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The Enlightenment and Its Learned Societies - The Peculiarity of Groningen

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Netherlands led the entire Western world with regard to religious toleration. But by the eighteenth century, and especially the revolutionary era (1775-1800), the position had changed dramatically and the United States, Britain and France all surpassed The Netherlands in freedom of conscience, freedom of expression and removing religious discrimination. How and why did the Netherlands lose its primacy in this sphere? The explanation offered by Professor Jonathan Israel is that pre-1800 Dutch toleration was essentially a de facto stalemate of conflicting confessions and theologies, not a genuine secularization based on democratic Enlightenment principles and values.[1]

Eighteenth-century societies, regional academies and salons were generally offspring of the Enlightenment even in cases where they were not laying any special emphasis on discussion of philosophy, science and projects of reform and social amelioration. In countries where royal absolutist control was either absent or, by the late eighteenth century, much reduced such as the Netherlands, Switzerland, Britain, the American colonies (and then from 1776, the new United States) as well as post-1770 France, political thought was, for the first time, also being intensively diffused and discussed among the literate elites. After 1770 widening intellectual endeavour combined with rising political awareness, increasingly stimulated discussion of Montesquieu, Rousseau, republicanism and the nature of political liberty, and this process of widening enlightened sociability laced with new political ideas of itself became a threat to the social and political status quo by injecting the impetus of the Enlightenment as an innovative force. It needed only some local

political or social crisis for the new ideas to find an opening, turning them into a generally destabilizing and, in some sense, revolutionary tendency. After 1770 this was a ubiquitous phenomenon in the Western Atlantic world, beginning in North America, but one which at the same time generated its own conservative reaction, a reaction abundantly evident also in the societies, aiming to turn the tools of Enlightenment sociability into an effective antidote, against itself.

The more conservative local societies in The Netherlands, as elsewhere, manifested little desire to add to the escalation of political tension and little if any desire to bring the lower orders or marginal groups, such as Jews or foreign political exiles, into the enlightened sphere they too sought to bolster and cultivate. They often aimed, rather, to familiarize patricians, military officers and leading professionals with each other in an atmosphere of ease and refined relaxation encouraging a culture of 'harmony' which in practice meant sophisticated support for the *ancien régime* social and political system. In this respect, the Groningen 'Grote Sociëteit', like some of the other Dutch societies, was a refined and cultivated deflecting mirror, a response to the more unsettling tendencies of the Enlightenment – while at the same time also a typical expression of the Enlightenment.[2] For these reasons, the Groningen 'Grote Sociëteit', like other such societies, never assigned any particular priority to intellectual pursuits and constantly strove to maintain political neutrality as between the Patriotten and the Orangists during the political struggles of the 1780s and 1790s.

Conservative response (moderate Enlightenment) to the onset of democratic, republican and (from 1774) revolutionary tendencies, was in several respects a typical outgrowth of the *Verlichting*.[3] Devising rules and organizational methods in the spirit and manner of Benjamin Franklin's circle in Pennsylvania so as to minimize 'fondness for dispute', 'warmth of expression' and 'desire for victory', had long been a core Enlightenment characteristic throughout Europe and the European colonial world, as well as of the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia. Such society constitutions as that of the Groningen 'Grote Sociëteit' with their stress on calm rational debate without anger or vitriol were inherent in the quest for reasonableness, toleration, and acceptance of other views, and the belief in the positive power of constructive criticism. However, in The Netherlands tension between defenders of the Orangist court and the traditional methods and procedures of the old patrician-aristocratic oligarchy, as well

as of Calvinist orthodoxy, on one side, and those advocating reform and a wider toleration while criticizing religious orthodoxy and at odds with the Orangist elite, frequently and after 1780 increasingly burst these restraining rules and practices, causing a proliferation of new kinds of political clubs and societies that was overtly and actively aligned with Orangist reaction or, alternatively, with Patriot reform.

