

# Why was Slavery not Abolished in 1798?

## Humanity and Human Rights in the Batavian Revolution

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Het 'slavernijprobleem' was een belangrijke morele kwestie in de achttiende-eeuwse Nederlandse verlichte pers. Toch leidde de toename van het aantal publicaties over dit onderwerp niet tot serieuze pogingen om deze praktijk af te schaffen. Dit leek te veranderen tijdens de Bataafse Revolutie, toen de afschaffing kortstondig in het parlement werd besproken. Dit artikel analyseert de Nederlandse anti-slavernijdebatten, vooral binnen de context van het Nederlandse revolutionaire parlement in 1797. Het laat zien dat de menslievende sentimenten in deze debatten niet automatisch leidden tot steun voor de afschaffing. Alleen radicale volksvertegenwoordigers bepleitten de noodzaak van afschaffing op basis van 'mensenrechten'. Dit artikel poneert daarom een hermeneutisch onderscheid tussen anti-slavernij en afschaffing.

The 'problem of slavery' was an important moral issue in the eighteenth-century Dutch enlightened press, but the increase in publications on this topic did not lead to any serious attempts to abolish the practice. This seemed to change during the Batavian Revolution, when abolition was briefly discussed in parliament. This article analyses Dutch anti-slavery debates, especially within the context of the Dutch revolutionary parliament in 1797. It shows that the humanitarian sentiments in these debates did not automatically lead to support for abolition. Only radical representatives argued for the abolishment of slavery on the grounds of 'human rights'. On this basis, this article posits a hermeneutical distinction between anti-slavery and abolition.

The important moment is here. The moment that will decide the fate of violated humanity. The moment is here. The moment that will decide between interest and duty. O, if only our devastated African brethren [...] could find consolation in the sensitivity of your hearts... find consolation in the weight you will attach to fulfilling your moral duties!<sup>1</sup>

With these rousing words, the radical democratic representative Pieter Vreede opened his speech during the session of the National Assembly of the Batavian Republic on 22 April 1797. The National Assembly was debating the contents of the future constitution, and it had just turned to the topic of the future rule over the colonies. The ‘moral duties’ Vreede was referring to concerned the abolition of the Dutch slave trade and slavery in the Dutch colonies. According to Vreede, the time had come to extend the rights of liberty, equality and fraternity to all people who lived in the Dutch territories. Vreede was known as a talented orator. He knew that to convince his fellow representatives of this cause, he had to use all the rhetorical skills he could muster. The central theme of his speech was a moving appeal to humanity (*menschelijkheid*), compassion (*medemenselijkheid*) and human rights (*regten van den Mensch*).

Members of the audience later attested they were swept away by Vreede’s speech. One member asserted that Vreede’s ‘eloquent tongue’ had moved him in such a way that he had visions of the paintings of ‘the godly Titian’, and of the horrific scenes depicted by the Flemish painter Frans Snijders (see Figure 1). ‘Never before was the most noble cause, that of humanity, more nobly advocated’, another contemporary observed.<sup>2</sup> In the debate that ensued, Members of Parliament were eager to express their disdain for the practice of slavery. Just like Vreede, they described how it conflicted with their sense of humanity. However, when Vreede’s proposal was finally put to a vote, a large majority decided against including abolition of the slave trade or slavery in the future constitution. They deferred the matter to the long term and left it to a future government to decide on. Despite their professed disgust for slavery, these representatives voted against its abolition. How can this be explained?

Scholars of Dutch abolitionism have long argued that abolitionist and anti-slavery sentiments were virtually non-existent in the eighteenth-century

1 *Dagverhaal der handelingen van de Nationale Vergadering* vol. v (Den Haag: Swart en comp., 1797) 10: ‘Het belangryk oogenblik is daar, waarin het lot der geschonden menschlykheid zal beslist worden. Het oogenblik is daar, dat zal uitspraak doen, tusschen belang en pligt. Ach mogten onze rampzalige Afrikaansche Medebroeders, [...] troost vinden in de

gevoeligheid uwer harten – troost vinden in het gewigt, dat gy zult hechten aan het volbrengen van uw zedelyke verpligtingen!’

2 *Dagverhaal* v, 21; Cornelis Rogge, *Geschiedenis der staatsregeling* (Amsterdam: Johannes Allart, 1799) 339: ‘Nimmer werd de edelste zaak, de zaak der menschheid, edeler bepleit.’

Dutch metropole, particularly in comparison to England.<sup>3</sup> It was not until the 1830s that popular abolitionist organisations sprang up and paved the way for the gradual abolition of slavery in the Dutch colonies between 1863 and 1873. Most eighteenth-century citizens would not have had any clear ideas about the international slave trade or the use of slave labour in the Dutch colonies. Any talk about abolition would therefore be informed by economic motives. Given the severe economic challenges confronting the Dutch Republic in the eighteenth century, the Dutch understandably refrained from considering the cessation of the profitable exploitation of slave labour.<sup>4</sup>

It is true that the eighteenth-century Dutch political authorities and the all-powerful trading companies never deigned to consider abolishing the slave trade or forced labour. However, recent scholarship has shown that dissenting voices did emerge within society at large. Historians have remarked on the significant increase in anti-slavery publications in the second half of the eighteenth century. The ‘problem of slavery’ became an important moral issue in the enlightened Dutch spectatorial press, and philosophical and literary works. Key anti-slavery texts from France, Britain and America were translated into Dutch and widely discussed. The horrors of enslavement were described in plays, poems and other works of fiction. It turns out that slavery was anything but a peripheral subject in the Dutch Republic.<sup>5</sup> It remains the case, however, that the onset of enlightenment has not led to any serious attempts to abolish slavery. By the time Vreede broached the subject of abolition in 1797, his fellow representatives were all well versed and well informed of the latest slavery-related news in the revolutionary Atlantic world.<sup>6</sup> René Koekoek has rightly asserted that Dutch revolutionaries did not suffer from a ‘blind spot’, or failed to ‘live up to their own ideals’, as older historiography has told us. During

3 Albertus Nicolaas Paasman, *Reinhart: Nederlandse literatuur en slavernij ten tijde van de Verlichting* (Nijhoff 1984) 96–97; Seymour Drescher, ‘The Long Goodbye. Dutch Capitalism and Antislavery in Comparative Perspective’, *The American Historical Review* 99:1 (1994) 44–69. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2166162>.

4 For an analysis of this historiography see Angelie Sens, ‘Dutch antislavery attitudes in a decline-ridden society, 1750–1815’, in: Gert Oostindie (ed.), *Fifty years later. Antislavery, capitalism and modernity in the Dutch orbit* (KITLV Press 1995) 89–104.

