on certain peculiarities of the Dutch case, but without falling into the trap of exceptionalism. 'Without making a claim for some type of Dutch exceptionalism', Bas van Bavel nevertheless strives to draw attention to the 'exceptional' balance between the social actors in the (medieval) Netherlands; he explains this exceptional situation by pointing out 'the weakness of feudal elements in the Netherlands, the large degree of freedom enjoyed by the ordinary population and its high degree of self-organization'. Mineke Bosch uses similar terms in her contribution on gender issues: 'there is no reason to believe that Dutch gender relations at the beginning of the twenty-first century are the result of a historical *Sonderweg* [special path] (as the differences between European countries seem to be relative rather than categorical)', she writes, but she still aims to 'understand these differences [between nations] historically'. The other authors also concentrate on an exceptional characteristic of the Netherlands. However, there is a crucial difference from the arguments in the exceptionalist tradition, which described national histories in isolation. Here, the focus is not on the allegedly 'unique' features of the country, in the sense that these could only be dealt with independently from other national histories: national history as unique in the sense of in fact being incomparable to other national histories, and therefore to be studied separately, in isolation. Instead the authors of this volume use 'exceptional' characteristics or the exceptional extent to which certain elements prevailed in Dutch society as a way to illuminate, examine or address more general international patterns or general issues in historiographical debates, such as 'the transition from feudalism to capitalism' by Bas van Bavel; the origins of the Scientific Revolution by Klaas van Berkel, or of the European Enlightenment by Wijnand Mijnhardt.

In a playful yet serious manner, Klaas van Berkel pictures the Dutch seventeenth century as a 'laboratory': an artificial world that can be used to carry out historical experiments as it were, as if to 'test' historiographical hypotheses. In a curious way, this idea is in keeping with some well-known images of Dutch history. According to these images, the Netherlands is an 'artificial' land in the most literal meaning of the word. Have the Dutch not famously created their country with their own hands? After all, had it not been for the dikes and polders, the Dutch would have drowned long ago. As

national (self-)images go, this is something of a cliché, but Van Berkel also stresses the constructed nature of at least the rather new, modern and unusual Dutch society of the seventeenth century. He too comes close to exceptionalist arguments, but uses them in a more or less generalising, comparative way.

Van Berkel uses these arguments in a contribution on the history of science. It is small wonder, however, that he uses them in reference to the Dutch Golden Age in particular: always admired as a peak of achievements in economy, art, science, and even political power. If the historians and the general public of other countries have been interested in Dutch history at all, their interest has more often than not been focused on the Dutch Republic. Also, Dutch historians themselves have always been convinced of the importance of the period of the Republic, in particular the late sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, to which Fruin devoted most of his energy. Even if contemporary historians no longer cherish the nationalist admiration of the Golden Age of Fruin's time, they still regard the seventeenth century as exceptional. In this volume, all contributors refer in one way or another to that period, even if concentrating on an earlier or later period themselves. In this sense, they certainly stick to the national traditions of their trade.

Several non-Dutch historians have also built their careers on a specialisation in Dutch history of the early modern period. Before moving on to other subjects, Simon Schama and Jonathan Israel, for instance, wrote major books about the Dutch Republic and its aftermath. There is perhaps only one other area of Dutch history for which this could also be said: colonial history. In an often quoted expression, the nineteenth-century Dutch literary critic and cultural historian Conrad Busken Huet said that Java and Rembrandt's paintings were the 'two best letters of recommendation' of the Netherlands abroad.[4] And it has famously been said (by the conservative historian F.C. Gerretson) that losing its colonies would reduce the Netherlands to the state of a farm with a landing at the North Sea; or to 'the rank of Denmark', apparently a frightening prospect indeed.[5] The Dutch East India Company was founded in 1602 as a private company, and its territorial possessions nationalised around 1800. Subsequently, the Dutch Indonesian empire of the nineteenth century was regarded as a spectacular colonial success, in particular as long as

4 P.B.M. Blaas, 'De Gouden Eeuw: overleefd en herleefd. Kanttekeningen bij het beeldvormingsproces in de negentiende eeuw', in: Idem, *Geschiedenis en nostalgie. De historiografie van een kleine natie met een groot verleden* (Hilversum 2000) 59; Conrad Busken Huet, *Het land van Rembrandt. Studies over de Noordnederlandse beschaving in de zeventiende eeuw* (1883-1884; Amsterdam 1987) 780.