In Britain and Ireland, this kind of polarization commenced already earlier during the American War of Independence when the more radical reformers, including John Jebb, Richard Price, Joseph Priestley and of course, Tom Paine, were vehemently ostracized by the mainstream intellectual establishment because they supported democracy and the American cause. British radicals identified with the American revolt (which many in Europe compared to the Dutch revolt of 1572) and also urged far-reaching, sweeping reform at home and in Ireland. By the 1790s, a parallel basic division had become very deep and very bitter also in Switzerland, Scandinavia, Germany and elsewhere. In this respect the post-1780 situation in The Netherlands was just an extreme instance of a wider Western predicament. During the mid-1790s, at a time when American politics itself had turned into a furious ideological battle-ground divided between democratic and aristocratic republicanism, one of America's stoutest foes of democracy and defenders of "aristocracy", John Quincy Adams (1767-1848), son of the United States' first ambassador to The Netherlands, and himself a future president in the years 1825-9, became American envoy at The Hague. His attitude sharply contrasted with Thomas Jefferson's active support for the democratic republicans in France. In fact, John Quincy, even more than his father – who had been a great foe of Benjamin Franklin and the latter's democratic legacy- felt deeply antagonistic to the democratic movement in Holland which he too viewed as part of a wider trans-Atlantic threat to the principles of aristocracy, established churches and monarchy. The bitterness of the Dutch ideological polarization, John Quincy also believed, served as a further warning to America of the appalling dangers and risks of the kind of strife between democratic republicans and Orangist *aristocratisme* then characterizing the Dutch ideological scene – in intellectual terms the clash between moderate Enlightenment (venerating Montesquieu) and Radical Enlightenment (the democratizing and egalitarian ideas of Condorcet, Paine, and Jefferson). Following the French conquest of the Low Countries, in 1794-5, the new revolutionary regime that assumed power in Holland swiftly turned the tables on the Orangists while doing nothing to dampen

the ferocity of the Dutch domestic ideological conflict.

Before 1787, in "most of the cities and villages throughout the provinces"of The Netherlands, explained John Quincy, reporting back to America, "certain clubs or popular societies had formed themselves, similar in their nature to those which have since been so notorious in France, and to those which upon their model have recently arisen in the United States". After September 1787, these political clubs, having successfully attracted considerable bodies of adherents, were "prohibited from assembling, and others, consisting only of partisans of the House of Orange, were substituted in their stead". With the arrival of the French armies and the "revolution consequent upon that event, the Orange societies have been prohibited in their turn and the patriotic clubs have been revived". The result, since 1795, was a hardening of the ideological and cultural arteries, deepening of domestic political conflict, the Netherlands becoming, like France, Britain, Ireland, Switzerland and America, a land of entrenched warring political clubs and societies organizing local factions and, if care was not taken, the same paralyzing deadlock would permeate and polarize the United States too.[4]

In The Netherlands, such Enlightenment polarization, dividing culture and politics as well as philosophy between "moderate Enlightenment" and "Radical Enlightenment" can already be discerned in an incipient form at a notably early stage. The dismissal of one of the Republic's foremost critics of religious orthodoxy, tradition and conventional thinking, and strongest advocates of toleration and Enlightenment philosophy, Frederik Adolf van der Marck, from his professorship at the University of Groningen, in 1773, occurred only after a long public controversy in which many members of the Groningen elites were involved on both sides, for and against. This clash exacerbated intellectual-political tensions locally and illustrated the close linkage of the growing political, religious and philosophical layers of conflict within Groningen society and culture.[5] Van der Marck had attracted a circle of radical students around him and generally conducted himself in a provocative and challenging manner with regard to the public Church and academic tradition, though it was not his intention directly to challenge the Stadholder or the constitutional *status quo* either regionally or in the Netherlands as a whole.[6] After his dismissal by the university senate, with the backing of Stadholder, the Groningen University remained vehemently and bitterly divided.[7]