5 See for example Paasman, *Reinhart*; Jan Willem Buisman, *Tussen vroomheid en Verlichting. Een cultuurhistorisch en -sociologisch onderzoek naar enkele aspecten van de Verlichting in Nederland 1755–1810 dl. 2* (Waanders 1992); Angelie Sens,

‘*Mensaaap, heiden, slaaf*’. *Nederlandse visies op de wereld rond 1800* (SDU Uitgevers 2001); Sarah Adams, *Repertoires of Slavery. Dutch Theater Between Abolitionism and Colonial Subjection, 1770–1810* (Amsterdam University Press 2023). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9789048554829>; Esther Baakman, ‘From Valuable Merchandise to Violent Rebels: Depicting Enslaved Africans in the Dutch Periodical Press in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries’, *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 139:3 (2024). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgn-lchr.12793>.

6 Pepijn Brandon, ‘“Shrewd Sirens of Humanity”. The changing shape of pro-slavery arguments in the Netherlands (1789–1814)’, *Almanack* 14 (2016) 3–26. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1590/2236-463320161402>.



**Figure 1.** One of the representatives in the *Nationale Vergadering* compared Vreede's anti-slavery speech to the grisly scenes of a deer hunt depicted by Frans Snijders (1579-1657). © Prado, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=51001827>.

the revolutionary years of the Batavian Republic, Dutch politicians had the opportunity to end slavery and the slave trade but consciously decided – by majority vote – not to.<sup>7</sup>

The Dutch revolutionary discussions of slavery demonstrate that there was a tension between humanitarianism and abolition. This tension has been remarked on in the international literature but has been studied less within the context of Dutch discussions on slavery.<sup>8</sup> In line with the central theme of this special issue, I argue that the division between anti- and pro-slavery was not as clear as one might assume. Late eighteenth-century discussions on slavery operated within a wide-ranging spectrum, and participants took up positions that defied classification as outright advocates of slavery or abolition. Working from the premise that anti-slavery and abolition were separate concepts, this article sheds light on the gradual – rather than dialectical – differences between viewpoints regarding slavery. The distinction between anti-slavery and abolition was made by American historian Albert Bushnell Hart more than a century ago. He posited that anti-slavery could be described as a negative force; it criticised the phenomenon and its ‘aberrations’, and at most strove for curtailment of the institution and improvement of specific conditions. Within this stance, abolishment of slavery was only considered an abstract, long-term goal. Abolition, on the contrary, can be seen as a positive, activating force. It pursued the swift termination of slavery as an institution, which was considered fundamentally at odds with human rights.<sup>9</sup> Anti-slavery did indeed gain ground in the late eighteenth-

- 7 René Koekoek, ‘Liberty, Death and Slavery in the Age of Atlantic Revolutions, 1770s-1790s’, in: Hannah Dawson and Annelien De Dijn (eds.), *Rethinking Liberty before Liberalism. Part II - Hierarchies* (Cambridge University Press 2022) 134-154, 153. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108951722.010>.
- 8 David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution 1770-1823* (Oxford University Press 1999). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195126716.001.0001>; Brycchan Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility. Writing, Sentiment, and Slavery, 1760-1807* (Palgrave Macmillan 2005). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230501621>; Christine Levecq, *Slavery and Sentiment: The Politics of Feeling in Black Atlantic Antislavery Writing, 1770-1850* (University of Massachusetts Press 2008); Stephen Ahern (ed.), *Affect and Abolition in the Anglo-Atlantic 1770-1830* (Routledge 2013); see

also Karen Halttunen, ‘Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture’, *The American Historical Review* 100:2 (1995) 303-334. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2169001>; Devin Vartija, *The Color of Inequality. Race and Common Humanity in Enlightenment Thought* (University of Pennsylvania Press 2021).

- 9 Albert Bushnell Hart, *Slavery and abolition 1831-1841* (Harper Brothers 1906) 174. Note that historically, the words ‘anti-slavery’ and ‘abolition’ were not used as distinctively; Christopher Brown, *Moral Capital. Foundations of British Abolitionism* (University of North Carolina Press 2006) 17-18 footnote 14, 40; Davis, *The Problem of Slavery*, 21-22; for a brief discussion on terminology, David Brion Davis, ‘Antislavery or Abolition? Review of Gerald Sorin, *Abolitionism: A New Perspective*’, *Reviews in American History* 1:1 (1973) 95-99. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2701691>.

century Dutch Republic, but it did not transform into an abolitionist agenda, as was the case in England.

This article will offer a different explanation for the failure of the first attempt to abolish the slave trade and slavery. First, I give an account of the literary and sentimental context in which Dutch anti-slavery ideas emerged. I will then turn to the political and intellectual mindset of Dutch revolutionaries. To do so, I use contemporary publications, most notably the *Dagverhaal der Handelingen van de Nationaale Vergadering*. These minutes of parliamentary proceedings were published and widely read at the time, and were considered trustworthy sources by contemporaries and later historians alike.<sup>10</sup>

### The suffering of others

The problem of slavery was not lost on the eighteenth-century Dutch. Since the formation of the Dutch empire and its first ventures into the transatlantic slave trade in the seventeenth century, critical works on slavery had been written.<sup>11</sup> A significant increase in writing on anti-slavery and abolition can be seen from the 1750s onwards, as was the case elsewhere in Europe.<sup>12</sup> Important French and English anti-slavery pamphlets were translated into Dutch. These texts circulated widely in the enlightened societies that sprang up throughout the country. A work such as *The History of the Two Indies*, by Guillaume-Thomas Raynal, was reprinted several times and became a household name.<sup>13</sup> Anti-slavery became a recurring theme in the spectatorial journals. Literary works such as novels, poetry and plays – both in translation and in original Dutch – were an important medium for disseminating critical thought on slavery. These works were perfect vehicles to display the horrors of slavery and evoke feelings of empathy or sympathy in the reader.<sup>14</sup>

10 Joris Oddens, *Pioniers in schaduwbeeld. Het eerste parlement van Nederland 1796-1798* (Vantilt 2012) 17-20.

11 For recent discussions on Dutch empire see René Koekoek, Anna-Isabelle Richard and Arthur Weststeijn (eds.), *The Dutch Empire between Ideas and Practice, 1600-2000* (Palgrave Macmillan 2019) and Cátia Antunes, 'Binary Narratives to Diversified Tales. Changing the Paradigm in the Study of Dutch Colonial Participation', *Tijdschrift voor geschiedenis* 131:3 (2018) 393-407. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5117/TVGESCH2018.3.001.ANTU>.