5 E.g. Jur van Goor in: Ed Jonker and Piet van Hees (eds.), *Geschiedenis in Utrecht. Bestaat er een Utrechtse school in de geschiedbeoefening* (Utrecht 1994) 36; H. Baudet, 'Nederland en de rang van Denemarken', BMGN 90:3 (1975) 430-443.

it yielded enormous profits for the Dutch treasury. For instance, the Belgian king Leopold II envied the Netherlands their profitable colony, and tried to copy the Dutch example by setting out on a colonial adventure himself, in Africa.[6] At that time, and until the end of Dutch colonialism in Asia, 'nobody needed to be convinced of the necessity to study the Dutch example', Wim van den Doel says in his contribution to this volume. And the importance of the Indonesian empire was not forgotten, even after the end of colonialism. In the 1960s and 1970s, the famous historical anthropologists Clifford Geertz and Benedict Anderson both started their careers by writing a book about Java, and they both used examples from Indonesia in their later work, too.

Religion and civil society

The Dutch Golden Age and the Dutch colonial empire have always attracted the attention of historians, Dutch and non-Dutch alike. Besides, the Netherlands has often been described as a Calvinist country. Even more than Switzerland the Netherlands has been the country of Calvinism, and Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* was at least partly inspired by the author's knowledge of Dutch history and Dutch contemporary society. Weber was well aware that the Dutch Republic was hardly dominated by orthodox Calvinism, and the Netherlands has never had an established church. Also, the country has always had a large Catholic minority. To discuss the 'relevance of Dutch history' without paying attention to religion would be almost inconceivable, and religion features in most contributions. James Kennedy and Jan Zwemer concentrate on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and on the particular relations between state and church, and the (according to them) early and progressive secularisation that took place. The third issue they focus on is the famous 'pillarization', the segmentation of Dutch society (from the beginning of the twentieth century until the 1960s) along religious and ideological lines. Orthodox Protestants, Catholics and social democrats lived in their own disciplined moral communities from cradle to grave, and politics was dominated by a solid electoral majority of religious political parties. The issue of pillarization dominated the debates of Dutch historians for decades, and it has been almost the only way religion entered the work of historians dealing with the modern period. On the whole, they regarded religion as a phenomenon that was doomed to disappear owing to the modernisation of society. Even if a new, broader interest in the history

6 E.H. Kossmann, *The Low Countries 1780-1940* (Oxford 1978); Coenraad Arnold Tamse, *Nederland en België in Europa (1859-1871)* (The Hague 1973) *passim*; J. Stengers, *Belgique et Congo: L'élaboration de la charte coloniale* (Brussels 1963) 58; Idem, *Combien le Congo a-t-il coûté à la Belgique?* (Brussels 1957) 144 ff.

of religion is now appearing[7], most historians – except for the mostly separate community of church historians – have so far used the history of religion mainly as an important, but diminishing, aspect of social life.

Even themes with an obvious religious connotation were mainly studied in another context. Pillarization, for instance, has often been used (in particular from the 1960s to the 1980s) as an example of 'consociational democracy'. This has been described by internationally renowned Dutch political scientists such as Arend Lijphart and Hans Daalder as a viable alternative to the Anglo-American two party system.[8] This was their way of demonstrating the relevance of Dutch history to an international audience. Today, it would perhaps make more sense to demonstrate the extent to which the Dutch party system was an example of European 'party democracy'. In his modern classic *The Principles of Representative Government*, the French political philosopher Bernard Manin describes three phases of representative government: liberal parliamentarianism, party democracy and audience democracy. Whereas, explicitly or implicitly, Great Britain is his prime example of parliamentary government, the German social democratic party of party democracy and the United States for audience democracy, few countries fit his whole scheme as perfectly as the Netherlands: from a rather early and strong parliamentary system to a developing audience democracy today, with in between an ideal-typical party democracy. In this case, the relevance of Dutch history is not its unique 'pillarization' – which was by the way a system which, to a certain extent, also existed in countries such as Austria, Belgium, Switzerland and even Germany – but the way it reveals, to a remarkable degree, the characteristics of the different phases of representative government, in particular those of party democracy.[9]

Apart from its strength, the remarkable thing about Dutch party democracy is that it seemed so 'unpolitical'. At the end of the day, everything revolved around the state as the distributor of subsidies which kept pillarization going; 'ordinary' citizens however could conceive of their 'pillar' as a true moral community, rather than a true political party that would manifest itself primarily in parliament and social action. Remieg Aerts argues that political indifference (and a dislike for political dissension) has been the normal situation in the Netherlands. Aerts quotes political scientists who have concluded that, these days, the Dutch like democracy, but they do not like politics. Of course, this is not a peculiarity of the Dutch. According to Mark

7 Cf. e.g. Annemarie Houkes, *Christelijke vaderlanders. Godsdienst, burgerschap en de Nederlandse natie (1850-1900)* (Amsterdam 2009).