Founded in 1765, by 1775, the Groningen "Grote Sociëteit" had 181 members, hardly any of whom were *Doopsgezinden* or Catholics and none were Jews.[8] Yet by developing into a relatively large association of prominent men associated with the government of the city and province, and the military establishment, and one that remained firmly resolved to bridge the gulf between conservatives and reformers at a time when there was an unmistakable resurgence of ideological tension, the "Grote Sociëteit" was not merely an organization of local interest, not just a feature of the Groningen scene, or a point of local elite pride, but something more. The society's unbending and consistently upheld requirement to forbid and banish intemperate talk, angry polemics and vituperation, and insistence on maintaining the rules of calm, civilized conversation was perhaps more urgently needed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Netherlands than almost anywhere on either side of the Atlantic though its remarkable success in upholding these values and standards was rarely paralleled in other parts of the Dutch Republic. The society lost some of its memberships, apparently more than a third during the fraught years 1786-94, declining to only 104 members by 1794.[9] Nevertheless, the most typical and striking feature of the "Grote Sociëteit" of Groningen – its ability to surmount the fierce passions of political and ideological divisions gripping Dutch society at this decisive moment, its deliberate striving to stand back from and above public controversy and dissension – materially contributed, at least within the regional context, to generating a noteworthy reactive striving for reconciliation and harmonious resolution of deep divisions.

One reason why such stabilizing institutions, accommodating and reconciling opposed factions, was more urgently relevant in the Netherlands than elsewhere was that freedom of the press and free circulation of newspapers was more firmly established and accepted in the Republic than in any other Western country (apart from the United States after 1775). This was an achievement which enriched the Dutch and international Enlightenment, certainly, but also had the effect of dangerously fuelling eighteenth-century Dutch public controversies. Political criticism of one's own government and its leading figures, including the Stadholder, extended further in the United Provinces in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century than elsewhere including Britain before the Great Reform Bill of 1832 where it was by no means permitted to criticize the king or court, and where "libel" trials for pointed criticism considered as overstepping the mark severely affected the careers of Jebb, Paine, William Cobbett and many others. The American

Revolution's political and philosophical implications sparked a trans-Atlantic struggle not just between monarchy and republicanism, but more specifically, and more importantly in the longer term, between democratic and aristocratic republicanism (i.e. radical and moderate Enlightenment). This was dampened down by state censorship in most European countries (above all in Germany) – and in England by the overwhelming force of popular loyalism – the huge upsurge of "Church and king" populism turning mob violence against intellectuals like Joseph Priestley who challenged the ordinary way of thinking. Only in the Netherlands – until the outbreak of the great Revolution in France in 1789 where full freedom of the press prevailed there from July 1789 until May 1793 – was the contest between conservatives and democrats articulated with full clarity and vigour without being massively constrained by the authorities and the populace, and only there did it become rampant and threaten to go out of control.

Around twenty percent of Dutch pamphlets published during the years of the American Revolution (1774-83) debated American affairs – often with great passion – in all around ninety-seven tracts contributing to what became a deep and abiding rift in Dutch society between Orangists and "democrats".[10] In the prevailing situation, it could hardly be avoided that the major newspapers and journals also became sharply divided. If the *Gazette de Leyde*, the most renowned Dutch journal internationally, backed the American Revolution and (more sporadically) the Dutch democratic movement of the 1780s, the *Courrier du Bas-Rhin*, published in Kleve (Cleves), also widely read across Europe, was vehemently pro-Orangist, anti-American and anti-democratic. Defenders of the status quo and the House of Orange, and the British alliance principally deployed Locke and Montesquieu in defence of "mixed government" and aristocracy so that the clash of rival Enlightenment world-views in turn directly helped define in more philosophical terms the Dutch (and Swiss) ideological struggles of the 1780s, adding to what became an ever more embittered political contest between Orangist "mixed government" allied to aristocratic republicanism, on the one hand, and democratic republicanism (and Radical Enlightenment) on the other. This escalating intellectual war between *aristocrates,* as Dutch and Swiss *regenten* and patricians were called, and *démocrates* then of itself further polarized the Enlightenment's competing moderate and radical wings.

It was hence only in the Netherlands that a pamphlet directly criticizing

the head of state, such as Van der Capellen's *Aan het Volk van Nederland* could have circulated so rapidly and so far and wide at once exerting a sensationally wide public impact. "There is at present a fermentation in this nation", commented the then American envoy, John Adams, writing from Holland to the United States Congress, in Philadelphia, in 1781, an "exceptional excitement surrounding political pamphlets" and "especially one large pamphlet", meaning Van der Capellen's *Aan het Volk van Nederland*, a tract, he reported, which was distributed everywhere in the United Provinces , and was read and discussed by everyone and that had plunged the entire country into a ferment of excitement.[11] This pamphlet mattered much less, it is fair to say, as a work of political theory than for its powerfully subversive rhetoric, its lambasting the Princes of Orange as the oppressors of "Batavian freedom" while exalting the common people as the chief source of legitimacy in politics. Those who belong to human society are from "nature all equal and equal in relation to each other, with no-one subjected to another" while the point of society (and everyone's duty) is to render the people "happy".[12] Systematic social and political reform and amelioration were urgently needed in the Netherlands as elsewhere. Van der Capellen uninhibitedly equated the Stadholder and Orangism with undermining Dutch freedom in practically all respects.