12 Buisman, *Tussen vroomheid en Verlichting*, 339; Buisman counts no fewer than 144 anti-slavery works.

13 Koen Stapelbroek, 'Raynal, Luzac and Pinto: global trade, the Dutch Republic and the history and constitution of the commercial state', in: Antonella Alimento and Gianluigi Goggi (eds.), *Autour de l'abbé Raynal: genèse et enjeux politiques de l'Histoire de deux Indes* (Centre international d'étude du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle 2008) 45-61; Pouwel van Schooten, *Een waarlyk groot wysgeer. De Nederlandse Receptie van G.T. Raynals Histoire des deux Indes* (unpublished Master's thesis; University of Amsterdam 2020).



The growing importance of feelings of humanity and compassion in eighteenth-century socio-political debates is part of what historians have dubbed the Sentimentalist Enlightenment.<sup>15</sup> In her seminal work *Inventing Human Rights* (2008), Lynn Hunt has shown that the rise of the modern novel in Europe produced new sensibilities which were in turn crucial for the development of thinking about humanity, compassion and human rights. The more people could imagine the lives of others, the more they were able to empathise with people different from themselves. This ‘imagined empathy’ reinforced the idea that all human beings were in the most fundamental sense equal – a prerequisite for the development of the concept of universal human rights.<sup>16</sup>

These developments are also reflected in the work of Dutch writers. Authors of novels and spectatorial journals increasingly appealed to the emotions and humanitarian feelings of their audience. Compassion became a civic virtue, which also explains the rise of many philanthropic societies that emerged around the same time.<sup>17</sup> The sentimental epistolary novel made it possible to immerse oneself in the lives, emotions, thoughts and suffering of others, and therefore became a perfect instrument for shaping and civilising the self, building moral character and cultivating emotions, and helping citizens make sense of moral issues.<sup>18</sup> Throughout Europe, immersive sentimental narratives were used to address the topic of slavery.<sup>19</sup> Plays in particular were ideal vehicles for transmitting the horrors of slavery. With the characters shown alive and breathing on stage, it was easier to identify with

14 Buisman, *Tussen vroomheid en Verlichting*, 307–342.

15 Michael Frazer, *The Enlightenment of Sympathy: Justice and the Moral Sentiments in the Eighteenth Century and Today* (Oxford University Press 2010).

16 Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A history* (W.W. Norton & Company 2007). See also Thomas Laqueur, ‘Bodies, Details, and the Humanitarian Narrative’, in: Lynn Hunt (ed.), *The New Cultural History* (University of California Press 1989) 176–204. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520064287.003.0008>; Concepts of humanitarianism and compassion can be traced back further, for example David de Boer, *The Early Modern Dutch Press in an Age of Religious Persecution: The Making of Humanitarianism* (Oxford University Press 2023). For humanitarian arguments in favour of slavery see Lauren R. Cray, ‘Cruel Necessity. capitalism, the discourse of sympathy, and the problem of the slave trade in

the age of human rights’, *Slavery & Abolition* 37:2 (2016) 256–283. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2015.1120103>.

17 Sophie Rose, *Spectators of Suffering: Antislavery and the Politics of Morality in the Dutch Republic, 1763–1797* (unpublished Master’s thesis; University of Chicago 2016).

18 See literature in footnote 3.

19 Paasman, Reinhart; Annemieke Meijer, *The Pure Language of the Heart: Sentimentalism in the Netherlands 1775–1800* (Atlanta 1998). DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004484214\\_031](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004484214_031); Dorothée Sturkenboom, *Spectators van hartstocht. Sekse en emotionele cultuur in de achttiende eeuw* (Verloren 1998); see also the special issue ‘Batavian Phlegm? The Dutch and their Emotions in Pre-Modern Times’, *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 126:2 (2014). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.9538>.



**Figure 2.** Anti-slavery texts, pictures and artwork often depicted enslaved black people in a state of helplessness or in need of being rescued. *The Kneeling Slave, 'Am I not a man and a brother?'*, oil on canvas by an unknown painter of the British School, c. 1800. © Wilberforce House Museum, British School, Art UK, Public domain, via Wikimedia commons, [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The\\_Kneeling\\_Slave,\\_%27Am\\_I\\_not\\_a\\_man\\_and\\_a\\_brother%3F%27.jpg](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_Kneeling_Slave,_%27Am_I_not_a_man_and_a_brother%3F%27.jpg).



the victims of cruelty and experience a sense of shared humanity. On stage, emotions, sentimentalism and humanity coincided all at once.<sup>20</sup>

This trend, however, did not mean that Dutch authors used their works to promote the abolition of slavery or the slave trade. By the very nature of the literary medium, it was much easier to display slaves suffering at the hands of a particularly cruel master than as the result of a complex economic and governmental system.<sup>21</sup> The focus came to lie on excesses within the slavery system, and not on the system itself. Authors tended to focus on the cruel nature of especially British and French slave owners, thereby reinforcing the idea of the ‘good master’, who, unsurprisingly, was most likely to be Dutch.<sup>22</sup> In the introduction to *Kraspoekol*, for example, Willem van Hogendorp states that although his novel was critical of slavery, he did not want his readers to think that the slaves in Batavia were treated badly at all. In fact, he was convinced that there was no place where slaves were afforded better treatment than in the Dutch colony. Van Hogendorp had lived and worked in the Dutch East Indies himself, so his readership could trust his judgement.<sup>23</sup> The general focus on the degradation and suffering of black slaves accentuated their helplessness and incapacity, and stressed the need for white saviours to lift them out of their pitiful fate. This narrative of white superiority in turn reinforced the stereotype of black men not being sufficiently enlightened or civilised to deal with the grave responsibility of liberty – an argument that would later be used repeatedly to argue against the abolition of slavery (see Figure 2).

Only a few Dutch publications tied their criticism of slavery to abolition. One of these was the essay ‘Proeve eener Verhandeling over den Slaavenhandel’ (‘Essay on the slave trade and its consequences’, 1790), in which Jan Konijnenburg argued that freedom was an inalienable natural right that should never be violated.<sup>24</sup> Another such work was the translation of Benjamin Frossard’s *La cause des esclaves nègres* (1789), which was translated by the famous Dutch writer Elizabeth Wolff in 1790 and included proposals for gradual abolition.<sup>25</sup>

20 Adams, *Repertoires of Slavery*.

21 Cf. Paasman, Reinhart, 93, 104–109; Sarah Adams, ‘Slavery, Sympathy, and White Self-Representation in Dutch Bourgeois Theater of 1800’, *Early Modern Low Countries* 2:2 (2018) 146–168. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/emlc.69>.