8 Most famous is Arend Lijphart, *The Politics of Accommodation: Pluralism and Democracy in the Netherlands* (Berkeley 1968).

9 Cf. Henk te Velde, *'Inleiding. De internationalisering van de nationale geschiedenis en de verzuiling'*, BMGN/LCHR 124:4 (2009) 499-514.

Dirck van Delen, The Great Hall of the Binnenhof, The Hague, during the great assembly of the States-General in 1651.
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Mazower, who even goes a step further, 'Europeans accept democracy because they no longer believe in politics'.[10] However, the interesting question here is not whether the Dutch are unique, but whether their case can illuminate an important issue in contemporary debates. And it is in fact possible to argue that it does.

Aerts points to the precocious development of Dutch civil society, building on the contributions to this volume by Van Bavel and Prak, who also write about this issue. Van Bavel even suggests that the miracle of the Dutch Golden Age was in fact caused by the relative liberty of late medieval Dutch civil society. Maarten Prak writes about the political relevance of civil society in the Republic, and in particular about the way the decentralised structure of the Republic enabled lower middle class participants in this civil society to influence politics. Seen from the perspective of the current process of the erosion of nation states, we should revaluate the localised politics of the Republic as an alternative to modern forms of national democracy, Prak suggests. This was certainly not a type of politics we are familiar with in formal representative democracies; however, with all its shortcomings, it did offer a large number of possibilities for direct participation.

Aerts takes a different course. According to him, the strength of civil society coupled with the relative weakness of Dutch political life in the narrow sense of the word – the lack of interest and involvement in parliamentary politics and national administration – raise questions about the relationship between democracy and civil society. A thriving civil society does not automatically produce animated political life, but perhaps in the long run the first is more important for the maintenance of democracy than the latter. However this may be, it is clear that Dutch history has a lot to offer students of civil society, even if Dutch historians have so far paid almost no attention at all to the subject. To them, unlike to historians of neighbouring Germany, the existence of societies and all kinds of non-governmental self-organisation within society was self-evident, and could not as such explain the development of modern democratic politics in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. More importantly, the weaknesses in Dutch democracy or political life could hardly be explained by pointing at civil society, since this has always thrived. Moreover, Dutch society had been more or less 'democratic' for centuries already, at least in the Tocquevillean sense of the word: not a political regime, but the condition of an 'egalitarian' society without a strict hierarchy.[11]

10 Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (London, etc. 1999) 404.

11 Cf. Annelien de Dijn, *French Political Thought from Montesquieu to Tocqueville: Liberty in a Levelled Society?* (Cambridge 2008); Henk te Velde, 'Civil Society and Dutch History', *De Negentiende Eeuw* 32:2 (2008) 122-125.

History matters

Of course, this is not to say that Dutch democracy should be regarded as a kind of ideal type, let alone a blueprint for other societies. On the contrary. The recent and completely unexpected upsurge of populism in the Netherlands, and the apparent inability so far of the political establishment to deal with it in a constructive and steady way, has revealed the shortcomings of democracy Dutch style. Nobody was used to populist politics, so at first nobody knew what to do with it. Paradoxically, this demonstrated the importance of history and tradition in politics: experience, having learnt what to do in a certain situation, is very important in politics, whereas invention from scratch is very difficult. This has demonstrated that political development is 'path-dependent': many things are the result of long-term developments, and cannot be changed overnight. This can be a major obstacle for those who would like to change society immediately and completely. Old habits die hard, even when they are no longer useful. This is also illustrated by Marlou Schrover's contribution about the way the Dutch government has tried to integrate immigrants. The old structures and the ways of thinking from the social system of pillarization still determined immigration politics in the 1980s, although pillarization had already disappeared by then. However, pillarization was the way Dutch society had learnt to deal with minority issues, and this led to a rather patronising type of multiculturalism which in the end produced disappointment and bitterness.

The cases of populism and immigration politics illustrate that history matters, be it in a positive or a negative sense. After a few decades in which it seemed that modernisation had swept the past away or would sweep it away, but at most produced invented traditions, and in which the nation was first and foremost studied as a framework for modernisation (Gellner, Anderson, Hobsbawm), the *longue durée* has partly come back in explaining economic and social history (path-dependency and the 'cultural freezing' suggested by Schrover) and in political and cultural history (traditions). Mineke Bosch, for instance, attempts to make sense of the current position of women in the Netherlands by drawing on material from the history of the Netherlands since the early Republic. This is not to deny the possibility or importance of radical ruptures in the past, such as – to quote just one example from Dutch history – the introduction in 1795 of a unitary state in the wake of the French Revolution, but it is perhaps a result of the starting point of this book. Nevertheless, it is probably also a reflection of the pendulum of historiography.