Eulogizing seventeenth-century Dutch republicanism and the American rebels resisting the British crown, Van der Capellen stressed the need for peoples to elect their own representatives on a broad suffrage in an orderly and responsible manner. His inspiration for what he envisaged as the future democratic transformation of the Republic, he explained, derived from the Dutch republican past and especially from the "Thirteen United States of North America" which he declared his primary model as to how to reform the Dutch body politic although he also exalted "some of the republics of Switzerland".[13] Switzerland was destined to remain a land immersed in revolutionary ferment and deep divisions between rival conservative and radical Enlightenment intelligentsias virtually throughout the entire period from the Genevan Revolution of 1782 to 1848. Eulogizing Oldenbarnevelt and Johan de Witt, while exalting liberty, equality and freedom of the press, Van der Capellen fiercely condemned the Prince of Orange's tyranny, spy-network, and Anglomania. "How have you [the Stadholder] conducted yourself toward our merchants, our seamen, toward our entire Fatherland and its most precious interests, since the outbreak of the American war?"[14]

The exceptionally broad but also deeply destabilizing Dutch debate over political forms and demands for reform sprang also from the wide ramifications of the longstanding domestic political split between Orangists and Patriots further stoking up both sides during the years of the American Revolution. Ever since the great political crisis of the Republic in 1617-18 which culminated in the seizure of power by Prince Maurits and the execution of Oldenbarnevelt, it had been abundantly clear that the greatest challenge facing a religiously tolerant, mercantile republic run by a mix of *regenten*, aristocrats and the Stadholder was to achieve internal stability while conserving individual liberty of conscience and freedom of expression alongside internal and external security. The great political crisis of 1650 again revealed the basic structural weaknesses of the Dutch Republic and so no less did that of 1672 which ended the "True Freedom' of Johan de Witt and brought Prince Willem III to unchallenged political dominance as Stadholder from 1672 to 1702. For supporters of republican liberty in the Netherlands, the crisis urgently raised the question of how support for De Witt's "True Freedom" could be renewed, broadened and strengthened and this was also the essential challenge confronting the *cercle spinoziste* in the 1650s, 1660s and 1670s, the predicament that marks the start of what historians today call the "Radical Enlightenment". The upheavals of 1650 and 1672 confirmed the harsh lesson of 1618-19 when Maurits overthrew Oldenbarnevelt: the Republic could not achieve internal stability without either ending its "mixed government" system or else lessening the destabilizing effect of pamphlet wars and ideological division by stabilizing the relationship between the House of Orange and the city and provincial governments. The basic lesson was still the same with the great Dutch political crisis of 1747-8 which ended in Groningen with significant changes to the forms and procedures of administration and government in the province and a marked strengthening of the Stadholder's power.

The potential for chronic disorder deteriorating even into civil war looked very real at successive stages of the Republic's history so that stabilizing devices, safety valves letting off steam, or rather converting steam into polite conversation over salon games and a glass of wine, into social instruments that offered ways to diffuse tensions and lessen the impact of ideological warfare, became an indispensable tool of local political stabilization, the quest for "harmony". For democratic radicals, the most crucial desideratum was to broaden and strengthen the popular base of republican institutions. In response, conservatives needed to forge a system of mild and more

widely supported Orangism, a broadened system of aristocracy capable of accommodating the toleration, religious plurality, and strong civic and personal legal rights and institutions inherited from the republican past. To achieve this, the rancour and ideological fury of the political factions had somehow had to be overcome and defused. If the need was understood everywhere, Groningen diverged markedly from the rest of the Dutch Republic in terms of the practical outcome. Both the city government and the University strove hard to minimize the impact of the ideological split. At Groningen University, in contrast to the universities of Leiden, Franeker, and Utrecht where many professors were dismissed for Orangist sympathies in 1794-5, none were dismissed at Groningen.[15] By absorbing into its ranks large numbers of committed Orangists belonging to the upper strata of the local society (in the city and province) and at the same time numerous prominent Patriots and then obliging them to co-exist within the rooms of the "Grote Sociëteit" peaceably and amiably, obliging them to abstain from every form of invective and violent polemic, the Groningen "Grote Sociëteit" notably fulfilled a mitigating and harmonizing role.