22 Paasman, Reinhart, 141–154.

23 Willem van Hogendorp, *Kraspoekol, of de droevige gevolgen van eene te verre gaande strengheid, jegens de slaaven*. Zedekundige vertelling (Batavia: Lodewyk Dominicus, 1780); Ann Kumar,

‘Literary Approaches to Slavery and the Indies Enlightenment: Van Hogendorp’s “Kraspoekol”’, *Indonesia* 43 (1987) 43–65. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3351209>.

24 On this essay, see Jan Konijnenburg, *Visioen van vrijheid. Mémoire sur la liberté des cultes (1827). Proeve eener Verhandeling over den slaavenhandel (1790)*, transl. and ed. Simon Vuyk (Verloren 2013).

25 Paasman, Reinhart, 114–115.

Although anti-slavery became a popular theme in Dutch novels, plays and essays, what actually happened in the Dutch colonies received far less attention than one might expect. This became especially clear during the revolutionary Patriot Movement of the 1780s. Dutch citizens all across the country organised themselves in an attempt to fight the moral, political and economic decline of the Republic. In the rapidly expanding political press, virtually all aspects of political and social life were debated. However, treatises on colonial rule or the institution of slavery were remarkably scarce. The Patriots' preoccupation with an economic decline only reinforced the importance of the Dutch colonial empire. Abolition did not tie in with these concerns. In short, the Dutch Patriots did not develop a critical colonial conscience – nor did their conservative opponents, for that matter.<sup>26</sup>

If the Patriots broached the notion of slavery at all, it was almost exclusively used to describe their *own* political state of being. The political crisis had caused a revival and radicalisation of classical-republican ideas on liberty. Some Patriots now argued that one either lived in a state of liberty or a state of slavery. This political understanding of slavery was not an elusive concept, but belonged to the very core of classical-republican thought.<sup>27</sup> The dichotomy of freedom and slavery would be a powerful and recurring hyperbole in republican imagery, which would radicalise during the age of revolution.<sup>28</sup> By designating democratic self-rule as the fundamental condition of liberty, the Welsh republican philosopher Richard Price argued forcefully that 'the greatest part of the rest of mankind are slaves. They are subject to arbitrary and insolent masters, who say to them bow down before us that we may go over you, and who have their properties and lives entirely at their mercy.'<sup>29</sup>

Embracing these ideas, Pieter Vreede was one of the first to equate political liberty with forms of direct democracy and constitutionalism during the 1780s. Finding that Dutch citizens lacked the democratic rights to rule themselves, he drew the shocking conclusion that all Dutchmen had been living in a state of slavery all along. They simply had not noticed the 'yoke of slavery' because it had been drawn from sight by economic prosperity and

26 Gerrit Jan Schutte, *De Nederlandse patriotten en de koloniën. Een onderzoek naar hun denkbeelden en optreden, 1770-1800* (Tjeenk Willink 1974) 15-16; Sens, 'Dutch antislavery attitudes'.

27 Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge University Press 1998). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139171274>; Freya Sierhuis, 'Republicanism and Slavery in Dutch Intellectual Culture, 1600-1800', in: Joris Oddens et al., *Discourses of Decline: Essays on Republicanism in Honor of Wyger R.E. Velema* (Brill 2022) 53-69.

DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004470651\\_005](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004470651_005); Wyger R.E. Velema, *Republicans: Essays on Eighteenth-Century Dutch Political Thought* (Brill 2007) 45-49.

28 See also Koekkoek, 'Liberty, Death and Slavery', 138-144.

29 Cited in Anthony Page, "'A Species of Slavery': Richard Price's Rational Dissent and Antislavery", *Slavery & Abolition* 32:1 (2011) 53-73, 58. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2011.538198>.

by false beliefs about the meaning of liberty.<sup>30</sup> The Patriots were still in the process of figuring out what it meant to be free when an invading Prussian army restored the rule of the stadholder and forcibly ended the Patriot Revolt in 1787.

### Anti-slavery versus abolition in the National Assembly

The question of abolition would gain momentum for the first time in Dutch history after the Batavian Revolution in 1795. In March 1796, a National Assembly was established whose main goal was to write a constitution for the Dutch people.<sup>31</sup> Dutch revolutionaries seized the opportunity to finally turn their enlightened ideas into practice. It was in this context that national representatives came to talk about the future rule of the colonies and how it should be included in the constitution. The Batavian Revolution led to a fundamental reassessment of the Dutch Republic as a colonial empire. The rule and administration of the colonies were now transferred from the trading companies to the national government.<sup>32</sup> The economic decline of the Dutch Republic made the rationalisation of colonial rule all the more important. The question of how future rule over the colonies should be organised was particularly difficult to answer because the British had taken possession of most of the Dutch colonies in the East and West Indies, and South Africa.

In February 1797, a parliamentary commission headed by representative Jacob Floh was appointed to draft a colonial chapter for the constitution. The Floh Commission advised that the constitution should only include some general stipulations and that further details should be filled in later once the constitution was in place. As long as most colonies were under British control, nothing could be decided.<sup>33</sup>

It was in this context that Pieter Vreede turned the Assembly's attention to the problem of the slave trade and slavery (see Figure 3).<sup>34</sup> Much to his surprise, the Floh Commission report had not commented on these matters. Vreede argued that while the Batavian people were in the process

30 [Pieter Vreede], *Waermond en Vryhart. Gesprek over de vryheid der Nederlandren en den aert der waere vryheid* (In Holland, 1783).

31 For an overview of the Dutch Revolution see Simon Schama, *Patriots and Liberators: Revolution in The Netherlands, 1780-1813* (London 1977).

32 René Koekkoek, 'Envisioning the Dutch Imperial Nation-State in the Age of Revolutions', in: Koekkoek et al., *The Dutch Empire between Ideas and Practice*, 135-157. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-27516-7\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-27516-7_7); Gert Oostindie, 'Dutch Atlantic Decline during "The

Age of Revolutions"', in: Gert Oostindie and Jessica Vance Roitman (eds.), *Dutch Atlantic Connections, 1680-1800: Linking Empires, Bridging Borders* (Brill 2014) 309-335. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004271319\\_014](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004271319_014).

33 *Dagverhaal*, vol. v, 712-727.

