

The Relevance of Dutch History, or: Much in Little?

Reflections on the Practice of History in the Netherlands

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This essay presents a series of reflections on the relevance of Dutch history. Taking different angles of approach, it examines in particular the historical image and self-image of the Dutch and the nation's cultural identity; the role played by the heritage issue in the rise of the new political nationalism; the fascination of foreign historians for Dutch history and their influence on Dutch historiography itself; the role of language in history-writing and the question of whether 'relevance' is a meaningful category at all for historians. To conclude, four great themes of Dutch history are identified as of supranational relevance: water management; economy and society, in particular capitalism and colonialism; culture and intellectual life, tolerance and secularity, in particular – but not only – in the early modern era; and the national ambition to show the world an exemplary route to modernity.

National and trans-national history

There is one Dutch historian whose name every cultivated European knows: or at least should know.¹ That man is Johan Huizinga (1872-1945).² From a professional perspective, Huizinga's career was that of an innovative and versatile scholar enjoying international recognition. Having graduated in the Indo-Germanic languages, he turned to history at the age of 25. Starting out as a teacher at a secondary school, he went on to become a professor of general and national history successively at Groningen and Leiden, where he served as rector of the university for a year. For thirteen years, he chaired the Humanities and Social Sciences Division of the Royal Netherlands Academy at Amsterdam; he served on the International Committee for Intellectual Cooperation of the League of Nations and received international rewards for his historical work and intellectual commitment. Yet his scholarly authority went far beyond his rather traditional professional career. In fact, there

are two Huizingas: the national historian and the international authority. Huizinga published many seminal studies on Dutch history; his critical assessments of the cultural condition of Europe and of the United States of America played a very prominent role in the cultural awareness of the interwar Netherlands; and his great essay on the *burgerlijke* (bourgeois) and egalitarian character of seventeenth-century Dutch society for many decades determined the Dutch national vision of the Golden Age, considered to be the cradle of present-day Dutch civilisation. And yet, in spite of several translations, as a *national* historian, Huizinga is barely known outside the Netherlands.³

His *international* reputation however is based mainly on two thematic works of a very different character and with a decidedly international theme and scope. The first is his trailblazing and – following a period of international hesitation – finally highly influential and much-debated study of the culture of late-medieval European society (1919), initially translated as *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (1924) and now, more correctly, as *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* (1996); the second, titled *Homo ludens* (1938), is his profoundly original attempt at writing a synthesis of the world's cultural history under the viewpoint of 'play' as the basic form of culture. When, some decades after his death, a new cultural history became fashionable, Huizinga's theoretical essays on the morphology of cultural forms and images and his methodological considerations of the experience of 'historical sensation' were rediscovered and reinterpreted as the theoretical foundations for a new historical understanding of culture.⁴ Although he is now internationally recognized as one of the greatest historians of the twentieth century, his work on Dutch history remains largely ignored outside the Netherlands.

I would like to thank several anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier versions of this article.

1 Since this essay has been written for an international audience, only references in internationally known languages will be given in the footnotes. As a personal reflection, my aim is not to present an exhaustive treatment, but to provide some basic information and foster discussion. Of course, in many cases Dutch publications on the same issue or on similar themes do exist, often in abundance. Readers familiar with the Dutch language might refer to the bibliographical tools available, in particular the Digital Bibliography of Dutch History at www.dbng.nl. It should be remembered that

the geographical concept 'Netherlands' is taken here in its present, narrow, national sense, although cooperation between Flemish or Belgian and Dutch historians is quite common at Low Countries level.

2 On Huizinga; Christoph Strupp, *Johan Huizinga. Geschichtswissenschaft als Kulturgeschichte* (Göttingen 2000); idem, 'Kulturgeschichte und Kulturkritik. Neue niederländische Literatur zu Johan Huizinga', *Zentrum für Niederlande-Studien [Münster]. Jahrbuch* 9 (1998) 95-112.

3 Johan Huizinga, *Dutch Civilisation in the Seventeenth Century, and Other Essays*, Pieter Geyl and F.W.N. Hugenholtz (eds.) (London 1968).

4 See for a critical assessment the chapter 'Huizinga and the experience of the past' in Frank Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford 2005) 119-139.

In quite another field, a similar paradox holds true for the other historical figure of the late medieval and early modern Netherlands who – alongside to the founder of the Dutch state, prince William of Orange – is probably best known internationally: Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466/1469-1536).⁵ Erasmus's life may be characterized as a surprising and much-discussed mix of 'Dutchness' and European cosmopolitanism – and it is perhaps no coincidence that it was precisely Johan Huizinga who was asked to write Erasmus's biography (1924). Erasmus's Dutch origins and education, and his Dutch character traits, culture and mentality contrast strongly with his truly international agency outside of his homeland, his supranational discourse on man and society, and his consciously and conspicuously fashioned public self-image as a cosmopolitan.⁶ Yet, Erasmus (who referred to himself a *civis mundi*), is considered one of the 'greatest ever Dutchmen'. Though in 2004 he finished only at number 5 in the Dutch national standings, professional historians put him at number 1, with special praise for his 'un-dogmatic moderation'.⁷ In October 2009, he was elected the 'greatest citizen of Rotterdam ever' with 56 percent of the votes, before legendary boxing hero Bep van Klaveren (1907-1992), who is extremely popular locally.⁸ Erasmus's bronze statue in Rotterdam, erected by the city council in 1622 to replace the first (1549) statue, is not only the oldest statue of a secular hero in the Netherlands, but also one of the very few remnants of pre-war Rotterdam that survived the disastrous bombing of the city centre in May 1940. This gives the statue a double aura of antiquity; and indeed immunity. Erasmus never again set foot in his hometown after his early youth; yet the city of Rotterdam has successfully made him its totem. He is the name-

5 Significantly, Erasmus has been actively appropriated by many of the towns where he has lived. Writing his biography has been considered a supremely honourable task, or a moral obligation, by many historians from different countries and scholarly traditions, including Johan Huizinga himself (1924). See the websites www.erasmus.org of the Erasmus Center for Early Modern Studies at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam, www.huygensinstituut.knaw.nl for the scholarly edition of Erasmus's *Opera omnia*, and www.erasmushuisrotterdam.nl for the Erasmus promotion of the city of Rotterdam.

6 Cf. Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago 1980).

7 In 2004 he finished number 5 on the list of the 'greatest Dutch ever', but number 1 on the questionnaire submitted to the professional historians of the Netherlands by the *Historisch Nieuwsblad* (the monthly historical newspaper for a broader public). On the national list of Belgium Erasmus finished number 11 among the Flemish nominees, but remained absent from the 100 nominees on the separate Walloon list. On a national level, Erasmus appears therefore as a representative of the values of the Dutch-speaking parts of the Low Countries.

8 www.gemeentearchief.rotterdam.nl/grootsterotterdammer; www.nu.nl/algemeen/2103323/erasmus-grootsterotterdammer.html [consulted on 2 November 2009].



This double portrait of two icons of tolerance is painted on the exterior wall of the mosque in Erasmusstraat in Rotterdam: the Christian Erasmus (after the portrait by Holbein Jnr) and the Muslim poet Rumi (also known as Mevlana). Ahmed Reza Haraji, 2008. Erasmushuis, Rotterdam.

giver of the University, of a beautiful bridge on the river Maas [Meuse], of streets and underground lines, and of many companies and associations; the municipality also argues in its city branding that Erasmus's virtues and values are best represented by the town of his birth. Although Erasmus's arguments for tolerance, pacifism, civility and moderation have not always been followed up in Dutch history, these values correspond perfectly to the self-image of the Dutch nation and, clearly, of its historians.

Such distinctions between the national and the trans-national dimensions of history may be seen as symptomatic of the historical practice of many Dutch historians and, more generally, of the place of Dutch history within the international scientific community. Contrary to the bulk of historical scholarship in the greater nations, which adopts without much reserve the national vantage point as a basis for international history, the historical production of Dutch scholars adopts the opposite approach. As a rule, Dutch national history remains hidden behind smaller or greater thematic approaches of international scope, which may include topics of crucial importance for the history of the Netherlands but seldom focus on the nation itself. Very few reliable scholarly histories of the Netherlands as a nation exist, and those that do were often written by foreign historians in need of a textbook for their students. Here, we touch on a typically Dutch problem, which can be summed up in the commonplace that the Netherlands is too small for the ambitions of Dutch historians. Yet, it also reveals another fact, namely that Dutch history plays an ambiguous role in the way the Dutch as a nation understand themselves: historians included. On the one hand, the Netherlands constitutes the historical space on which most of the research of professional historians is focused, while on the other hand, these historians remain reluctant to adopt the Dutch national context as an explanatory frame of historical reference, preferring either to cross borders or adopt a bird's-eye view that involves comparison, internationalism or a global vision. In this introduction, I shall reflect upon some elements of this question and try to give some clues to the relevance of Dutch history. Dutch readers will, of course, learn nothing new; they may even feel provoked to disagree. My main scope is to provide foreign readers with some insights into the scholarly world of the Dutch historical profession and elements for a fruitful discussion.

Much in little?

'Much in little' was the promising title of a seminal article on the 1795 Batavian Revolution in which, half a century ago, American historian Robert R. Palmer freed Dutch historiography from the false opposition between its own dogmatic, national vision of the 'velvet' Revolution of the Batavian Dutch, with its supposedly 'Dutch' and therefore non-violent character on the one hand, and the evidence of a truly revolutionary political event with

huge consequences for the future of the nation on the other. Palmer restored Dutch patriotism to the broad Atlantic perspective that every general history of the Netherlands as a commercial and seafaring nation should adopt.⁹ By publishing as his first major work – and the springboard to international fame – a broad and at the same time detailed scholarly synthesis of the Netherlandic Revolution, another foreign historian, Simon Schama, made the period fashionable again and relieved it from another form of dogma: that of the opposition between proletarians and aristocrats.¹⁰ The work of foreign historians was needed in this case to bypass the national myopia rooted in the timorous Orangism of the new monarchy and the moral prejudices of a small nation which, still focusing on the glorious past of the Golden Age, forgot that glory is always an effect of acknowledgment by others, and therefore inextricably bound up in international relations.¹¹ Quite recently, Lisa Jardine tried to reverse the usual perspective by provocatively entitling her new book on early modern culture *Going Dutch: How England Plundered Holland's Glory*.¹²

Ever since the waning of the Northern Netherlands as a great political, maritime and colonial power during the eighteenth century, the Netherlands has occupied an ambiguous position in Europe compared with its other nations. Though really a small nation, it cultivates great memories and rather lofty ambitions: greater at any rate than the major nations of Europe used to recognize. Politically, the Dutch authorities like to position their country in the middle of the European scale, as the 'greatest of the smaller nations'. Obviously it is not, and never was, a great country in itself. But neither does it want to be assimilated into what it considers the range of small European countries, such as Denmark, the Czech Republic, or Estonia. Through the number of inhabitants (over 16 million), the presence (and even the origin) of several of the world's major companies, the role of 'world port' Rotterdam and of 'main port' Schiphol as hubs of international traffic and commerce – not to forget the number of Dutch-speaking people in Europe (over 22 millions, including Flanders, without taking into account the former colonial

9 Robert R. Palmer, 'Much in Little: The Dutch Revolution of 1795', *Journal of Modern History* 26 (1954) 15-35.

10 Simon Schama, *Patriots and Liberators: Revolution in the Netherlands 1780-1813* (New York 1977).

11 On the changing historiography of the revolutionary period, see: Willem Frijhoff and Joost Rosendaal, 'La Révolution régénérée: Nouvelles approches et nouvelles images de la Révolution néerlandaise', in: Michel Vovelle (ed.), *L'Image de la Révolution française: Communications*

présentées lors du Congrès Mondial pour le Bicentenaire de la Révolution, Sorbonne, Paris, 6-12 juillet 1989 (Paris 1989) volume I, 543-561; Annie Jourdan, *La Révolution batave entre la France et l'Amérique (1795-1806)* (Rennes 2008), with an extensive bibliography.

