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2. Political concepts and languages

Revolutionary concepts and languages in the Sister Republics of the late 1790s

Pasi Ihalainen

Political debate was transnational in the Europe of the 1790s to a higher degree than ever before. Varieties of Enlightenment thought and ideas of the gradually radicalising French Revolution crossed national boundaries. Traditional monarchies were challenged by the strengthening of older and the rise of new oppositional discourses, which often emphasized the involvement of ‘the people’ as ‘citizens’ in political debate and decision-making side by side with the ruler and old elites, and which sometimes also redefined ‘democracy’ as a form of government. The expanding – and in the case of several countries increasingly free – printed media was becoming interested in reporting on the proceedings of the representative institutions, creating new links between them and the general public. Politicians – both in the sense of political writers and that of acting statesmen – were readily drawing comparisons between constitutions home and abroad.¹

The transformation and radicalisation of Western political thought in the late eighteenth century took place at stages, through international interaction. French Enlightenment thinkers gave new connotations to democracy; the American colonists and their British sympathisers emphasised popular representation and increased parliamentary publicity; and the British political elite began to re-evaluate democracy and publicity within the mixed constitution and parliamentary government in the 1780s. The Dutch Patriots, aware of all of these trends of thought, combined the concepts of representation and democracy into ‘democracy by representation’. When the French joined the process of transformation with their Revolution in 1789, much of Europe was at first uncritically enthusiastic. The revolutionary process led to more radical redefinitions of democracy, citizenship and other basic political concepts than anyone had ever expected, however, which made much of Europe react against such excesses. By 1795, the French were already exporting their revolutionary notions to the neighbouring Netherlands, Switzerland and Italy.²

In this section, we discuss the reception and consequences of this exportation project. The comparative and transnational European context should be seen on the background as we view republican and revolutionary understandings of the concepts of democracy and citizenship in the national spheres of Switzerland, Italy and the Netherlands. Indeed, these

spheres were only gradually emerging in the three countries where decentralisation and plurality of practices had been customary in the early modern period.

Silvia Arlettaz's study on citizenship in the Helvetic Republic (1798–1803) shows how the concepts of nation, people, fatherland and citizen in their revolutionary senses were imposed on the Swiss in the new republican constitution which followed the French occupation. The Helvetic Republic entailed an attempt to redefine the entire semantic field of citizenship; there had not been anything resembling 'the Helvetian nation', 'people', 'fatherland' or 'citizen' in the early modern confederation of cantons. A tiny radical elite³ imposed unity and homogeneity and questioned the privileges of previous ruling elites, but their project lacked wider popular support amongst the public accustomed to sovereign cantons, closed elites and sometimes direct democracy.

Following a general European practice, the concept of citizen had previously been used mainly with reference to the most appreciated burghers of towns and cities. The concept now needed to be radically rethought, alternative groups included in the political nation and the boundaries of citizenship in relation to women and religious minorities, among others, to be defined. Usefulness of an inhabitant to the community, achieved through education or business, became an increasingly important criterion. As the Revolution was imported to Switzerland in the aftermath of the French dechristianisation, the relationship between the churches and the state also needed to be rethought. Anticlerical tendencies strengthened and the institutions were separated, many leading clergymen appearing as spokesmen of the old order.

In the Italian Cisalpine Republic (1797–1802), organised by Napoleon Bonaparte, 'democracy' was one of the imported revolutionary concepts that became an object of intense debate, as illustrated by Mauro Lenzi below. The Italians debated the concept at a time when its popularity in France and elsewhere was already declining in the aftermath of the radical Jacobin phase of the Revolution. In the Batavian Republic, too, references to 'democracy', understood as direct democracy, were mostly avoided and were replaced either with an emphasis on representative government or with the vernacular term for popular government (Volksregeering).

Even if the Italian debate may appear as a reflection of belated and forced reception of revolutionary concepts created elsewhere, it led to some new applications in new contexts. The debate had already been preceded by quite an extensive international controversy on representative democracy on which the Italians could draw. Maximilien Robespierre's redefinition of representative democracy in 1794 may have been the most relevant model for

them, but there was a longer-term transnational process of redefining democracy in the background, too.

Given the lack of earlier rethinking of democracy in its pejorative classical sense of direct democracy, the update of the Italian language of politics became extensive and quite confrontational in the late 1790s. Lenci shows how democracy was redefined in various genres of political literature, in different local contexts, in rapidly changing constitutional and political circumstances and for the purposes of conflicting political arguments. There were limitations to the freedom of expression set by the French military administration, and no unified 'national' debate could yet emerge in those circumstances. Contributions to the debate on the meaning of democracy were many around Italy, in any case, and re-evaluations of the concept were taking place. Even the aristocratic tradition of classical republicanism became reinterpreted in the Italian context – quite anachronistically – in democratic terms.

Citizenship and democracy – those were contested concepts not only in Switzerland and Italy but also after the French occupation of the Dutch Republic in 1795. The concept of citizen had been evolving since the 1760s in several western European languages so that Dutch transformations as such were nothing unique. The amalgamation of the concepts of citizen and the privileged bourgeois in political discourse was general in Germanic languages: the same was initially true of the German concept of Bürger and the Scandinavian variations of (med)borgare, though at least in Sweden the concept had already become a near synonym of 'subject' or inhabitant of the fatherland.⁴ Yet the Dutch case deserves particular attention due to the Patriot movement of the 1780s which had opened a period of redefinition of the language of politics before the outbreak of the French Revolution – even if the Dutch rising had been smashed by a Prussian intervention in 1787.⁵ Historians have put forward quite divergent interpretations on how revolutionary in social terms the Patriot movement was, that is, whether the Patriots only campaigned to extend representation to their own rather elitist social group or whether their concept of citizen reached beyond financially independent men. Fermentation preceding the French Revolution influenced in the background of the debates of the Batavian Republic, which makes the update of the language of politics there slightly different from the Swiss and Italian experiences.