34 Angélie Sens, 'La révolution batave et l'esclavage. Les (im)possibilités de l'abolition de la traite des noirs et de l'esclavage (1780-1814)', *Annales historique de la révolution française* 326 (2001) 65-78, 68-69. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ahrf.479>.





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**Figure 3.** Portrait of Pieter Vreede (1750-1837) by Reinier Vinkeles. © Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, RP-P-OB-62.976,  
<http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.189721>.

of securing their liberty, they were, at the same time, keeping thousands of their fellow men in bonds. Vreede told the other representatives that he did not plan to 'stir [their] hearts by painting a scene of the horrors of this inhuman enterprise'.<sup>35</sup> He was certain that their love for humanity was sufficient to curtail the institution of slavery. He understood, of course, that the National Assembly had to consider the economic needs of the motherland and wanted to avoid civil unrest. Vreede insisted nonetheless that the Batavians 'should make clear our abhorrence of establishing a Constitution that claims to be based on the rights of Man under the banner of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, legitimising and establishing a custom that makes humanity shudder, and violates and uproots all rights of men'.<sup>36</sup> He then hastened to add that he did not wish to abolish slavery in one sudden and reckless move. It was widely understood that this had happened in the French colony of Saint-Domingue: 'I intend to unite justice with wisdom, and love for mankind with prudence.' If the constitution did not outright abolish slavery, it should at least include a prescription to end the 'disgusting' slave trade.<sup>37</sup>

The Floh Commission was set to work again, this time on the question of whether the constitution should indeed include anything regarding slavery. Its advice was read out in parliament on 22 May. In its lengthy report, which had been backed by the West Indian Committee surveying the colonies, the commission made clear it had struggled to combine 'pure philosophy' with 'true politics', and choose 'between philanthropy and the conservation of the civil State'.<sup>38</sup> The commission deemed it unwise to include anything regarding this matter in the constitution and once more advised passing it over altogether. They brought forward a number of arguments, referring to the events in Saint-Domingue and the fear of revolts and mayhem in the colonies. They argued that white colonists were outnumbered by 30 to 1. This meant that there were too few white men to work the lands themselves, but also that their safety would become a concern if *any* reform was made. Most importantly, they warned of the disastrous economic consequences that abolition might set in motion.

The report was then discussed in parliament. Once again it was Vreede who set the tone for the debate, starting off with a lengthy and passionate speech, the first words of which are quoted at the beginning of this article.

35 *Dagverhaal*, vol. v, 727: 'uwe harten te roeren door een tafreel te schilderen der afschuwlykheden van dit onmenschelyk bedryf'.

36 *Ibid.*: 'maar wy moeten even zeer tonen een afgryzen te hebben, om een Constitutie te vestigen, die ten grondslag moet hebben de regten van den Mensch; die Vryheid, Gelykheid en Broederschap ten opschrift heeft, en waarby wy

een bedryf zouden wettigen en vaststellen, waar tegen de menschlykheid schreeuwt en dat alle regten des menschedoms schendt en omwroet'.

37 *Ibid.*: 'ik bedoel regtvaardigheid met wysheid, en menslievenheid met voorzigtigheid te veréénigen'.

38 Koekkoek, 'Envisioning the Dutch Imperial Nation-State', 135-158.



He attacked the report first because it alleged that he was motivated by too much zeal and abstract philosophy, without considering practicalities. As an enlightened man of his time, Vreede was well aware that slavery was a matter that moved people's hearts. By evoking feelings of love for mankind, compassion and brotherhood, he stressed the need to end the cruel practice of slavery. His speech contained visual metaphors and powerful emotional language. By using words such as 'fellow human beings' ('natuurgenoten'), 'fellow men' ('medemenschen'), 'brothers' and 'fraternity', Vreede appealed to the commonality between the Batavian representatives and the enslaved people in the colonies.

Vreede's plea did not only show traces of the passionate language of sentimentalism. He also made it clear that slavery was at odds with universal human rights. He reminded his audience that they were talking about their fellow human beings ('natuurgenoten'), who 'may they be black or white, remain our fellow men, our Brothers – whose eternal rights are the same as ours, to whom we must always offer our fraternity'.<sup>39</sup> As had been the case in the United States and France, the establishment of the revolutionary Batavian Republic had coincided with the declaration of the rights of man and citizens. Rights of man have played an important role in revolutionary political culture ever since.<sup>40</sup> During the constitutional debates, the Batavians had discussed whether the declaration of rights should be included in the future constitution. For Vreede it was clear that if the Batavians took the rights of man as a fundament for their own constitution, these same rights also applied to the enslaved people living in the Dutch colonies.<sup>41</sup> He pointed out that the commission had approached the problem in the wrong way altogether. One had to start by asking the most fundamental question: were the black inhabitants of Africa human beings, or were they not? If not, Vreede argued, Batavians could go ahead and subjugate them as they pleased. But if they were human beings – and this was unmistakably the case – continuing slavery would be an abomination. For Vreede, it could not be any clearer:

39 *Dagverhaal* vol. v, 727-728: 'onze Natuurgenoten, die, het zy zy zwart of blank zyn, niet nalaten onzer medemenschen, onze Broeders te zyn – wier eeuwige regten dezelfde zyn als de onze, en die wy by alle gelegenheden onze broederschap aanbieden'.

40 F.H. van der Burg et al., *Tweehonderd jaar rechten van de mens in Nederland: de verklaring van de rechten van de mens en van de burger van 31 januari 1795 toegelicht en vergeleken met Franse en Amerikaanse voorgangers* (F.M. van Asbeck

Centrum voor Mensenrechtenstudies 1994); Niek van Sas, 'Mensenrechten in 1795', *Kleio* 37:9/10 (1996) 10-14.

41 Leonard de Gou, *Het plan van constitutie 1796: chronologische bewerking van het archief van de eerste constitutiecommissie ingesteld bij decreet van de Nationale Vergadering van 15 maart 1796* (Martinus Nijhoff 1975) 101-106; Wybo Jan Goslinga, *De rechten van den mensch en burger. Een overzicht der Nederlandsche geschriften en verklaringen* (A.J. Oranje 1936).