12 Lisa Jardine, *Going Dutch: How England Plundered Holland's Glory* (London 2008). To compare with the earlier synthesis by Charles Wilson, *Holland and Britain* (London 1946).

territories in America and the closely related Afrikaans language in South Africa) – the Dutch community pretends to play a greater political, economic, and cultural role than the size of the country would seem to justify.

Two supplementary arguments are relevant in our context. Firstly, the role of the Dutch in the historical evolution of Europe as the commercial and financial centre of the world's economy from the beginning of the seventeenth to the early eighteenth century, a political heavyweight until the Peace of Utrecht (1713), a major colonial power until after WWII [World War II], one of the leading nations in many fields of science, culture and religion throughout the centuries, and one of the founding fathers of the European Community itself. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the self-assigned role of the Dutch as a moral compass for the international community, i.e. the Netherlands as a *gidsland* [guiding country], setting out at its own initiative principles, beacons and rules of ethical behaviour and social welfare, including in matters of sexuality or euthanasia, drug consumption or other forms of social permissiveness, the environment, water control or nuclear policy, Third World aid, and international relations.¹³ Although this role is now subject to some serious challenges, it refers quite clearly to the historical evolution of the Netherlands as a national community and may therefore be a subject of debate on the relevance of Dutch history. It may be no coincidence that reflection on the ethics of the historical profession is well developed in the Netherlands, as exemplified by the Network of Concerned Historians under the direction of the Groningen historian Antoon De Baets, author of a recent manual on the matter.¹⁴

How relevant is Dutch history indeed? Before answering this question, we must realize that 'Dutch' is not a Dutch word and probably not even a Dutch concept.¹⁵ It is the foreign term summarizing in a single concept the often desperate complexity of the Netherlands, past and present, and – by extension – the identity Dutch people ascribe to themselves in front of others, after having migrated to another country, or when acting in a foreign setting.

13 The notion of *gidsland* ('guiding country') has been elaborated on by American-Dutch historian James C. Kennedy, *De deugden van een gidsland. Democratie en burgerschap in Nederland* (Amsterdam 2005). On the contemporary evolution of the Netherlands, see also in other languages Thomas Beaufile and Patrick Duval (eds.), *Les identités néerlandaises: De l'intégration à la désintégration?* (Villeneuve d'Ascq 2006); Christoph Driessen, *Geschichte der Niederlande. Von der Seemacht zum Trendland* (Regensburg 2009).

14 Antoon De Baets, *Responsible History* (New York, Oxford 2009), and www.concernedhistorians.org.

15 See on this concept: Annemieke Galema, Barbara Henkes and Henk te Velde (eds.), *Images of the Nation: Different Meanings of Dutchness, 1870-1940* (Amsterdam 1993); Joep Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe: A Cultural History* (Amsterdam 2006); Willem Frijhoff, 'Dutchness in Fact and Fiction', in: Joyce D. Goodfriend, Benjamin Schmidt and Annette Stott (eds.), *Going Dutch: The Dutch Presence in America, 1609-2009* (Leiden, Boston 2008) 327-358.



The Leo Belgicus is a map of the Northern and Southern Netherlands in the form of the Dutch lion made at the start of the Twelve Years' Truce. This period of ceasefire in the Eighty Years' War lasted from 1609 to 1621. On the left are the northern and southern Netherlands peacefully side by side, shown

as two women. Mars, the god of war, sleeps at bottom right. At the top of the map are the coats of arms of the seventeen provinces. To each side are ten city views from the two Netherlands.

Claes Janszoon Visscher, *Leo Belgicus*, 1609. Museum Simon van Gijn, Dordrecht.

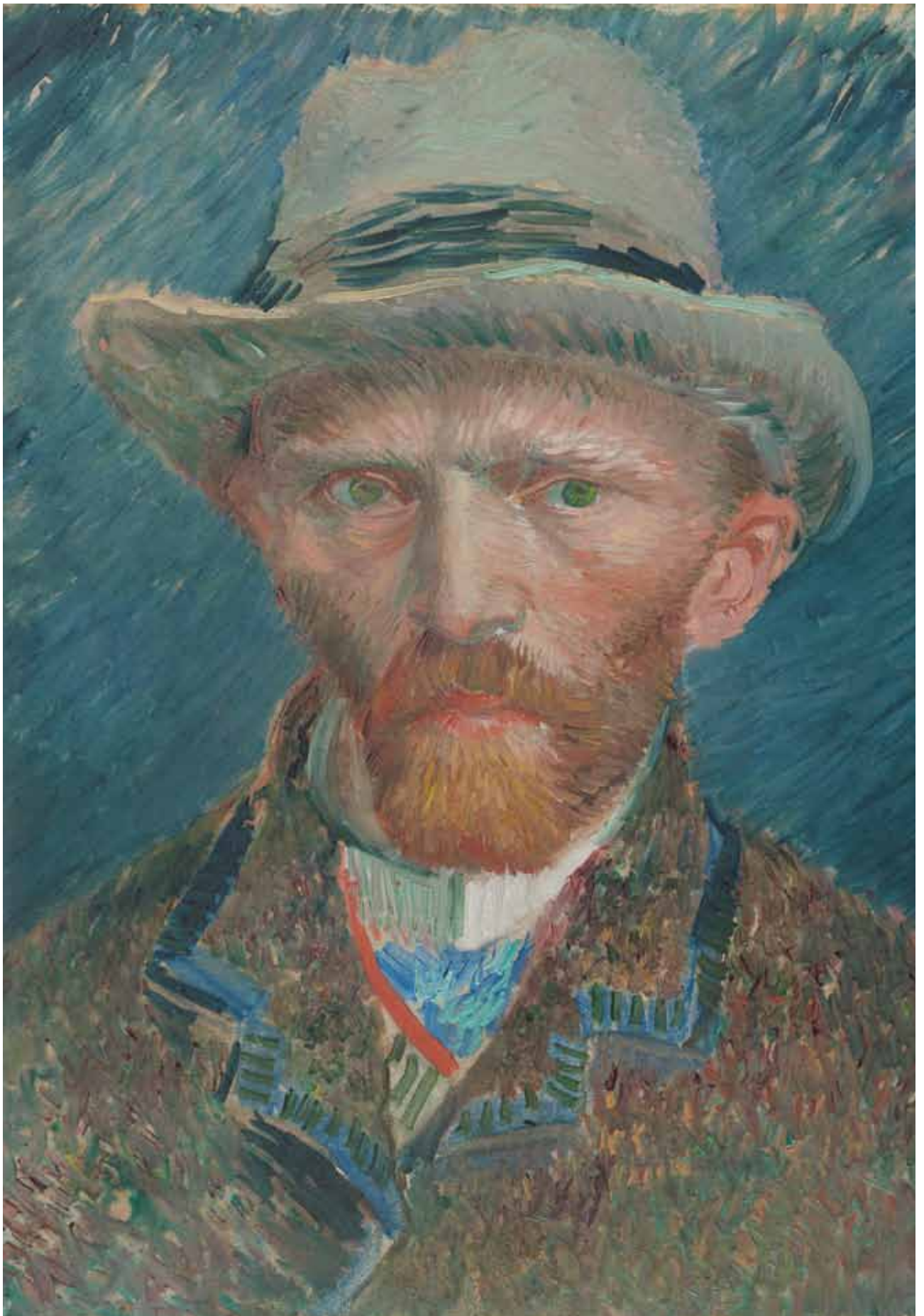
‘Dutch’ is the key term in the master narrative of the Dutch people about itself and its past. Beware however of the confusion between Holland (the ancient province, actually two provinces, North and South), the Netherlands (either the present-day country, or, in the past, also the name of the whole territory of the present-day Netherlands, Belgium and the northern fringe of France, or – between 1815 and 1830 – that of the ‘united kingdom’), and the Low Countries (Netherlands and Belgium), or between the adjectives Flemish (formerly used in foreign countries for present-day Flanders and Holland, now for Flanders alone, either as a province or as a regional community of Belgium) and Dutch (used for the Northern Netherlands alone). And when speaking of Holland, do not metonymically consider Amsterdam a pocket-version of that whole province, or even of the Netherlands as a whole!

The basic question of how relevant Dutch history really is, remains therefore fraught with ambiguity from the start. It refers not only to the practice of historical narrative, but more profoundly to the meaning of the Dutch past for insiders and for outsiders: in both cases ambiguity looms large. Indeed, for insiders (either the Dutch population at large or Dutch historians as a professional group), Dutch history is relevant as such but international history may be more important still to the self-understanding of a small nation surrounded by foreign powers which, through their sheer weight, act upon Dutch history without even being aware of this. The Dutch cannot really afford to keep their awareness of the past within their own boundaries. Throughout history, the role played by, for instance, Germany, Great Britain or France in many fields of Dutch history – political, economic or cultural and intellectual – has time and again been so crucial, and immigration from those countries into the Netherlands now and then so significant to the economy, society and culture of the Netherlands, that it is virtually impossible to write a faithful history of the Dutch without properly accounting for such cross-border interactions.

The relevance of Dutch history for the Dutch themselves

If history writing is fundamentally a narrative on identity, its genesis and its context, we should remember that identity involves not only the view from within, the self-image, but also the image shaped by foreigners, from the outside: the *imago*, as we use to call it in Dutch.¹⁶ History can therefore never be just an inward-looking narrative. Even national history gets its meaning from a minimum of contextualisation or comparison. In the 1980s and 90s,

16 Cf. Manfred Beller and Joep Leerssen, *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters. A Critical Survey* (Amsterdam, New York 2007).



Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich published a well-known series of historical monographs on specific themes with the subtitle ‘in national context’, such as *The Renaissance in National Context*, *The Scientific Revolution in National Context* or *The Enlightenment in National Context*, every country involved receiving the appropriate treatment. Besides the sometimes rather light substance of national histories on such themes, which by definition are international, the aim of this collection was precisely to show that international phenomena are rooted in national contexts and developments, and that the study of such phenomena has much to gain from interactive confrontation with national and international developments. Without quoting the growing importance of global relations – marvellously exemplified by the recent global financial crisis – we may remember the impact on national destinies of European or world-wide events or processes such as the Reformation, the wars of religion, the slave trade and colonisation, the rise of capitalism and socialism, industrialisation, or the great world wars. Conversely, outsiders – such as foreign historians, and more generally the international audience – are quite naturally interested by their own stories, and may recognize the peculiar interest of Dutch history in relation to specific aspects of their own national histories, their origins, economies or political fates, or their culture and self-understanding.