Certainly, during the nineteenth and early twentieth century the Groningen 'Grote Sociëteit' retreated into a narrower, more restrictive and conservative mode serving as a resort for those sections of the Groningen upper classes that showed scant interest in welcoming new social strata, or in reform or democratization. By and large the society tended to debar prominent local Jewish academics, professionals and businessmen throughout until after World War II. It showed no interest whatsoever in the question of whether women should be admitted to its ranks. After 1814 and the establishment of the modern Dutch monarchy, the society's role over many decades was hardly an innovative or even any longer a particularly constructive one. Yet in the latter respect the story had been strikingly different earlier.

If most eighteenth-century societies in Groningen and elsewhere in the Dutch Republic conspicuously took sides in the great collisions of the 1780s and 1790s and through the Napoleonic period, the "Grote Sociëteit" of Groningen was one of a category of Dutch societies that used their organization and rules to curtail overt political dissension and divisive polemics and diminish taking of sides, and by defusing tension and keeping political and intellectual debate informal contributed to the reconciling tendency that in the end may have proved the salvation of the Dutch body

politic. It was a historical manifestation characteristic of the various cultural trends that eventually led to the remarkable (and exceptional) unity in diversity and special cohesion of modern Dutch society.

Notes

1. This text is an adaptation of Professor Jonathan Israel's contribution to *Studium Generale*'s University Colloquium "Toleration in the Dutch Republic – A Changing Picture?", which was held on Wednesday 4 November 2015 at the Academiegebouw in Groningen.
2. J.K.H. Van der Meer, *Patriotten in Groningen 1780-1795* (Assen: Gorcum, 1996), 40-1.
3. *Verlichting* is the Dutch word for Enlightenment.
4. John Quincy Adams, *The Writings of John Quincy Adams*, ed. W. Chauncey Ford (7 vols., New York: The Macmillan Company, 1913-17) I, 363; "John Quincy Adams to Randolph" (The Hague, 24 June 1795).
5. Hans W. Blom, "'Zet de ramen open!' De natuurrechtsleer van Van der Marck (1719-1800)," in *Zeer kundige professoren. Beoefening van de filosofie in Groningen van 1614 tot 1996*, ed. H.A. Krop, J.A. van Ruler and A.J. Vanderjagt (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 1997), 163-165.
6. Klaas van Berkel, *Universiteit van het Noorden: vier eeuwen academisch leven in Groningen vol. 1: De oude Universiteit, 1614-1876* (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2014), 334-344.
7. Idem, 347.
8. Jan M. Minderhout and Free R. Hijseler, "De Groote Sociëteit te Groningen" in *De Groote Societeit te Groningen 1765-2015. 250 jaar 'hic cedunt verbis arma togaeque simul'*, ed. Cees Smit Sibinga (Groningen: Uitgeverij Profiel, 2015), 58.
9. Van der Meer, *Patriotten in Groningen*, 40.
10. Jan Willem Schulte Nordholt, *The Dutch Republic and American Independence* (Chapel Hill, NC.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 127.
11. *The Papers of John Adams*, ed. R.J. Taylor (16 vols. thus far, Cambridge, MA.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977-2012) XII, 242-243; Schulte Nordholt, *Dutch Republic*, 193.
12. Joan Derk van der Capellen, *Aan het Volk van Nederland*, ed. H.L. Zwitzer (Amsterdam, 1987), 23.
13. Idem, 36.
14. Van der Capellen, *Aan het Volk*, 59; E.H. Kossmann, *Politieke Theorie en Geschiedenis. Verspreide opstellen en voordrachten* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 1987), 252.
15. Van Berkel, *Universiteit van het Noorden I*, 381.