It is for *people* that I hold a plea. It is for *people*, who are captured by your Fellow Citizens with lies and violence on the coasts of Africa, and who are sold, and then thrown into your Plantations in America, where they have to plough away on your Fields for their entire lives. It is for those distraught people, for your Fellow Brethren, that I am begging. Not so that you give them back their freedom all at once with one reckless gesture, not so that you can suddenly declare the Negroes free – although this would be entirely just – [...] but I am begging, that you will pair justice with freedom, that you will cautiously return humankind its rights!<sup>42</sup>

Vreede went on to criticise the report for focusing on matters of economic convenience, which had nothing to do with moral justice. He reminded his colleagues that self-rule and the rights of man were the founding principles of the Batavian Republic, and these principles could not simply be trumped by economic wants, the conveniences of planters or even the State as a whole. In the discussions that followed, however, the rights of man hardly played a role. The Floh Commission mentioned these rights only in passing, when it stated near the end of its report that not constituting specific laws that derive from ‘certain principles’ did not mean a negation of these principles.<sup>43</sup>

Humanitarian sentiments in particular were echoed in the speeches of the other representatives. Concepts such as humanity, compassion and charity were deployed with astounding regularity during the debates. Time and again representatives stressed the horror of the institution of slavery. No one in the Batavian parliament had the urge to defend slavery. Moreover, the focus on humanity and love for humankind was probably also why no one dared to present enslaved people as mere property. Unlike later nineteenth-century debates on abolition, practical questions concerning financial compensation for the loss of property did not play a significant role. Indeed,

42 My emphasis. *Dagverhaal* vol. vi, 11: ‘het is voor menschen waar voor ik pleite.’ T Is voor menschen die uwe Medeburgers met list en geweld in Afrika roven en kopen, om ze in Amerika in uwe Volkplantingen neer te smyten, en ze voor al hun leven op uwe Akkers te laten zwoegen.’ T Is voor die rampzalige menschen, voor uwe Medebroeders, dat ik smeeke – niet dat gy hun met een onberaden woord de vryheid eensklaps wedergeeeve – niet dat gy onverhoeds de Negers vry verklare, hoe regtvaardig ook dit besluit zyn zoude [...] maar ik smeeke, dat gy regtvaardigheid met wysheid zamen paare, dat gy met voorzigtigheid de menschheid haare regten wedergeeeve!’

43 *Dagverhaal*, vol. v, 9: ‘dat het niet daadlyk statueeren van alle stellige wetten, welke uit zekere grondbeginselen voortvloeyen, of met dezelve overeenkomstig zijn, geenzins in zich sluit eene ontkenning of verlochening dier grondbeginselen zelve’. On the limits of the ‘extension’ of the rights of man, see Siep Stuurman, *De uitvinding van de mensheid. Korte Wereldgeschiedenis van het denken over gelijkheid en cultuurverschil* (Prometheus 2009) 322–340; René Koekkoek, *The Citizenship Experiment. Contesting the Limits of Civic Equality and Participation in the Age of Revolutions* (Brill 2020) chapter 2.

everyone concurred that slavery was a degrading and dehumanising form of torture that should be abolished as soon as possible. However, after making such remarks, representatives usually continued by putting forward practical objections and suggested that now was not the time for abolition. Referring to the upheaval in Saint-Domingue, several representatives argued that the emancipation of the slaves would plunge the colonies into a state of anarchy, and would therefore hurt the fate of its black population.<sup>44</sup>

It was not uncommon for representatives to use emotionally charged language in the National Assembly. The parliamentary debates would frequently stir up intense emotions. Emotional outbursts could at times indicate one's sincerity and revolutionary fervour, but showing too much emotion could also be interpreted as a sign of irrationality or clouded judgement. The representatives had to walk a fine line.<sup>45</sup> This was also true for the debates on slavery. The moderate representative Rutger Jan Schimmelpenninck warned his fellow representatives against letting their passions rush them into anything. He reminded the Batavians how the French had rushed to abolish slavery: 'The name St Domingo alone should give cause for thought. Humanity's own voice calls on you to be cautious.'<sup>46</sup> They should not only follow their hearts, he warned, but also their minds, especially amid the current revolutionary turmoil. Also arguing in the name of humanity, Schimmelpenninck wanted to ignore the issue altogether; he seemed to trust that the problem of slavery would simply resolve itself whenever the time was right. The right to liberty was thus balanced against the right to security.<sup>47</sup> As it turned out, the sentimental language of humanity could also be used to argue *against* abolition. This too was an international phenomenon.<sup>48</sup>

It is important to note that the discussion on slavery and abolition tied in with a broader pattern emerging within the National Assembly. It was not the first time Schimmelpenninck and Vreede found themselves on opposing sides. The Batavian parliament witnessed the emergence of two distinct political parties, the Republican and Moderate parties.<sup>49</sup>

44 For the role of the Haitian revolution in the abolition debates, see also Robin Blackburn, *The American Crucible: Slavery, Emancipation and Human Rights* (Verso Books 2011); René Koekoek, *Revolutionaire tijden. Politiek en idealen rond 1800* (Ambo Anthos 2020) 91-126.

45 Edwina Hagen and Inger Leemans, 'Een "vuurige aandoening van het hart" – Drift en geestdrift in het Nederlands theater en de Nationale Vergadering, 1780-1800', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 126:4 (2013) 530-547. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5117/TVGESCH2013.4.HAGE>; Amber

Oomen-Delhay, *De Amsterdamse schouwburg als politiek strijdtoneel* (Verloren 2019). These themes will also be discussed in my forthcoming dissertation on Pieter Vreede.

46 *Dagverhaal* vol. v, 729: 'De naam van St. Domingo alleen moet u hier tot nadenken brengen. De eigen stem der menschheid roept u hier toe om bedagtsaam te zyn.' Davis, *The problem of slavery*; Brown, *Moral capital*.

47 See also Annelien De Dijn, *Freedom: An Unruly History* (Harvard University Press 2020) 197-202.

48 Carey, *British Abolitionism*, 144-185.

The Republican Party – headed by Vreede – consisted of reform-minded representatives who saw the revolutionary state of affairs as an opportunity to achieve far-reaching and radical transformation of Dutch politics and society. They considered the future constitution an ideal vehicle for harnessing this change, and also felt they should not miss the opportunity. One had to strike while the iron was hot. Members of the Moderate Party – for which Schimmelpenninck was a spokesperson – argued that the revolution had to be brought to an end as soon as possible.<sup>50</sup> With the Batavian Republic facing enough challenges as it was – war, economic decline, social upheaval and a lack of legitimacy – now was not the time for radical change. They hoped a swift move to constitutional politics would restore social peace and order.