Often, such relevant forms of Dutch history (and the histories of other nations) are in fact quickly appropriated by foreign readers as something pertaining to their own history, thereby forgetting their Dutch (or other) origins. This is quite evident in the case of industrial products from the capitalist era, but it is also true of immaterial values and elements of culture. The Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh, for instance, is considered by many inhabitants of France as a Frenchman – Fernand Braudel went so far as to illustrate the covers of the three volumes of his *L’Identité de la France* with paintings by Van Gogh, apparently meaning to tell us that Van Gogh was better able than any French painter to express French identity.¹⁷ Reversely, the Dutch tend to enlist French philosopher René Descartes – who in the everyday imagery of present-day France figures as the very symbol of Frenchness, and indeed of French ways of thinking and speaking – as a typically Dutch philosopher, perfectly fitting into the idiosyncrasies of the Dutch Golden Age. Yet he wrote his major works during his stays in the Dutch Republic, among a host of sympathizers from different sectors of Dutch society whose problems and everyday discussions quite clearly inspired him just as much as his widespread international correspondence.¹⁸

17 Fernand Braudel, *L’Identité de la France* (3 volumes, Paris 1986, paperback edition 1990).

◀ Vincent Van Gogh, *Self-portrait, 1887*. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

18 This is not the place to resume the immense Cartesiology. See e.g., Theo Verbeek, *Descartes and the Dutch: Early Reactions to Cartesian Philosophy, 1637-1650* (Illinois 1992).



The great flood of 1953 took the lives of more than 1,800 inhabitants of the Netherlands. Queen Juliana visits the affected area.

Algemeen Nederlands Persbureau ANP.

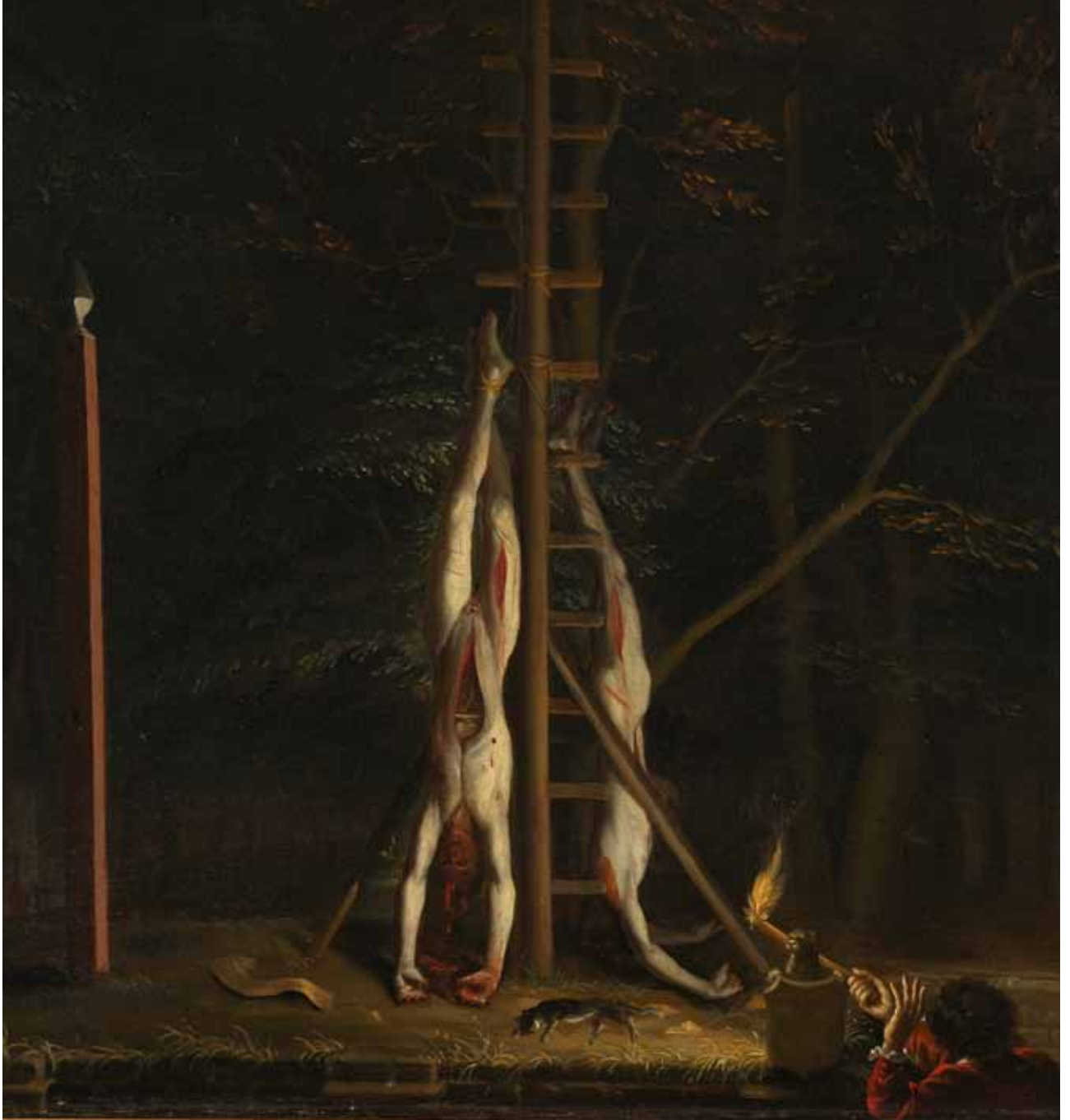
To give another well-known example, the main product symbolizing Dutch culture abroad – the tulip – was imported in the sixteenth century from the East, through Turkey; it derives its symbolic strength from its successful appropriation by the Dutch at the start of the Dutch Republic, and the equally symbolic economic disaster of the ‘tulipmania’ of the 1630s.¹⁹ Of course, nothing is as effective for the promotion of a community’s identity rooted in history as national disasters and catastrophes or major forms of injustice, and the well-stoked memories of these. For example, the memories of the great World Wars, of the major revolutions, of slavery, of natural disasters such as the earthquake of Lisbon in 1755, the eruption of great volcanoes such as Vesuvius in 79 or Krakatau in 1883, or, as far as the Netherlands is concerned, the catastrophic floods with many thousands of victims of 1421 (at Saint Elisabeth’s day, 19 November) and of February 1st, 1953. The latter claimed over 1,800 victims and has been acknowledged as one of the fifty major historical events in the Canon of Dutch History.²⁰ At the same time, this shows how catastrophes can turn historical memory in upon itself: indeed, the history of the flood remains largely enclosed in regional memory and stories of local identity, neglecting its national and ignoring its international extensions.

The main trick cultural memory plays on the Dutch is perhaps that they have always managed rather effectively to organize their society so as to collectively avoid major disasters, or to contain excessive violence by an advanced process of – to paraphrase Norbert Elias – civilisation. I would be tempted to call this the first point of relevance of Dutch history for a foreign audience: its precocious and exemplary role in the organisation of a *société polieée* (i.e., in the sense given to politeness by Quentin Skinner, J.G.A. Pocock, and other intellectual historians). As we all know, happy nations don’t have a history of their own. Yet, appearances can be deceptive, because all historical memory is embedded in contextualized narratives on national identity, beautifully characterized in Benedict Anderson’s famous expression as ‘imagined communities’.²¹ The Dutch are used to imagining their society and its history as peaceful, well-balanced, consensual and convivial, non-violent, equal, democratic and tolerant: in brief, a society without history in the heroic or cruel sense of the word. In the course of history, they have many times rewritten their national narrative so as to bring historical memory into line with this image of their national qualities – which, needless to say, is an image that does not greatly conform to reality.

19 Anna Pavord, *The Tulip: The Story of a Flower That has Made Men Mad* (New York 1999); Anne Goldgar, *Tulipmania: Money, Honor and Knowledge in the Dutch Golden Age* (Chicago 2007).

20 See the explanation of the Canon below.

21 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London 1983; review edition 1991).



The mutilated bodies of Johan de Witt and Cornelis de Witt, hanged at the Groene Zoodje on the Vijverberg in The Hague, 20 August 1672 (detail).

Jan de Baen, 1672-1675.

Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Thus the Dutch Revolt was told mainly as a story of heroic and pious freedom fighters, necessarily involving some losers, but as a whole embedded in a collective struggle for the freedom of state and religion and legitimized by the birth of the new nation. Unwelcome groups or dimensions in history have been removed or evacuated to the margins of orderly Dutch burgher society. The lynching of the De Witt brothers in 1672 was attributed to an unruly mob and, compared to the bloody mess the French had made of their politics, the Batavian Revolution of 1795 not only seemed a rather smooth change of regime, but such nasty aspects as deaths, civil war, mass plundering, destruction and banishments were airbrushed away, leading to the rather sweet nickname of the ‘Velvet Revolution’. Ninety years after the French Revolution, the first political party founded in the Netherlands (in 1879) was even named the Anti-Revolutionary Party. Of Calvinist inspiration, it rejected the principles of the French Revolution, holding the implicit view that the Dutch were much more Christianized and polite than those barbarous French.

Mutatis mutandis, the same holds for the heroic self-image of the Dutch in WWII: of the Dutch resistance to Nazi domination, and of the role of the Dutch in the Holocaust.²² It is only quite recently, in fact barely a quarter of a century ago, that these positive self-images have really been challenged by historians and that careful historiography has contributed to changing the Dutch collective memory.²³ By now, we realize that the sixteenth-century Dutch Revolt also was a terrible civil war between several Dutch communities²⁴; that the ‘velvet’ image of the Batavian Revolution owes much more to Dutch imagination than to the reality of social relations and political action; and that WWII tells a quite different story in relation to almost every aspect of Dutch involvement. Even the famous strict neutrality of the Dutch in WWI [World War I] is challenged – a war Dutch memory continues to ignore, unlike the neighbouring countries.²⁵ Many of these new interrogations have their roots in international debates and scholarly achievements. And they involve new insights into the often difficult, sometimes paradoxical

22 See the discussion on the Holocaust historiography in this volume.

23 I just refer to the work of Hans (J.C.H.) Blom ever since his trendsetting inaugural lecture *In de ban van goed en fout* [Obsessed by good and bad] (1983), and of his collaborators and successors at the NIOD [Netherlands Institute for War Documentation], Amsterdam.

24 Henk van Nierop, *Treason in Holland: War, Terror and the Law in the Dutch Revolt* (Princeton 2009).

25 Hubert P. van Tuyl, ‘International Law and National Existence: The Myth of Strict Neutrality (1918-?)’, in: Laura Cruz and Willem Frijhoff (eds.), *Myth in History, History in Myth: Proceedings of the Third International Conference of the Society for Netherlandic History, New York, June 5-6, 2006* (Leiden, Boston 2009) 145-156.

relations between history and memory.²⁶ Yet, against the background of the evolution of their country at the crossroads of a range of major developments in European and even world history, the Dutch may still play a specific role in such forms of revisionism, by stressing the complex interactions between national and international narratives about group agency and group identity.

The relevance of Dutch history for others

Obviously, however, when speaking of the relevance of Dutch history for an international readership, it is not its relevance for the Dutch themselves we have in mind, but rather for outsiders. How important is it for non-Dutch historians to be acquainted with the Dutch past? And does Dutch history increase our historical knowledge, either of particular themes or global? In this introduction, I propose to reflect upon some premises underlying this question, and then briefly sketch some outlines of what may justify an enhanced interest in Dutch history. Of course, much more will be said on this in the other contributions to this volume (and with much more expertise), but I will start with two preliminary observations. The first is about the place of Dutch national history in international historical production, the second concerns the enhanced relevance of national history as such in the present.