The transnational debate on citizenship had moved on between 1787 and 1795, and once the Dutch Republic fell, the Dutch language of citizenship needed to be rapidly updated in lines of the French Revolution – in a form where utter radicalism was over but the concept of citizenship became nevertheless redefined by the revolutionaries. The Batavians tried to combine traditional (federalist) and transformed (unitarist) Patriot concepts of citizenship

with the French tradition, which was not easy given the many varieties of the French Revolution since its beginning.

Some Dutch historians have emphasized the popularity of the particularly Dutch revolution of the 1790s and the domestic basis of the constitutional process; others have rejected the Batavian Republic as an unoriginal puppet regime. Evidently the Batavians did not invent the major aspects of Batavian citizenship without transnational intellectual interaction, which, in the circumstances of the late 1790s, was quite one-sidedly focused on France.⁶ There were significant fluctuation in the content of the Batavian debate at its various stages as well, depending on the proportion of federalist and unitarist members in the National Assembly / Representative Body / and more particularly in its Constitutional Committee.

Mart Rutjes demonstrates how the definition of the limits, rights and duties of citizenship had its particular challenges in the Dutch case. An increasing emphasis on education was a general enlightenment development, and so was the revolutionary discourse on the usefulness of citizens. Rutjes's discussion of the integration of the country population to citizenship is interesting when contrasted with another country with long traditions of estate representation such as Sweden, where the Peasant estate had been involved in the Diet throughout the early modern period. It was only in the late eighteenth-century that the Swedish and Finnish common people began to view themselves as 'citizens', however, encouraged by a monarch who wanted to overcome the nobility by allying with the commoner estates.⁷ Against this background of integrating the rural population politically in some northwest European countries, the Dutch tendency to exclude country people appears to be a consequence of the essentially commercial nature of the old order of the Republic. Once the rural population was integrated in the electorate, this must have had consequences for election results, possibly strengthening federalist tendencies that, in turn, appeared counter-revolutionary in the eyes of the radicals.

The Batavians created the first national representative body of its kind in the Netherlands. An important transformation in the role of representative institutions was connected with the growing publicity of their proceedings, marking a gradual transition from early modern estate assemblies to parliamentary government of a more modern kind. Parliamentary publicity had been extensively debated in countries such as Britain and in Sweden ever since the 1760s. In the British Parliament, references to the particular value of such publicity increased in the 1790s not only among opposition but also government ranks. The French model of publishing the debates of the revolutionary assemblies may of course

have been more important for the development of parliamentary publicity around the Dutch National Assembly.⁸ Even if this parliamentary experiment did not prove a lasting one, it constituted one step in the process of the emergence of representative government based on publicity in a country where the former States General had been notorious for their secrecy.

A further noteworthy aspect of political citizenship in the Batavian Republic was interaction between the National Assembly, extra-parliamentary publicity and the electors, which did not seem to function particularly well, as the radicals took over much of the press and as public debate became increasingly regulated after the coups of 1798. There may have been an ideal that all members of the Dutch people would audit their representatives, but that was hardly realised in practice. A further coup in 1801 and the Constitution of 1805 limited possibilities for democratic representation and citizenship once again. There were constant contradictions between traditional republican and revolutionary notions of citizenship in the Netherlands, but serious attempts to unite these were made and visions for an extended political nation thus opened. Nineteenth-century Dutch political culture would, however, disregard much of the Batavian experiment in favour of continuity with old regime Republic.

¹ Pasi Ihalainen, *Agents of the People: Democracy and Popular Sovereignty in British and Swedish Parliamentary and Public Debates, 1734–1800* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010); Pasi Ihalainen, Michael Bregnsbo, Karin Sennefelt and Patrik Winton, eds., *Scandinavia in the Age of Revolution: Nordic Political Cultures, 1740-1820* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2011).

² Renée Waldinger, Philip Dawson, and Isser Woloch, eds., *The French Revolution and the Meaning of Citizenship*, (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1993); John Dunn, *Setting the People Free: The Story of Democracy* (London: Atlantic Books, 2005); Ihalainen, *Agents of the People*. See also Wyger Velema in this volume.

³ See Olivier Meuwly, ed., *Frédéric-César de La Harpe 1754 – 1838* (Lausanne: Société Académique Vaudoise, 2011).

⁴ Pasi Ihalainen & Anders Sundin, “Continuity and Change in the Language of Politics at the Swedish Diet, 1769–1810”, in *Scandinavia in the Age of Revolution: Nordic Political Cultures, 1740-1820*, eds. Pasi Ihalainen, Michael Bregnsbo, Karin Sennefelt & Patrik Winton. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited 2011, pp. 169–192. (here pp. 174, 181).

⁵ Wyger Velema, *Republicans: Essays on Eighteenth-Century Dutch Political Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

⁶ Jourdan, Annie, *La Révolution batave entre la France et l’Amérique (1795-1806)* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2008).

⁷ Ihalainen & Sundin 2011, p. 179.

⁸ Pasi Ihalainen, “Parlamentsdebatten und der Aufstieg ausserparlamentarischer Medien im späten 18. Jahrhundert. Schweden, Grossbritannien und die Niederlande“, in Jörg Feuchter and Johannes Helmrath, *Parlamentarische Kulturen vom Mittelalter bis in die Moderne. Reden – Räume – Bilder*. Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, pp. 97–113.