Although the party lines were not set in stone, it will come as no surprise that the Republicans were more likely to argue in favour of abolition, while Moderates were arguing to settle the question at a later date.<sup>51</sup> The sentiments of the latter group were clearly formulated by the Floh Commission, when it argued that it had to broker ‘between love for mankind and care about the conservation and esteem of the civil State’ and warned that the consequences of eliminating this ‘evil’ should not be worse than the evil itself.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, Vreede did not make much effort to put his opponents at ease. For one, he quoted an infamous passage from the work of Raynal, stating that ‘anyone who defends slavery deserves the utmost contempt from the philosopher, and from the Negro a stab with his dagger’.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, the fact that white planters were outnumbered by black slaves did not count for anything to Vreede when it came to human rights. Why should the safety of one white man, who probably had blood on his hands anyway, outweigh the well-being of 30 black men? If there was no way to end slavery and remain an empire, Vreede concluded, the Dutch simply had to get rid of the colonies altogether. This type of reasoning was exactly what made most representatives shudder. In the end, the majority of the Batavian parliament

49 Oddens, *Pioniers in schaduwbeeld*, chapter 5; Niek van Sas, ‘Scenario’s voor een onvoltooide revolutie, 1795-1798’, in: idem, *De metamorfose van Nederland. Van oude orde naar moderniteit, 1750-1900* (Amsterdam University Press 2004) 277-291.

50 See also Edwina Hagen, *President van Nederland. Rutger Jan Schimmelpenninck 1761-1825* (Uitgeverij Balans 2012) 92-93, 97-98.

51 Outspoken Republican abolitionists were Vreede, Van Zonsbeek, Gevers, Witbols and Quesnel. Independent abolitionists were Van Lockhorst,

Hoffman, Van Hooff, Hahn, De Leeuw and Guljé. Moderates were Teding van Berkhout, Schimmelpenninck and Nieuwhoff. Independents favouring postponement were Blok, Van Manen, Vitringa, De Leeuw and Floh. See Oddens, *Pioniers in schaduwbeeld*, 396-404.

52 *Dagverhaal* vol. v, 3: ‘tusschen menschlievendheid, en zorg voor het behoud en aanzien van den burgerstaat’.

53 *Ibid.*, 11: ‘die de slaverny verdedigd, verdient van den wysgeer eene diepe veragting, en van den Neger een steek met den dolk’.

decided not to include anything regarding slavery or abolition in the future constitution.

## Two referendums and a constitution

Abolition disappeared as a topic of discussion in the National Assembly, and the colonial chapter remained unchanged in the constitutional draft. This draft was put to a popular vote in a constitutional referendum in August 1797. Vreede and the radical members of the Republican Party actively campaigned against this constitution. In a series of pamphlets, Vreede attacked the constitution for failing to secure democratic rights. Instead, it would once again put an 'aristocratic yoke' on the shoulders of the Dutch people, symbolically referring to the state of political slavery that the Dutch people had lived in for such a long time.<sup>54</sup> Curiously, Vreede did not mention the colonial chapter or slavery at all. This was in fact true for almost all of the many pamphlets that critiqued the constitutional draft.<sup>55</sup>

The constitutional draft was rejected nonetheless. A couple of months later, Vreede and his fellow radicals staged a coup that led to the installation of a radical Executive Regime. The road towards a radical republican constitution was clear. Among the new political leaders were outspoken abolitionists such as Bernardus Bosch and Jan Konijnenburg.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, the colonial chapter did not change significantly, and the topic of slavery was not reconsidered. The new constitutional committee still relied heavily on the West Indian Committee for advice on the colonial chapter, and simply conformed to the Floh Commission report.<sup>57</sup> This shows that even within the radical Republican Party, abolition was not a core objective. The democratic constitution that was eventually approved by a popular vote in April 1798 did not mention anything about slavery.

54 Pieter Vreede et al., *Beoordeeling van het ontwerp van constitutie voor het Bataafsche volk* (Leiden: Pieter Hendrik Trap 1797).

55 An exception being Jan Konijnenburg, who castigated a constitution that had 'the rights of man' in its title but remained silent on the fate of the enslaved. The topic did not constitute an argument in favour of its rejection. The campaign, however, was a success, and the constitution was rejected.

56 Simon Vuyk, 'Wat is dit anders dan om met onze eigen hand deze gruwelen te plegen? Remonstrantse en doopsgezinde protesten tegen

slavenhandel en slavernij in het laatste decennium van de achttiende eeuw', *Doopgezinde Bijdragen* 32 (2006) 171-206.

57 Arend Huussen, 'The Dutch Constitution of 1798 and the Problem of Slavery', *Tijdschrift voor Rechtsgeschiedenis* (2002) 99-114; Leonard de Gou, *De staatsregeling van 1798. Bronnen voor de totstandkoming*, vol. 1. RGP kleine serie, 65 (Bureau der Rijkscommissie voor Vaderlandse Geschiedenis 1990) 37, 372. This was no coincidence; Irhoven van Dam was the principal author of both the report of 17 May 1797 and the report of January 1798.



In the wake of Pieter Vreede's speeches, the subject did receive some attention in the political press. The Mennonite preachers Jan van Geuns and Willem de Vos published a rejection of slavery, although they opposed a rash abolition as had occurred in St-Domingue.<sup>58</sup> In 1799, author A. de Raeff published his *Proeve over de vernietiging der slaverny in de Bataafsche volksplantingen* (*Essay on the destruction of slavery in the Dutch colonies*), which included the entire transcription of Vreede's speech.<sup>59</sup> Also remarkable was a plan for the gradual abolition of slavery in the West Indian colonies, written by a French inhabitant of the Dutch colony Demerary, J.C. Delacoste.<sup>60</sup> Delacoste had submitted his plan to the Executive Regime, but it had redirected this proposal to the Committee of American Colonies and Affairs, which further redirected it to yet another committee.<sup>61</sup> The Executive Regime did not get the opportunity to follow up on this. On 12 June 1798, a second coup d'état toppled the radical regime. A new, moderate regime took up the reins and never followed up on it. Delacoste's plan was shelved and subsequently forgotten.

In 1800 and 1801, colonial administrator Dirk van Hogendorp published the final abolitionist texts of the Dutch revolutionary era. The first text was a revision of his father's play *Kraspoekol; of de Slaaverny* (see Figure 4). Van Hogendorp junior had lived in the Dutch East Indies, where he had witnessed slavery first-hand. He agreed with his father that slaves under Dutch rule were generally treated better than elsewhere, although this depended entirely on the whim of their masters. Unlike his father, however, Van Hogendorp junior did not argue for improvement of the conditions in which slaves were forced to work, because 'slavery is inherently in conflict with human rights'. He stated the goals of his play in the introduction:

I intend to portray slavery as disgustingly and hatefully as I can, and the godless slave trade even more so. By any means necessary, I want to promote the intent and heartfelt desire, felt by all right-minded friends of humanity, to forbid and stop the slave trade in our possessions as soon as possible, and subsequently also end slavery itself gradually and with caution.<sup>62</sup>

58 Philalethes Eleutherus over den slavenstand. Met eenige aantekeningen en een voorbericht van den uitgever Jan van Geuns (Leiden 1797); for an analysis of this essay see Vuyk, 'Wat is dit anders', 189-196, and Karwan Fatah-Black's contribution in this issue: "'Oh Dutchmen, Defer this Catastrophe'": The Haitian Revolution and the Decline of Abolitionism in the Netherlands, ca. 1790-1840', *BMGN – LCHR* 139:3 (2024). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgn-lchr.12788>.