The first observation is about the present place of Dutch national history in the international field of historical production. Does Dutch history – that is: the history of the Netherlands as a territory, a state and a nation – really play a significant role in the world’s scholarly production of historical texts? I rather doubt it, at least as far as the historical narrative concerning the Netherlands is concerned. Let me give just a few examples. Taking some textbooks about world history at random, passages on Dutch history are scarce, seldom going beyond the early modern period; they also often separate the Netherlands from its colonial empire.²⁷ Another check: go

26 Cf. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (eds.), *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (Berlin, New York 2008). In an early stage, places of memory (*lieux de mémoire*) have been the object of a critical assessment at a Franco-Dutch conference: Pim den Boer and Willem Frijhoff (eds.), *Lieux de mémoire et identités nationales* (Amsterdam 1993). Recently both Dutch and Belgian physical *lieux de mémoire* have been described in national repertoires: H.J. Wesseling et al. (eds.), *Plaatsen van herinnering* (4 volumes, Amsterdam 2005-

2007); Jo Tollebeek et al. (eds.), *België: een parcours van herinnering* (2 volumes, Amsterdam 2008); 31 immaterial *lieux de mémoires* common to both countries are the subject of Jo Tollebeek and Henk te Velde (eds.), *Het geheugen van de Lage Landen* (Rekkem, Belgium 2009).

27 A random sample: in Felipe Fernández Armesto, *The World: A History* (Harlow 2007) on 1056 pages of text the Dutch figure mainly for their colonial empire (pp. 542-546, 714-715, 849 and 853, the East Indies, 570 Pernambuco, 571-574 ecological change, 581 South Africa, 791

to any bookshop in any major city abroad, even in a university town, and you will come up very disappointed when looking for the Dutch history section. Virtually every European nation can boast of a series of books on that nation's history in foreign languages, but the harvest for Dutch history is at best scanty, and usually non-existent. It would be too easy to blame the short-sightedness of the publishing houses or the bookshops. The fact is that Dutch history is much more present in the public space as a history of particular themes, such as economy, expansion overseas, painting, science, philosophy, or religion, than as the history of a nation. For the foreign reader, the Dutch community apparently equates more to its performances in these areas than to some immanent identity of the Dutch as a people or as a nation. And most Dutch historians themselves do not share the national pride of many other country's historians by publishing their major book about their own country: not even as a textbook.²⁸ We can of course invoke objective reasons for this deficiency: Dutch medieval history, so important for the general historical production cherished by a broader public and provider of a considerable part of the history books elsewhere in Europe, barely exists on the historical market.²⁹ Though an important academic speciality, it does not really have a proper national consistency, the Low Countries having been then either connected

industrialization through colonial products, 980-981 decolonisation); Palmira Brummett, Robert R. Edgar and Neil J. Hackett, *Civilization Past and Present* (11th edition, New York 2006) 1072 pages of text: pp. 445-456 the Dutch Revolt, 456 the Peace of Westphalia, 512 Dutch modernity (following Schama), 517 the Anglo-Dutch war, and some passages on colonisation; Albert M. Craig, William A. Graham and Donald Kagan, *The Heritage of World Civilizations* (7th edition, Upper Saddle River, NJ 2006), on 1056 pages of text: pp. 461-463 the Dutch Revolt (1 page and 1 map) 452 the Dutch in China, 479 the East India Company, 497-498 South Africa, 503 North America (including slavery), 686 the Congress of Vienna; R.R. Palmer, Joel Colton and Lloyd Kramer, *A History of the Modern World to 1815* (10th edition, Boston 2007), on 431 pages of text: pp. 71-72 the Modern Devotion, 123-128 the Dutch revolt, 149-155 the Dutch Republic until 1672 (with 2 figures), 274 the Peace of Utrecht, with the peremptory statement that the Dutch 'after Utrecht receded

from the political stage' (and from the volume itself).

- 28 There are of course exceptions, the most important in English being the small synthetic volume *The Low Countries: History of the Northern and Southern Netherlands* by E.H. Kossmann and J.A. Kossmann-Putto published since 1987 by the Association 'Ons Erfdeel' [Our Legacy] at Rekkem (Belgium) in many languages for a broad international public; and the more developed synthesis, written by specialists and translated from the Dutch (1993), *History of the Low Countries*, edited by J.C.H. Blom and E. Lamberts (New York 1999; paperback 2004; second edition 2006).
- 29 An important exception is the work of Frits van Oostrom on medieval Dutch literature. In English: *Court and Culture: Dutch Literature 1350-1450* (Berkeley, Los Angeles 1992); however, his magnum opus on Jacob van Maerlant, *Maerlants wereld* (Amsterdam 1996), which set his national fame as an author, has not yet been translated.

to the Holy Roman Empire or to the Burgundian State.³⁰ On the other hand, Dutch national history has lost much of its academic attractiveness in the present-day context. The Dutch community systematically doubts its historical identity, and at university level comparative, societal, European, or global narratives are valued much more than the national stance.

The same holds true for expertise on Dutch history in foreign universities. The few Dutch departments abroad are mostly kept up and visited for language and literature, sometimes for art history; seldom for the general history of the Dutch nation, let alone the Dutch state. Dutch language studies are often embedded in the German language department – a rational choice from the linguistic point of view, but rather questionable as far as history is concerned. Though the Northern Netherlands were part of the Holy Roman Empire until 1648, and neighbouring Germany remains the most important commercial partner to this day, the political and cultural orientation of the country is decidedly turned towards the West – the North Sea and the Atlantic – and the Dutch population, whatever its political or cultural orientation, never defines itself as Central European, but always as Western European.³¹

The fate of the once government-funded Queen Wilhelmina Chair in Dutch Language, Literature and History, founded in 1913 at Columbia University in New York City (a city founded by the Dutch themselves in 1625) and formerly occupied by the historian Wim Smit, speaks volumes.³² After his disappearance in 2006, the chair was taken over by the *Nederlandse Taalunie* (the Dutch Language Union, a public Flemish-Dutch institution for the promotion of the Dutch language) and reduced to a scant one-day-a-week assignment for

30 See for instance: Johan Huizinga, 'L'État bourguignon: Ses rapports avec la France et les origines d'une nationalité néerlandaise' [1930], in: Johan Huizinga, *Verzameld werk*, volume 2 (Haarlem 1948) 161-215; and the recent syntheses by Walter Prevenier and Wim Blockmans, *Les Pays-Bas bourguignons* (Antwerp, Paris 1983); Walter Prevenier and Wim Blockmans, *The Promised Lands: The Low Countries under Burgundian Rule, 1369-1530* (Philadelphia 1988).

31 For this perspective, see Juliette Roding and Lex Heerma van Voss (eds.), *The North Sea and Culture (1550-1800): Proceedings of the International Conference held at Leiden 21-22 April 1995* (Hilversum 1996); Wim Klooster, *Revolutions in the Atlantic World* (New York 2009); Pieter C. Emmer, Didier Poton de Xaintrailles and François

Souty (eds.), *Les Pays-Bas et l'Atlantique 1500-1800* (Rennes 2009); and the volumes in the Atlantic Studies collection published by Brill at Leiden/ Boston. For a broader perspective, see the fascinating essay by the late Jan Willem Schulte Nordholt, *The Myth of the West: America as the Last Empire* (Grand Rapids MI 1996).

32 On this and other teaching positions in Dutch culture in the USA, see David J. Snyder, 'Dutch Cultural Policy in the United States', in: Hans Krabbendam, Cornelis A. van Minnen, and Giles Scott-Smith (eds.), *Four Centuries of Dutch-American Relations 1609-2009* (Amsterdam 2009) 970-981.

33 See www.homepages.ucl.ac.uk/~ucrabjk/Low%20Countries%20Studies%20in%20London.htm.

a visiting professor in Dutch Literature. Elsewhere, literature and art studies similarly tend either to supersede the general history of the Netherlands or to subsume the Dutch past into European history, highlighting the larger nations and giving less attention to the smaller ones.

The Chair in Dutch History founded in 1919 at University College London (now in the Department of History) has been occupied by a prestigious procession of historians: Pieter Geyl, G.J. Renier, Ernst Kossmann, K.W. Swart, and Jonathan Israel. Together with the Centre for Dutch Studies and alongside the Dutch studies department at Hull (UK), this is by now probably the best-preserved place of Dutch history abroad, although even here nothing is certain.³³ In neighbouring France, inside knowledge of Dutch history has by now all but disappeared, with the exception of some Dutch *expat* historians who, locally or incidentally, manage to maintain a slight interest in their country's past. In Lille, a metropolis of Northern France that until 1668 was part of Flanders, Low Countries history is maintained with difficulty; the history periodical of the local university *Revue du Nord* tries to revive the awareness of the historical community of the Low Countries with present-day Northern France, but the downfall of French as a learned *lingua franca* makes these efforts virtually invisible to the Dutch themselves, while there is no urge whatsoever on the part of the Dutch to take part in this enterprise. This periodical is so rarely used by Dutch historians that the link between the two countries has become virtually non-existent, notwithstanding the role as a cultural mediator bilingual Belgium could still play in North-Western Europe. The only other foreign place where research into Dutch history still occupies a significant position within the university landscape is the city of Münster in Westphalia, not far from the Dutch border, with its *Haus der Niederlande* and its full-fledged teaching programme on Dutch language, culture and history. But new hope is rising on the francophone front. Since 2007, the new Franco-Dutch Academic Network (with offices in Utrecht and Lille) has been sponsoring a yearbook called *Deshima*, after the former Dutch possession in Japan, devoted to French studies 'on Netherlandic worlds', including history.

One of the reasons for this deficiency has to be sought among Dutch historians themselves. In keeping with the particular historical structure of Dutch society, they are much more specialists – either on communities, regions, or towns – than generalists on the Dutch nation as such, or on aspects, themes or evolutions at international level. The 'history of the fatherland', once an important issue at Dutch state universities, has long since receded behind the history of infra-national communities or supra-national evolutions, though new interest in national history seems to be growing among the younger generation. Some of the most important international research institutes in history have their seats in the Netherlands, such as the International Institute of Social History [IISG] and the International Information Centre and Archives for the Women's Movement [IIAV, recently renamed Aletta] in Amsterdam, or

the Grotius Collection, the Peace Palace Library in The Hague. Ever since the seventeenth century, Dutch publishers (Elsevier, Brill) have controlled part of the market for science, including history.

Actually, as a rule, Dutch historians seem to be much better represented in international societies, international research programs or international conferences, and probably also on the advisory boards of international journals, than the size of their nation might justify. In the past, they were often asked to take up such roles because of their ability to master several foreign languages simultaneously. At present, they do so mostly as specialists in particular thematic fields or great domains of history writing; not (or seldom) as historians of their own nation. Besides, we must recognize that, apart from some rare exceptions such as Johan Huizinga, Jan Romein, Pieter Geyl, Jacques Presser or Frits van Oostrom, Dutch historians are seldom gifted writers displaying a real literary talent, and their academic education is not really aimed at the development of such skills – nowadays less so than ever, because publishing in learned Anglophone A-journals has become the only achievement really valued by academic authorities. This is not really a new trend, however. Traditionally in the Dutch historical profession, historical craftsmanship and international scholarly reputation are much more highly valued than the culture of the beautiful expression or empathy with a broad, general readership.

