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## EDITORIAL

# THE RISE OF MODERNITY IN DUTCH POLITICAL THOUGHT

This volume of *Redescriptions* contains three important contributions by Dutch specialists in the history of political thought and conceptual history. Though providing long-term analyses, all three papers focus specifically on the early modern period and the Age of Revolutions and discuss the related political concepts of freedom of the press, citizenship and national representation in the Dutch Republic respectively. The papers constitute a thematic entity which we believe will appeal to readers in a number of countries and a broad range of disciplines.

Why should Dutch history interest scholars outside the Netherlands? And why should an originally Finnish publication suddenly focus on the history of Dutch thought? A brief moment of contemplation helps us to realise that Dutch history of political thought deserves more attention within the international scholarly community than it has received thus far. At least three separate factors point in that direction.

Firstly, the early modern Netherlands was truly pioneer country in many respects. Though the Dutch were most successful in practical arts such as navigation, trade, building a market economy and

financing and fighting wars, their decentralised republican constitution at a time when monarchical rule prevailed, unusually high degree of religious diversity when persecution was the rule elsewhere, and considerable material and cultural wealth provided fruitful circumstances for pragmatic and sometimes innovative political thought. If practical thinkers and pamphleteers are taken into account and the language of the country of one of the most thriving publishing trades of the time read — as it should be, — we encounter a high number of minor Dutch theorists whose writings can be revealing with regard to the modernisation of European political thought in general. While Dutch printed literature has been studied by a number of Dutch scholars, it still constitutes a neglected gold mine for non-Dutch researchers focusing on the comparative study of political cultures. To give just one example of potential comparisons, there existed a group of highly literate and increasingly commercial societies in eighteenth-century Europe with representative bodies and a commitment to defend the cause of liberty. Though diverse in many respects, eighteenth-century Britain, the Netherlands and Sweden may be much more easily comparable with each other than has tended to be realised. And it is only through comparative studies that the unique and shared characteristics of political cultures can be specified in an analytical manner.

Secondly, indicators of research activity show that Dutch historians are among the most active members of the international scholarly community. Manuscripts on Dutch history of political thought often pass reviews by their peers, sometimes resulting in the concession by the referee that the author's level of expertise leaves little room for criticism. Dutch scholars are approaching the past in innovative ways, applying methodological strategies borrowed from different cultural contexts yet adapting these to specific Dutch contexts, drawing significant conclusions and presenting the findings in idiomatic English.

Thirdly, the Netherlands has become a fashionable country among many Europeans. Politicians, reporters, researchers and ordinary citizens seem to have become increasingly aware of the fact that the Netherlands is, in many ways, a 'Scandinavian' country outside of Scandinavia. When research, education, welfare state, public health or EU-policy, for instance, are concerned, many Scandinavians tend

to view Dutch solutions in a positive light. For the Anglophone world, too, the Netherlands has always been slightly more accessible than most other Continental societies. Anglo-Dutch links concern the history of ideas in particular, as England and Holland share so many parallel and often connected intellectual development.

In this volume of the *Redescriptions*, we have the chance to explore Dutch history through three scholarly articles. Firstly, Joris van Eijnatten takes us on a fascinating journey to the practice and theory of censorship and freedom of the press in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Netherlands — a haven of free publishing and intellectual activity compared to most European states at that time. His article leads to a classification of arguments in favour of freedom of the press which provides tools for further analyses on the topic in different national contexts.

Secondly, Karin Tilmans provides us with a helpful overview of the results of the recently completed project on the Dutch concept of the citizen. Whereas the findings of the project have mainly been published in Dutch thus far, we are now presented an English account of the development of a key concept in a country where the role of citizens — however defined — has been central in government for longer than in most other European political cultures.

Thirdly, Thomas Poell discusses a question of major scholarly interest — the transition from medieval structures of representation to modern liberal representative democracy. He demonstrates a clear opposition between old traditions of representation on the one hand and the liberal democratic state model on the other and reaches the important conclusion that revolutionary change was necessary before a major reform in representative structures became possible.

After reading these contributions, we are not only more familiar with the history of a middle-sized European state but also with the process of the rise of a modern liberal democratic state in general. The Netherlands was unique but experienced many intellectual changes as one of the first European countries and thus makes an excellent object of comparison in the study of the history of political thought and conceptual history.

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