59 A. de Raeff, *Proeve over de vernietiging der slaverny in de Bataafsche volksplantingen* (Breda: W. van Bergen, 1799).

60 National Archives The Hague (hereafter NATH), archive J. Goldberg, 2.21.006.51, no. 170; see also Sens, 'La révolution batave', 69.

61 NATH 2.01.28.01, archive of the Committee for Colonial Affairs on the Coast of Guinea and America, no. 11, p. 527 and no. 19, p. 21.

62 Dirk van Hogendorp, *Kraspoekol; of de Slaaverny. (Een tafereel der zeden van Neerlands Indiën)*



(KRASPOEKOL.)

*Ma! Jou Caronje.....  
mij een glas water voor de voeten op den  
grond te smijten.....enz.....*

Kraspoekol of de Slaavernij.  
1<sup>ste</sup> bed. 4<sup>de</sup> ton.

▲  
**Figure 4.** Frontispiece from *Kraspoekol, of de slaavernij*, the anti-slavery play written by Dirk van Hogendorp and published in 1800. Consulted on Delpher 21 February 2024, <https://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=dpo:10388:mpeg21>.

The play's outspoken abolitionist character was not lost on Van Hogendorp's contemporaries. When it was performed in The Hague in 1800, agitated members of the audience shouted it down, probably assembled there by stakeholders in East and West Indies plantations.<sup>63</sup> This resistance was perhaps the reason why Van Hogendorp then published his second text, a twelve-page treatise on abolition he had written earlier in 1796.<sup>64</sup>

## Conclusion

Towards the end of *Inventing Human Rights*, Lynn Hunt considers the 'limits of empathy' and the question of how far people are willing to go out of their way to battle the suffering of others. Adam Smith had already raised this question in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* of 1759, in which he ponders how a man would respond if he heard about an earthquake in China. He would, of course, react in shock. As a moral man of his time, he would know to say all the right words and express all the right emotions. But afterwards, Smith wrote, he would simply continue his day 'with the same ease and tranquillity, as if no such accident had happened'.<sup>65</sup>

Eighteenth-century Dutchmen had a similar response when confronted with the problem of slavery. Batavian politicians were eager to express their feelings of pity and horror, and their hope that enslaved black human beings would one day be freed from their chains. They sensed and knew that slavery was wrong, but they did not connect their anti-slavery feelings to abolition. On the contrary, the representatives warned one another that they should not let their emotions rush them into hasty decisions. Humanitarian urges were pitted against well-thought-out decision-making. Only a few radical voices tied anti-slavery to abolition. It was especially Pieter Vreede who realised that the constitutional moment the Batavian nation was experiencing would be the right time to do so. For the majority – in the Batavian parliament at least – the revolutionary state of affairs was, however, exactly the reason why abolition was unwarranted for the moment. The question of abolition soon lost its urgency.

(Delft: M. Roelofswaert 1800) VIII: 'Mijn doelwit is, de slaavernij, en nog meer den godtergenden slaavenhandel, zoo afschuwelijk en haatelijk als mogelijk is te maaken; en daar door, langs alle mogelijke middelen en wegen, te bevorderen het oogmerk, en den hartelijken wensch, van alle weldenkende menschen vrienden, om, zoo spoedig mogelijk, den slaavenhandel in onze bezittingen te doen verbieden en ophouden; en vervolgens ook trapsgewijze en met voorzigtigheid een einde aan de slaavernij zelve te maaken.'

63 Sarah Adams and Kornee van der Haven, "'Er is geen recht voor ons...". Van Hogendorps abolitionistische toneelstuk *Kraspoekol* (1800) als proces tegen de slavernij', *Internationale Neerlandistiek* 54:1 (2016) 1-17, 5. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5117/in2016.1.adam>.

64 Dirk van Hogendorp, *Stukken, raakende den tegenwoordigen toestand der Bataafsche bezittingen in Oost-Indië? en den handel op dezelve* (Den Haag 1801) 453-464.

65 Cited in Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, 210.



The Dutch revolutionaries' response to the problem of slavery was not unique. Throughout the Western world, critiques of empire, colonialism and slavery did not directly lead to abolition.<sup>66</sup> It could be argued, as Pepijn Brandon has done convincingly, that the ubiquity of anti-slavery sentiments contributed to the fact that when the British commanded the Dutch to abolish the slave trade in 1814, it could happen without much discussion.<sup>67</sup> It is interesting to note that when abolition resurfaced as a political issue from the 1840s onwards, the topic would once again stir up intense emotions in otherwise stoic nineteenth-century Dutch politics. Many of the same emotional appeals to humanity, empathy and relief from suffering could be heard. The responses to these appeals to love for humankind were not unlike the responses in 1797, when opponents of abolition warned anew that the emotionally driven call for abolition could be disastrous for both enslaved people and the Dutch economy.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, abolition was problematised by liberals not wanting to infringe on the slave owners' right to property. The problem of financial compensation was finally sorted out in 1863, when the Dutch government abolished slavery in the West Indies.<sup>69</sup>

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66 Blackburn, *American Crucible*, 149-155.

67 Brandon, 'Shrewd Sirens'.

68 Ulla Jansz, 'Hartstocht en opgewondenheid. Kamerdebatten over mensenrechten in de koloniën rond 1850', *Jaarboek parlementaire geschiedenis* (2003) 47-56; Maartje Janse, 'Representing Distant Victims: The Emergence of an Ethical Movement in Dutch Colonial Politics, 1840-1880', *BMGN* 128:1 (2013) 53-80. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.8355>.

69 Maartje Janse, *De afschaffers. Publieke opinie, organisatie en politiek in Nederland 1840-1880* (Wereldbibliotheek 2007) 73-127; idem, 'Holland as a little England? British anti-slavery missionaries and continental abolitionist movements in the mid nineteenth century', *Past & Present* 229:1 (2015) 123-160. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/ptv037>.