It would probably be correct to contend that national histories are written mainly by commission in the Netherlands, and rarely out of some inner drive.³⁴ They remain therefore rather scanty, or are the work of gifted journalists such as Geert Mak, able to write accessible panoramic overviews without much sophistication and intended for a broader public, or delivering highly personal interpretations that disregard for the sake of narrative the hypotheses and findings of academic history.³⁵ One of the typical aspects of

34 Good examples are the collective Dutch-Belgian enterprises for university-level national history, such as the two successive series titled *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* [General History of the Low Countries], published respectively in 1949-1958 (12 volumes) and 1977-1983 (15 volumes); and the *Ijkkunten-project*, a historical research program on Netherlandic culture under the common title *Dutch Culture in a European Perspective* (5 volumes, The Hague 1999-2001), fostered by the Dutch government in the context of the European integration and focused on four chronological *ijkkunten* [vantage points]: 1650, 1800, 1900 and 1950, with a fifth volume, *Taking*

Stock, going up to 2000 (English translation of the 5 volumes: Assen, Basingstoke 2004; the fifth volume has also been translated into Chinese, Guangxi 2007).

35 Cf. for instance Geert Mak, *In Europe: Travels Through the Twentieth Century*, published in Dutch in 2004, and immediately recognised as Dutch 'Book of the Year', translated into English, and reworked as a highly successful television series (2007-2008); this may well be the internationally most-read historical work by a Dutch author of the past decades, but it has received criticism from professional historians of the period.

the Dutch literary market is precisely the rather sharp contrast between the historical profession and other providers of historical narratives: folklorists, novelists, journalists, television-makers, museum curators, heritage enthusiasts, etc. These two groups regularly ignore one another, or confront one another with distrust, in spite of the rise of university-level cultural studies, Dutch ethnology and heritage departments. For all these reasons, the history of the Dutch nation seems to be only moderately represented on the international market. Moreover, the commercial editors of academic history – even those long established in the Netherlands – visibly prefer broader ‘European’ themes or items of Western civilisation to national Dutch issues. Going through the catalogues of the major international publishing houses, one discovers very few books on Dutch history in editors’ announcements, and the same holds true for articles on themes from Dutch history in foreign academic journals.

Like their colleagues in other countries with ‘minor’ languages, Dutch professional historians are often confronted with a painful contrast on the linguistic market.³⁶ If they want their publication record rewarded by university bureaucracies in search for ‘excellence’, they must increasingly publish in English-language journals but, quite aside from the papers’ scholarly quality, American or English journals are not particularly eager to publish long series of articles on Dutch topics. It is true that quite a lot of translations of Dutch historical studies do appear in English – and sometimes also in German – but rarely in the other modern languages, not even French. Notwithstanding the creation of a Franco-Dutch Academic Network, Dutch history in French is written by that ever-smaller group of Dutch university-trained historians that does know French and is able to write directly in the French language, whereas Dutch students of the Erasmus programme generally tend to prefer English-language courses, even in France. I am convinced that the problem of multilingualism in Europe (and throughout the world) must find a much higher place on the academic agenda for safeguarding the internal equilibrium of the cultural development of Europe.³⁷

Of course, to be truthful, I should also mention two restrictions. Firstly, with regard to the market potential of the humanities, Dutch is a small language indeed. Much more so than in the larger European countries, such as Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy or Spain, with their strong native

36 The problem of the assessment of academic production in the humanities has been tackled in a most interesting report issued in 2005 by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences: *Judging Research on Its Merits*: www.knaw.nl/publicaties/pdf/20051029.pdf.

37 The report *Nederlands, tenzij...* published in 2003 by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences advocates vernacular/English bilingualism in the humanities and the social sciences: www.knaw.nl/publicaties/pdf/20031001.pdf.

history markets, some of which continue to benefit from the continuing cultural influence of their former colonial Empires, Dutch historians try to publish their scholarly books first in English, even on the national market, and some publishing houses distribute their work through American networks. But publishing in the English language alone jeopardizes the historians' role as cultural brokers in their own country, not to mention their social responsibility for its cultural advancement. Secondly, Dutch history books, especially those by professional historians, are with few exceptions heavily supported by sponsors, usually cultural foundations or associations and sometimes foundations affiliated to universities. Often, the author has to subsidize part of the work and s/he is almost always compelled to abandon any claim to royalties. Hence, compared to countries such as France, Germany, Italy or Spain – Great Britain and the USA being a case in point because of English being the native language and a *lingua franca* at the same time – professional history book production in the Netherlands is probably characterised by a much greater international orientation, with regard both to its thematic scope and equally to market conditions.

Nevertheless, Dutch history proves time and again attractive to specific sectors of the public audience; not only to the historical profession in other countries, but even to broader groups of readers or spectators outside of the Netherlands. Of course, I am not referring to the simple, well-known myth of the Flying Dutchman or to the fictional character of Hans Brinker, the boy who managed to seal a breach in the dike with his thumb, though such myths help perpetuate the image of a historically significant nation.³⁸ Similarly, thanks to its disastrous and long-lasting side-effects on the image of New York's Dutch ancestors, Washington Irving's satirical *Knickerbocker History of New York* (1809) has paradoxically done more for the preservation of the Dutch heritage in America than much of the later scholarly historical production. Notwithstanding Irving's effective use of historical sources – he was one of the first novelists to do this – Irving's *Knickerbocker* Dutchmen were caricatures of historical persons, but at least they did exist and spoke for themselves. Films such as Tim Burton's *Sleepy Hollow* (1999), with a sparkling Johnny Depp as Irving's Ichabod Crane, and *The Girl with a Pearl Earring* by Peter Webber (2003), after the novel by Tracy Chevalier (1998), or *Nightwatching* by Peter Greenaway (2007), are masterpieces of historical imagination presenting to a broad public visions of Dutch culture in America and in Europe in times past. Small

38 Mary Mapes Dodge, *Hans Brinker or the Silver Skates* (New York 1865). This extremely popular children's book, translated into several languages, has long determined among the general public the vision of the Dutch as a smart and brave nation able to master hostile nature. Cf. for

the USA: Annette Stott, *Holland Mania: The Unknown Dutch Period in American Art and Culture* (New York 1998) 240-241, and on Dutch-American influences more generally the essays in Krabbendam, *Four Centuries of Dutch-American Relations 1609-2009*.

wonder that cinema productions on the Dutch deal almost inevitably with culture, and virtually never with politics or warfare, like the great films on the emperors, kings and queens of France, Germany, Austria or Great Britain.

For the sake of the argument in this essay, I must now refer to the production of Dutch history by scholars of foreign origin, or at least by authors working in other countries.³⁹ I'll name only some of them; you may easily supply your own favourites. Ever since the 1970s, for instance, German historian Heinz Schilling has patiently built an oeuvre presenting new interpretations of many aspects of early modern Dutch history.⁴⁰ American historian Jan de Vries has published – with his Dutch colleague Ad van der Woude – a major synthesis on the Dutch economy in the Golden Age, described by them as the ‘first modern economy’, and therefore a seminal example of the relevance of Dutch history taken in its own right.⁴¹ Quite a lot of American historians have preceded them or followed similar paths, starting with Violet Barbour on Amsterdam capitalism in the seventeenth century or Joel Mokyr on the economic history of the Low Countries in the nineteenth.⁴² De Vries, Schilling and Mokyr, and quite recently Jonathan Israel, have successively been awarded the prestigious Heineken Prize in History (the ‘Dutch Nobel Prize’) for their work. A dozen years ago, the French politician Alain Peyrefitte even made a bestseller of his narrative on the Dutch economic miracle of the Golden Age, in a series of lectures given at the Collège de France – but just like other politicians’ studies in history, this thesis too was more adapted to French problems than to Dutch realities.⁴³ Jonathan

39 General histories of the Netherlands by foreign authors include: Paul Arblaster, *A History of the Low Countries* (New York 2006). In German: Horst Lademacher, *Geschichte der Niederlande. Politik – Verfassung – Wirtschaft* (Darmstadt 1983), and *Die Niederlande. Politische Kultur zwischen Individualität und Anpassung* (Berlin 1993) – the author was however for many years professor of modern history at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam; Michael Erbe, *Belgien, Niederlande, Luxemburg. Geschichte des niederländischen Raumes* (Stuttgart etc. 1993); Friso Wielenga and Ilona Taute (eds.), *Länderbericht Niederlande. Geschichte – Wirtschaft – Gesellschaft* (Bonn 2004); Michael North, *Geschichte der Niederlande* (Munich 2008). In French: Christophe de Voogd, *Histoire des Pays-Bas* (Paris 1992). American-Dutch historian James C. Kennedy recently published *A Concise History of the Netherlands* (Cambridge 2008).

40 See, e.g., Heinz Schilling, *Niederländische Exulanten im 16. Jahrhundert. Ihre Stellung im Sozialgefüge und im religiösem Leben deutscher und englischer Städte* (Gütersloh 1972); *Religion, Political Culture and the Emergence of Early Modern Society: Essays in German and Dutch History* (Leiden 1992).

41 Jan de Vries and Ad van der Woude, *The First Modern Economy: Success, Failure, and Perseverance of the Dutch Economy, 1500-1815* (Cambridge 1997).

42 Violet Barbour, *Capitalism in Amsterdam in the Seventeenth Century* (Baltimore 1950); Joel Mokyr, *Industrialization in the Low Countries, 1795-1850* (New Haven, London 1976); cf. also, by the Amsterdam-based English historian Michael Wintle, *An Economic and Social History of the Netherlands, 1800-1920: Demographic, Economic and Social Transition* (Cambridge 2000).

43 Alain Peyrefitte, *Du ‘miracle’ en économie* (Paris 1995); idem, *La Société de confiance* (Paris 1998).

Israel has devoted much of his work to Dutch history, and alongside his great thesis on the Dutch origin of the Radical Enlightenment, he is the author of a major scholarly synthesis on the history of the early modern Netherlands that is still authoritative and, in many respects, unparalleled by Dutch authors themselves.⁴⁴ Peter Burke wrote a much-quoted and indeed highly suggestive comparative analysis of the elites of the two great early modern European republics, Venice and Amsterdam, the latter often having been inspired by the first.⁴⁵

Simon Schama started his academic career with the in-depth study mentioned above on the Batavian Revolution and its aftermath until Waterloo, which has only recently been challenged by similar studies from Dutch authors. His international fame began however twenty years ago with the publication of *The Embarrassment of Riches*, a narrative on Dutch history, identity and culture in the Golden Age which, through the extensive use of visual material and uncommon sources, departed from the textual approach customary in Dutch historiography.⁴⁶ As the subtitle asserts, he put forward a very personal ‘interpretation’, which actually ignored much recent scholarship; in the eyes of many Dutch historians, the seductive simplicity of its main thesis does not really do justice to the complexity of early modern Dutch society. This was followed by a still more personal book on Rembrandt as a painter.⁴⁷ Ever since, Dutch historians have been very critical of Schama’s factual errors, sceptical of his post-modern narratives and jealous of his success; some of them even refusing to quote him altogether. In fact, like many other foreign historians, Schama takes Dutch society to be much more uniform and more profoundly Calvinistic than it probably was and certainly more so than most Dutch historians would consider legitimate, social complexity and religious diversity being at the heart of the country’s identity, if not of its very existence.⁴⁸ But it must be acknowledged that *The Embarrassment of Riches* has met with huge success among a broad international audience. Schama’s interpretation has undoubtedly set the tone of the present-day foreign perception of the Dutch Golden Age, much more so

44 Jonathan I. Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477-1806* (Oxford 1995); *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford 2001).