Whatever the case may be, Dutch history could at least – in the phrase of Klaas van Berkel – be used as a 'laboratory' to answer questions about the long-term effects of a flourishing civil society. That the theme of civil society is ubiquitous in this volume – the Netherlands could be used as an example in a number of contexts, but civil society clearly stands out – says something about

the Dutch past, but it also says something about current historiographical traditions. Civil society is a subject where cultural, political and social – and partly even economic – history meet. The omnipresence of civil society in this volume shows that the historical sub-disciplines are not nearly as far apart as they were a couple of decades ago. Van Berkel is a historian of scientific ideas and a cultural historian, but he writes about the practice and social context of science. Mijnhardt is a historian of cultural societies and a cultural historian, and writes about the urban context of the early Enlightenment. Van Bavel is an economic historian, and writes about the social and cultural structures and effects of economic development. They all study their own special subject within its context, and in doing so they all have something to say about civil society as well. Perhaps they all are socio-cultural historians to a certain extent. Mijnhardt is a case in point. He argues that the urban context is essential for understanding the development of the Enlightenment. Even though part of his contribution is about the history of ideas as such, his hypothesis links ideas and urban context.

Wijnand Mijnhardt shows something else, too. He uses the urban environment, rather than the *Dutch* national context in particular. It is the urban stimulus for the development of the Enlightenment he is interested in, and the Dutch Republic as such at first does not seem relevant for his approach, but rather the towns of the western part of the country. The first part of his contribution in particular therefore seems to concentrate on the relevance of urban, rather than Dutch, history. Even in his contribution, however, the national context becomes dominant towards the end. His conclusion, on 'the closing of the Dutch mind', follows the classic story of the decline of the Republic in the eighteenth century. This seems to be ironic, given that he has always been one of the most convinced advocates of the importance of the Dutch eighteenth century.[12] However, on second thoughts, this reveals that, from the perspective of this issue, it is possible to combine classic stories from Dutch history with new approaches to international history. ◀

Henk te Velde (1959) is Professor of Dutch History in Leiden; his area of special interest is the history of politics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His published works include: *Van regentenmentaliteit tot populisme. Politieke tradities in Nederland (2010); Stijlen van leiderschap. Persoon en politiek van Thorbecke tot Den Uyl* (2002) and *Gemeenschapszin en plichtsbesef. Nationalisme en liberalisme in Nederland 1870-1918* (1992).

12 Joost Kloek and Wijnand Mijnhardt, *1800: Blueprints for Dutch Society* (London 2004).

Acknowledgements

As editors of this special issue of the *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden/Low Countries Historical Review*, we would like to thank a number of people for their help and support along the way. The idea for a special issue devoted to the international relevance of Dutch history was first discussed in the Editorial Board and in the International Advisory Board of this journal, and we would like to thank the members of these two boards for their helpful suggestions. A special word of thanks is due to Wijnandt Mijnhardt, whose keen remarks were crucial in clearing up some ambiguities in the original plan. At a later stage, the members of the Editorial Board carried out invaluable work in commenting on the drafts of the essays submitted by the authors. James Kennedy's contribution in particular is very much appreciated, as his suggestions regarding some of the essays were critical in resolving quite a few editorial issues.

Naturally, a volume such as this would not be possible without the hard work, dedication and cooperation of the authors, who at first presented their ideas during a conference in November 2008 and later were willing to revise their essays for inclusion in this volume. We would also like to thank the referees for commenting on the contributions to that conference and for their insightful reports on the written essays. These remarks were essential in enhancing the quality of this volume.

We are especially grateful for the generous financial support provided by the Royal Netherlands Historical Society (Harreveldfonds) and the Institute of Netherlands History. The extraordinary generosity of the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam (Gijs van der Ham and Cécile van der Harten) and Amsterdams Historisch Museum (Kees Zandvliet) is reflected in the exuberant illustration of this issue. Free use of illustrations was also kindly offered by the International Institute of Social History (Amsterdam) and the Netherlands Institute of War Documentation (Amsterdam).

In addition, we would like to thank Hermen Grasman (design), Renske Siemens (guest image editor) and Mark Baker (translation) for their invaluable assistance and ever-present support in this process. The vision and dedication of the editorial staff (Marja de Keuning and Caroline van Vliet) ensured the success of this project.

KLAAS VAN BERKEL
LEONIE DE GOEI