45 Peter Burke, *Venice and Amsterdam* (London 1974).

46 Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (New York 1987).

47 Simon Schama, *Rembrandt’s Eyes* (London 1999).

48 Cf. my assessment: ‘Was the Dutch Republic a Calvinist Community?: The State, the Confessions,

and Culture in the Early Modern Netherlands’, in: André Holenstein, Thomas Maissen and Maarten Prak (eds.), *The Republican Alternative: The Netherlands and Switzerland compared* (Amsterdam 2008) 99-122.

49 We can think here, of course, of the concept of ‘consociational democracy’ coined by Arend Lijphart. See in particular his influential *The Politics of Accommodation: Pluralism and Democracy in the Netherlands* (Berkeley, CA 1968).

than his predecessor, Johan Huizinga, or his follower Jonathan Israel. Israel's scholarly book on the Dutch Republic remains very much a book for insiders, either foreign historians or Dutch general readers, whereas Schama's narrative has proven its effectiveness in attracting the general reader as well as sheer outsiders to engage in some intellectual or emotional companionship with the early modern Dutch.

Similarly, American art historians like Svetlana Alpers and John Michael Montias have successfully promoted specific visions of early modern Dutch art production and its economic, social or intellectual background. Others, like Herbert H. Rowen, J. Leslie Price, or Michael North – to name just three specialists from different countries – have intensively scrutinised the political, social and cultural particularities that made the Dutch Golden Age so special in an era of growing absolutism. It is of course quite common for foreign historians to take an interest in a European country: in particular, American historians whose PhD dissertations usually proceed through local case studies. My point, however, is the apparent disproportion between foreign and native narratives on the Dutch nation. The reason for this lack of balance must, in my view, be sought in the rather peculiar relationship the Dutch themselves have with their nation.

New political involvements in national history

At this moment, the Dutch state – challenged by political parties from both the conservative right and socialist left of the political spectrum – is intensifying its claims on the use of history as a privileged tool for a policy of enhanced nationalism, while at the same time changing the preconditions for the relationship between historical scholarship and the memory of the national community. This is the object of my second preliminary observation: the growing relevance of national history as a political instrument for national branding and formation of identity. In the Netherlands, history has never been the path to feelings of national identity with the same force as it has been in France, Great Britain, Spain or even Germany and the USA. In spite of the massive presence of historically shaped landscapes and cityscapes, Dutch people represent their identity in the present tense, much more through performing ritual than in symbolic narrative about its history or in frozen memories.

Ever since its genesis as an independent state, the society of the Netherlands has consisted of a plurality of more or less autonomous groups (such as urban and provincial communities, churches and groups of dissenters, ideological and political factions, or competing social institutions) which have had to negotiate and agree among themselves on the formation and the subsistence of a workable state.⁴⁹ What mattered was not primarily their historical trajectory, but their ability to cope with the current claims of others, most clearly during the period of *verzuiling* ('social pillarization')

covering a sizeable part of the twentieth century.⁵⁰ If my analysis is correct, the Dutch consider their nation not so much as an organic, historically evident fact, but primarily as a cultural construct. In the recent, remembered past and in the present, the nation has been and is being reshaped over and over again through the everyday designing or festive celebration of the present national community, much more so than throughout the memory of the historical Dutch state in its chronological trajectory.⁵¹ In other words: for the Dutch, their nation is a meaningful space – or still better: a trusty community – more than a legacy from the past.

The enhanced relevance of national history is no longer a typically Dutch phenomenon; we are seeing this arise throughout in Europe. In some countries, such as France, authorities are going so far as creating legislation on national themes of historical interpretation, fiercely opposed by professional historians. Many of these, also in the Netherlands, have signed the *Appel de Blois* of October 2008 in favour of public liberty for history and against the political instrumentalization of historical memory.⁵² In the Netherlands, however, the movement has taken on particular strength due to a compact sequence of almost simultaneous events that have shaken Dutch society during the last decades, giving rise to doubts about the foundations of its culture and its very identity, and hence questioning the direction Dutch history is taking. Public history is therefore making a strong comeback as one of the key indicators for the nation's future. These events are well documented: ever since the end of the first wave of decolonisation, the emancipation of the remaining overseas territories has clashed with Dutch ideas about national cohesion. Dutch society, traditionally marked by strong bonds between religious involvement and social organisation, seemed to become stricken by secularization with more intensity and much more quickly than its neighbours. By now, virtually nothing is left of the extremely strong confessional bonds of the 'pillarization' era.⁵³ Mass immigration, in particular from Muslim societies, is challenging not only the ancient Dutch conviction to be God's own elect Christian country, but also the secular design of the country as dreamt up by its liberal elites.

Political violence, expressed in the murders of the politician Pim Fortuyn (6 May 2002) and the controversial filmmaker Theo van Gogh

50 For a short assessment of the theme of pillarization, see Kees Schuyt and Ed Taverne, 1950: *Prosperity and Welfare* [Dutch Culture in a European Perspective] (Assen, Basingstoke 2004) 226-231.

51 Cf. also the considerations in my essay 'Dieu et Orange, l'eau et les digues: La mémoire de la nation néerlandaise avant l'État', *Le Débat. Histoire,*

politique, société (Paris), n° 78 (January-February 1994) 20-30.

52 'Appel de Blois', France, published in *Le Monde* 11 October 2008.

53 Cf. for the historical background Peter van Rooden, *Religieuze regimes. Over godsdienst en maatschappij in Nederland 1570-1990* (Amsterdam 1996).

(2 November 2004), and threats of assassination against prominent politicians such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who left the Netherlands for the USA in September 2006, or right-wing leader Geert Wilders, seem to pervert a political society that until quite recently thought of itself as fundamentally permissive, convivial and non-violent, and basically better equipped for moral excellence than other European societies. In addition, the self-sufficient view of their society cherished by the Dutch during WWII has been heavily challenged, and the traditional divisions between the religious and ideological communities – those ‘pillars’ which formed the strength of Dutch political society – have gone astray. The profound reason why Dutch society has been shaken much more than many other European countries is, in my view, that history didn’t act as an alternative for the questioned identity of the Dutch. Until some years ago, we would even be perfectly entitled to ask whether the Dutch really liked their own history. Things are changing, however.

All in all, Dutch society has started to have profound doubts about itself, about its identity and about the value of its traditional historical memory. Since the very cohesion of society is at stake, the temptation to reinforce the traditional image of the nation’s identity and to have recourse to political constraints in the public domain is greater than ever, and probably even greater than in neighbouring countries. Hence a series of recent political measures aiming at the restoration of the pre-immigration image of the nation’s historical identity. For instance, naturalization tests imposed on newcomers that stress a quite traditional image of Dutch history – one which is in fact rather foreign to many Dutch themselves. The most important form of ‘history by decree’, as Rotterdam historian Maria Grever has called it, however, is the establishment of a national ‘Canon’ of Dutch history and culture consisting of fifty ‘windows’: topics of major relevance in the formation of Dutch society throughout history, from pre-Christian times to the present.⁵⁴ The Canon is meant for teaching history in school. Following the explicit desire of Parliament, the creation of a Museum of National History in Arnhem to present the elements of the Canon has been scheduled, close to the Open Air Museum for Dutch ethnology. Quite typically, the value of this planned Museum itself as a privileged form of representing history has immediately been challenged. A quarrel developed between several competing parties, focussing finally not on matters of content or history, but on the location and cost of a car park. The project has given rise to a heated debate nationwide, the final outcome of which is far from certain. In December 2008,

54 See the website of the Canon: www.entoen.nu (with an English version); and the presentation in [F.P. van Oostrom], *A Key to Dutch History: The Cultural Canon of the Netherlands* (Boulder, Colorado 2009) [online resource via OCLC Pica].

Cf. the critical comments by Maria Grever and Siep Stuurman (eds.), *Beyond the Canon: History for the Twenty-First Century* (Basingstoke 2007); Maria Grever, ‘Geschiedenis per decreet’, *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 120:3 (2007) 382-386.

the two directors of the new museum presented an alternative plan centred on five 'worlds': I & us, land & water, rich & poor, war & peace, body & mind. Professional historians have hardly been consulted, however. Many of them have adopted a critical attitude, either towards the idea of such a museum itself or towards the more or less implicit focus on national identity.

One of the results of this upsurge of historical memory in the public sphere is the wild multiplication of 'Canons' in every conceivable domain: local, provincial, religious, cultural, scientific, etcetera, and the debates about their precise contents. These certainly attest to a growing feeling of commitment to the country's history among the general public; the danger being a new, politically tainted public codification of historical knowledge that prevents the smooth interaction between historical scholarship and public memory. In fact, a keen observer may object that the power play between cultural factions customary in the Netherlands, ensuring as ever its cultural and political equilibrium through sharp negotiation, has already started to counterbalance this traditionalization of Dutch memory. During the presentation in 2007 of a government-commissioned report in which national identity was presented not as an essential benchmark but as an ongoing process of identification with the community, the princess royal Máxima, born in Argentina, expressed publicly her doubts about the claim to a traditional Dutch identity. In spite of a storm of public protest, she has now been vindicated by a declaration from the Dutch government itself.⁵⁵

Yet two consequences of this rapid evolution must be taken into account. Firstly, the upsurge of popular demand concerns much less national *history* than the national community's *memory*, i.e., an experience-based form of national history adapted to the present interests and the emotional needs of a broad public. Alongside a host of journalists and media specialists using their own verbal and visual tools, Dutch professional historians are more and more urged to collaborate and present their own, memory-based view of what Dutch national history is about, preferably in that inward-looking national stance that goes against their professional idea of Dutch society's involvement in the international context and its quality as a nation. Secondly, therefore, a gap is growing between national memory and professional history. In the Netherlands too, national memory is by now very much about inner-directed national values; about heroes, places of memory and national symbols, about ethical problems regarding slavery, the holocaust, war resistance and decolonisation, about customs and traditions demonstrative of centuries-old group identities, ignoring Hobsbawm and Ranger's groundbreaking work on the invention of tradition.

55 For the report: Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid, *Identificatie met Nederland* (Amsterdam 2007), to download from www.wrr.nl.

In fact, in many respects, national history is resurfacing in old forms, as if the modern historical profession had never existed and its products had never been published. Historians are often forced to play an ambiguous role in this process. Returning again to the distinction between history as the historian's professional work, and memory as the historical narrative appropriated by the community, it must be acknowledged that professional historians construct history and legitimately want it to be accepted as a reflection – or an anticipation, for that matter – of the community's memory; while on the other hand they must reject those forms of memory that do not conform to the scholarly standards of their profession. Yet in order to safeguard the interests of history, they must maintain a balance between the emotional demands of the community and the rigour of scholarship.

Dutch identity: a cultural nation?

Again, the preceding remarks may be valid for many other regions of Europe than the Netherlands alone. Particularly interesting, however, is the way in which, in my view, Dutch society thinks of its identity: namely much more as a culturally defined community than as a politically formed nation state. Yet the nation state is very prominent in the Netherlands, and the cultural nation of the Dutch community, maintaining strong borders between insiders and outsiders, largely coexists with the nation state. It is at the levels of genesis, gestation and legitimization that the nation state and the cultural community differ. But the strength of Dutch society, and its particular interest in historical comparison, lies precisely in the historical balance between a prominent state as the basic structure of the community and a large degree of individual and institutional autonomy at all the levels of society at large. The famous Dutch 'particularism' has been one of its most steady expressions, ever since the creation of the Dutch Republic at the end of the sixteenth century.

The art of maintaining the balance relies heavily upon smooth communication between the elements of this socio-political structure, and it is precisely in this domain that Dutch society has proven its strength. Ever since its formation, it has basically been a communicative society. Its way of arriving at decisions within a divided community is presently known as the *polder model* of consensual communication. This corresponds largely to what my colleague Marijke Spies and I have called, in relation to the seventeenth century, a *discussion culture* – not without provoking a heated discussion on this concept among historians.⁵⁶ Communication between all the parties

56 Willem Frijhoff and Marijke Spies, with the collaboration of Wiep van Bunge and Natascha Veldhorst, 1650: *Hard-Won Unity*. Translation

by Myra Heerspink Scholz [Dutch Culture in a European perspective] (Assen, Basingstoke 2004).

involved, on an equal footing, including the right to refuse any form of unruly political command or social violence, has been the basis of national cohesion ever since the beginning of an ordered Dutch society in the Middle Ages. It is perhaps one of the most intimate secrets of the Dutch nation as a historically structured community.

Nevertheless, many Dutch historians maintain a problematic and unsteady relationship to their nation. Ever since ‘nation’ has become a suspect term for some members of the cultivated elites, as an unfit frame for true historical memory, or even a dirty word calling for intellectual incest, the Dutch historical profession has been torn between several forms of history writing that subtly distance themselves from the nation as such. French historians have named this a *jeu d'échelles*, a series of scale models for historical representation and historical narrative going from small to great.⁵⁷ Roughly speaking, we may distinguish between smaller frames, such as local or regional history, fashionable again since the rise of historical anthropology and European ethnology, or *microstoria*, and taller frames, such as European history, comparative history between ethnic communities, nations, international regions or continents, and world or global history. Comparative studies in particular tend to use the national framework as the basic unit of comparison – a choice that may be self-evident for the centuries of national state formation, but is much less so for earlier times, and perhaps also for many aspects of the global society to come.

The taller frames are the ones that are currently imposing themselves in university teaching and academic research, slightly counterbalanced by forms of *glocalisation* which combine history and anthropology in an effort to reconcile great evolutions, community structures and human experience. Going against the grain of this methodological scheme, Dutch professional historians tend to devote their research to specific themes encompassing either a plurality of national contexts or a global international space. Take the gender dimension, for example. Has gender history in itself anything to do with national history, which would make transnational comparisons meaningful, or is gender on a national scale just a more or less fortuitous excision from a larger symbolic field? The answer is, of course, subject to debate. But there is certainly a risk of the specificity of the national community or the national context remaining hidden behind the more general statements scholarly history tries to make in such larger symbolic fields.

How to measure relevance?

The question is therefore whether the proof of the relevance of Dutch history can be helped by such scale models. In other words, is there some indication that the history of the Dutch nation can significantly contribute to a better

understanding of smaller or larger processes in history? In principle, at least two solutions are conceivable: on the one hand, the search for the *exceptional*, i.e., either the uniqueness of what happened in the Netherlands, or the exceptional quality of Dutch history as preceding or magnifying more general evolutions. The question of whether the unique is really relevant to general history is debateable, as historical events derive their interest for historical research from their repeatability, yet the unique may well have a symbolic value of its own, speaking for other, more widespread qualities. To quote a famous expression by the Dutch historian Jan Romein, resurrected twenty years ago in a trendsetting pamphlet by Karel Davids, Jan Lucassen and Jan Luiten van Zanden: ‘Dutch history seen as a deviation from the general pattern of humanity’.⁵⁸

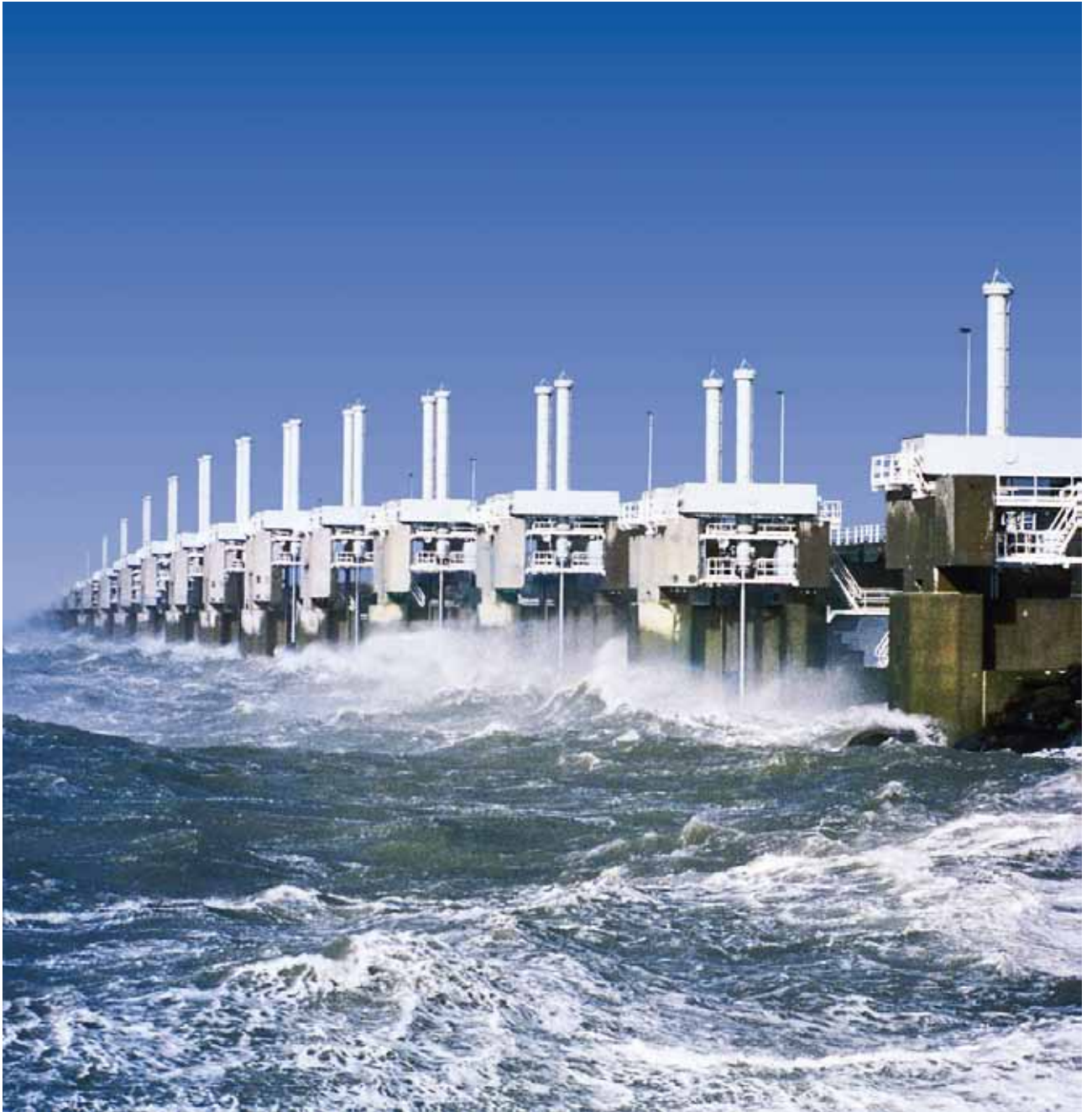
On the other hand, we may distinguish the search for the *average* nation, for a model country that exemplifies on a smaller scale or in a simplified way what happens everywhere else, and that may serve as a model for the analysis of other nations – in other words: ‘the Dutch case’, from which any form of generalization could be derived. We should not rule out the second option too quickly. Indeed, small countries with less burdened historical memories may present easier ways of mastering the complex interactions of historical processes. But it is not the purpose of this essay to show how utterly ordinary the Netherlands is in the light of history. Besides, depending on the degree of sophistication of the research, any country may appear in all its aspects as absolutely unique and incomparable. In this way, every nation can boast of its *Sonderweg*, and in matters of memory *l’exception française* matches forcibly the intimate feeling of uniqueness and exceptionality of any other country in the world. As professional historians, however, we must fight the illusion of the historical exceptionalism of the European nations and try to find a common measure for the ordinary and the exceptional or unique.

Such a measure for the specific, or occasionally even unique, role of the Dutch in history, which will justify the claim to the relevance of Dutch history as such, may be found in those objects of historical research, either events or facts, structures or processes, in which the Dutch have played a creative, formative, leading or decisive role. It goes without saying that objects of historical research are always intellectual constructs, and as such of a relative value. However, past research and present insights may together bring about a consensus on a minimal list of such historical objects, i.e., Dutch historical

57 Jacques Revel (ed.), *Jeux d’échelles: La micro-analyse à l’expérience* (Paris 1996).

58 C.A. Davids, J.M.W.G. Lucassen and J.L. van Zanden, *De Nederlandse geschiedenis als afwijking van het algemeen menselijk patroon* (Amsterdam

1988). One of the results of this call was the volume of comparative essays by Karel Davids and Jan Lucassen (eds.), *A Miracle Mirrored: The Dutch Republic in European Perspective* (Cambridge 1995).



More than half of the Netherlands is below sea level. The Delta Works, including this flood barrier in the Oosterschelde, were built to prevent a repeat of the flood of 1953. On 4 October 1986 Queen Beatrix officially opened the dam for use by saying the well-

known words: 'De stormvloedkering is gesloten. De Deltawerken zijn voltooid. Zeeland is veilig'. ['The flood barrier is closed. The Delta Works are completed. Zeeland is safe'.]
Deltapark Neeltje Jans.

themes that are in fact international research themes but with regard to which the Dutch have played a particular role, and that cannot be properly studied without taking into account the role of Dutch history. There is no need to summarize or even repeat the historical objects of Dutch relevance for international research presented in the other contributions to this volume. I'll just try to synthesize some aspects of this approach for the sake of a better understanding of our main theme.

Such themes can indeed be classified into several categories. In the category of the physical environment, the foremost theme is of course *water*. Think of the famous saying that God created the earth, but the Dutch created their country. The sea, the rivers and the canals have conditioned the commercial and agricultural prosperity of the Dutch, the oceans their trading empire and their colonial ventures. Native and foreign observers alike have acknowledged many times the internationally outstanding technical, social, economic and even cultural role the Dutch have played ever since the Middle Ages in terms of water management, dike building, polder draining, river control, land allocation, landscape planning, etcetera; not just in their own country, but in many others within Europe and beyond, in their colonies and in other countries where their particular skills have been appreciated. The French king Louis Napoleon, the first king of Holland, was fascinated by water management, and in recent years the prince royal Willem Alexander has made it one of his major public priorities. Many languages have borrowed from the Dutch the very idiom of these technical skills, both in water engineering and in marine techniques. It is impossible to study correctly water management, the environment and landscape formation as a cultural process in world history without referring to the role of the Dutch, both past and present.

A second category, more difficult to define, is that of public and private *policy*, i.e., the socio-economic and political structures, values and agency. The Dutch Republic and the early modern period can easily obtain privileged status here.⁵⁹ Think of Weber, Braudel or Wallerstein. However, since the Netherlands has from the very beginning developed as a commercial crossroads between countries and continents, Dutch economic history is very much a story of international relations, of transcontinental trading companies such as the early modern East and West India Companies [VOC and WIC] or the great shipping companies of modern times, and, ever since the industrial era,

59 See, for instance, the works of Jonathan I. Israel, *Dutch Primacy in World Trade 1585-1740* (Oxford 1989); Jan Luiten van Zanden, *The Rise and Decline of Holland's Economy: Merchant Capitalism and Labour Market* (Manchester, New York 1993); Pieter Emmer, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Economy*

1580-1880: Trade, Slavery, and Emancipation (Aldershot 1998); Johannes Postma and Victor Enthoven (eds.), *Riches from Atlantic Commerce: Dutch Transatlantic Trade and Shipping, 1585-1817* (Leiden, Boston 2003).



View of Batavia (present-day Djakarta) and the Salak, Pangerango and Gede mountain ranges. Seen from the water, with ships from the Dutch fleet at anchor. Hendrick Jacobsz. Dubbels, View of Batavia, around 1650. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

of international industrial conglomerates such as Philips, Unilever or Royal Dutch Shell. In this domain, Dutch history decidedly is of major relevance to the history of the world.

Besides, as the international textbooks on world history show, the Dutch colonial empire in connection with the rise of these economic networks is a historical subject in its own right for non-Dutch readers⁶⁰, and is inseparable from major interrogations about the Dutch exploration of the world and Dutch economic primacy in the seventeenth century, the commercial, economic, social, cultural, ethnic and even religious policy of the Dutch outside their own country until decolonisation, the slave trade and indentured labour, the colonial state and postcolonial developments, but also about the particular history and development of the Dutch colonial possessions as such: the many trading posts on the coasts of Asia, including the trading monopoly with Japan (Deshima) and even Australia, the short-lived colonies in such different territories as seventeenth-century New Holland (Brasil), New Netherland (New York and surrounding states) or Formosa (Taiwan), or the more durable colonies on the Gold Coast (Ghana), the Cape (South Africa), Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Malaysia, Suriname, Demerary, Curaçao and other islands in the Caribbean, and above all the immense archipelago that from 1945 became the Republic of Indonesia, formally recognized by the Dutch government in 1949. More so than immediately following decolonization, historiography now stresses the need for reconsidering the history of these territories in terms of interactions between the native societies and the colonizing power, of transfer of knowledge, skills, commodities, and specific forms of material culture. This has developed a new awareness of the cultural legacy of colonialism on both sides of the chain of interdependence.⁶¹

60 The bibliography is immense, therefore just some examples. A classic: Charles R. Boxer, *The Dutch Seaborne Empire, 1600-1800* (London 1965). On the slave trade: Johannes M. Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1600-1815* (Cambridge 1990). A particular relation: Leonard Blussé, Willem Remmelink and Ivo Smits (eds.), *Bridging the Divide: 400 Years of Dutch-Japanese Relations* (Utrecht 2000). A sociocultural approach: Frances Gouda, *Dutch Culture Overseas: Colonial Practice in the Netherlands-Indies, 1900-1942* (Amsterdam 1995; second edition Jakarta 2008). Imagology: Benjamin Schmidt, *Innocence Abroad: The Dutch Imagination and the New World, 1570-1670* (Cambridge 2001). A comparative approach:

Bob Moore and Henk van Nierop (eds.), *Colonial Empires Compared: Britain and the Netherlands 1750-1850* (Aldershot 2003). A comprehensive monograph: Jaap Jacobs, *New Netherland: A Dutch Colony in Seventeenth-Century America* (Leiden, Boston 2005; revised edition Ithaca NY 2009).

61 K. Zandvliet (ed.), *The Dutch Encounter with Asia 1600-1950* (Zwolle 2003); Gert Oostindie, *Paradise Overseas. Dutch Caribbean: Colonialism and Its Transatlantic Legacies* (Oxford 2005); Gert Oostindie (ed.), *Dutch Colonialism, Migration, and Cultural Heritage* (Leiden 2008); Susan Legêne and Janneke van Dijk, *The Netherlands East Indies at the Tropenmuseum* (Amsterdam 2009).

The Netherlands was the world's first capitalist empire. Capitalism as an early Dutch phenomenon; its relation to religion, to state formation and to the social organisation and basic values of the country; the genesis of a bourgeois society and its translation into the rather peculiar political structure of the Dutch Republic; its secularized conception of political power, its high degree of self-organisation, its non-violent ways of solving social problems owing to the exceptional balance between all the social actors, its openness to foreign immigrants of whatever persuasion, its horizontal organisation permitting early forms of consultation or political representation, and most of all its unremitting practice of reasoned permissiveness or tolerance: all these characteristics of Dutch society, which have grown throughout history, have created at an early stage a singularly modern society prefiguring in many aspects the destiny of the greater European nations, and of Europe as a whole.

A third category is *culture*, taken in a broad sense, i.e., as the collective forms of agency and the meanings assigned to community life, both high and low. It is a commonplace to stress the importance of the Dutch painting and print traditions for the renewal of these arts in Europe, not only in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but equally in the nineteenth and twentieth. We should also not forget the international influence of Dutch architecture and town planning, from the start of the Dutch Republic to the present day; now in fact probably more than ever.⁶² Moreover, from Humanism to the Enlightenment, from early modern republicanism to nineteenth-century liberalism, and from the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century to the so-called Second Golden Age of Dutch Science in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Dutch philosophy, technical innovations and science have been seminal in the advancement of culture in Europe. Holland was once called the *magasin de l'univers*, the warehouse of the universe, for its book, atlas, print and music production. The *translatio studii* from the South of Europe to the North made Leiden the new, Batavian Athens: the very centre of the European Republic of Letters, where philology, philosophy, science, medicine, anatomy, jurisprudence and even engineering worked together for the future of the West, constituting an almost explosive mix of learning and innovations that exercised an irresistible power of attraction to whoever wanted novelty or change. The anecdote that a letter sent in 1713 from China to 'Boerhaave, Europe' was correctly delivered at the famous professor of medicine's Leiden home, is just one token of the central position Dutch science had achieved in the early modern period.

62 To quote only one curious encounter of a world-famous Dutch architect with history: Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York 1994).

It would not be difficult to multiply the instances in which the Dutch have played a role that may have changed – if not the world, at least the course of some aspects of European history or the very conditions of survival of international communities. Dutch history is utterly relevant to a certain number of great debates in current historiography. One of those certainly is the case of religion. The particular mix of a single public church and a general freedom of conscience and thinking that characterised the Dutch Republic like no other country at the time, exercised a tremendous influence on the evolution of the relationship between religion and society, including in the New World.⁶³ It made new forms of secularism thinkable and credible, and definitely changed the power of religion as the basic foundation of the state. In the late seventeenth century, the Dutch Republic gave shelter to the three champions of formal tolerance: Spinoza, Locke and Bayle. Although over the centuries the Netherlands has experienced an almost steady change of regime in the relationship between the churches and the state, and religiosity has risen and declined in the social organisation of the country and its popular appreciation, yet it was the Dutch Republic that made a secular state a feasible political structure, able to resist the continuous pressure of theocratic ambitions and at the same time permissive with regard to any form of religiosity, old or new, high or low. The ‘pillarization’ of the confessional and ideological communities during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries has shown the elasticity of this structure, which respected the churches and the state, each in its own domain. The Dutch legacy in matters of religion is not so much one of constraint by church or state as one of liberty and trust in the benefits of religious freedom, albeit now at the price of mass defection from the church structures.

But behind these different categories looms the overall notion of *modernity*, subsuming the benefits and achievements of all the previous categories of Dutch history together into one single great movement towards the future. In his contribution to the centennial volume of the Institute for Dutch History in 2002, Jonathan Israel has contended that the major legacy of early modern Dutch history to Europe and the world was its creative and

63 C. Berkvens-Stevelinck, J. Israel and G.H.M. Posthumus Meyjes (eds.), *The Emergence of Tolerance in the Dutch Republic* (Leiden, New York, Cologne 1997); R. Po-Chia-Hsia and Henk van Nierop (eds.), *Calvinism and Religious Toleration in the Dutch Golden Age* (Cambridge 2002); Horst Lademacher, Renate Loos and Simon Groenveld (eds.), *Ablehnung – Duldung – Anerkennung. Toleranz in den Niederlanden und in Deutschland.*

Ein historischer und aktueller Vergleich [Studien zur Geschichte und Kultur Nordwesteuropas 9] (Münster 2004); Russell Shorto, *The Island at the Center of the World: The Epic Story of Dutch Manhattan and the Forgotten Colony that Shaped America* (New York 2004), in particular 96-97, 274-275; C. Scott Dixon, Dagmar Freist and Mark Greengrass (eds.), *Living with Religious Diversity in Early-Modern Europe* (Farnham 2009).

at times uncertain or unruly, but finally sustained route to modernity.⁶⁴ In a huge variety of essays, studies and syntheses, Dutch historians have provided arguments showing how much this hypothesis must be considered correct. This may well be the final – and at the same time a sufficient – reason to include Dutch history in any major study on the past of Europe, and indeed the world. ◀

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64 Jonathan Israel, 'Dutch History from the Perspective of European and World History', in: *Over de grenzen van de Nederlandse geschiedenis. Jubileumsymposium van het Instituut voor Nederlandse Geschiedenis, 19 april 2002* (The Hague 2002) 25-33. I use the concept of 'modernity' here in a factual, not in a teleological sense. For a critical assessment of this notion, see Lynn Hunt, *Measuring Time, Making History* [The Natalie Zemon Davis Annual Lecture Series at CEU, Budapest] (Budapest, New York 2008) 93-128.

The Medieval Origins of Capitalism in the Netherlands

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Large parts of the Netherlands saw an early rise in market traffic during the late Middle Ages already. Exchange via the market became the dominant form not only for goods, but also for land, labour and capital, and this during the course of the sixteenth century already. This contribution investigates why it should be that the market form of exchange arose so early here specifically; how markets were organised as institutions and how they functioned. It will be demonstrated that the markets here had a favourable organisation, with low transaction costs, a high level of integration of the markets and a large degree of certainty for parties entering these markets. Nevertheless, the consequences of the rise of the market were not all positive. The rise of a market economy did not lead to any appreciable economic growth, while the social effects were largely negative. Social polarisation, pollution and the need to work ever harder depressed standards of living for most people in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

1. Introduction

One of the fiercest and most productive historical debates – and one of the most ideology-laden – has been that on the transition from feudalism to capitalism.¹ Although interest in this specific debate and its ideological implications seems to be waning now, the importance of reconstructing and explaining long-term changes in economy and society is still clear. Not only are many of us curious about the origins of modern economy and society, but a long-term analysis also offers us the opportunity to better investigate and understand the causes of structural changes in economy and society, the geographical differences these display, and their effects. This task becomes ever more urgent now that we have increasing insight into the different trajectories various parts of the world have taken, and are still taking, and now that we are becoming increasingly aware of the striking differences which have arisen over time between rich and poor parts of the world. This awareness has given rise, for instance, to the current debate on the Great