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0521843529 - The Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century: The Golden Age

Maarten Prak

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Introduction: The enigma of the Republic

In 1908, Dr Johan Prak, a general practitioner in the provincial town of Ter Apel, acquired P. L. Muller's recently reissued book *Onze Gouden Eeuw* (Our Golden Age). The copy bears his name and the date, written in his unmistakably nineteenth-century hand. The book, the first edition of which had appeared in 1897, bore the subtitle *De Republiek der Vereenigde Nederlanden in haar bloeitijd* (The Republic of the United Netherlands in its heyday). Muller's book was not intended for scholars, and perhaps this contributed in some measure to its success. The 'inexpensive reprint' of 1908 – comprising two sizeable volumes, bound and gilt-edged – was still a superb piece of work, containing 967 pages chock-full of information and hundreds of illustrations in colour and black-and-white. My great-grandfather, the doctor from Ter Apel, might even have read it. His son – my great-uncle Wim Prak, who took a keen interest in history, especially naval history – certainly studied the book, as evidenced by the occasional note in his handwriting, marking passages which particularly attracted his attention or with which he disagreed, in which case he wrote 'incorrect' in the margin.

In his history of the Golden Age, Muller, archivist of Rotterdam and *professor extraordinarius* at Leiden University, repeatedly voiced his surprise: first at the fact that a country 'small in size and limited in population was capable of acquiring a measure of power equal to that of the large, traditionally established monarchies',¹ then at the 'unparalleled prosperity' achieved by that 'uncommonly talented generation',² and finally at the 'defectiveness of its national institutions',³ which was made up for only by the quality of its governors. Later historiographers also expressed their astonishment. In his 1941 book *Nederland's beschaving in de zeventiende eeuw* (*Dutch Civilisation in the 17th Century*), Johan Huizinga, the most famous historian the Netherlands has ever produced,

¹ P. L. Muller, *Onze Gouden Eeuw: de Republiek der Vereenigde Nederlanden in haar bloeitijd*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Sijthoff, 1908), vol. I, p. 32.

² *Ibid.*, p. 63. ³ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

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asked how it was possible ‘that so small and relatively remote a country as the young Republic should nevertheless have been so advanced politically, economically and culturally’.⁴ Huizinga found the meteoric speed at which the Republic had shot into the lead extremely surprising, all the more so because it happened at a time when the Republic was actually out of step with other countries. ‘Our astonishment would be somewhat tempered’, continues Huizinga, ‘were we to find that, in the seventeenth century, Dutch culture was merely the most perfect and clearest expression of European culture in general. But such was not the case.’ The Netherlands, in his view, ‘proved the exception and not the rule’.⁵

Such questions have continued to gnaw at historians, who in recent years have put forward various thought-provoking answers. In their voluminous book on the economy of the Dutch Republic, *The First Modern Economy*,⁶ the Dutch professor Ad van der Woude and his American colleague of Dutch descent, Jan de Vries, argued that the Netherlands already had a ‘modern’ economy a century and a half before the Industrial Revolution. This was apparent, in their opinion, from the presence in the Republic of a number of phenomena: well-developed markets for the three factors of production (land, labour and capital); high agricultural productivity, which not only enabled the development of a complicated social structure based on occupation but also facilitated social mobility; the authorities’ respect for property rights and their attempts to promote prosperity; and the level of technological development and social organisation which – aided in part by the consumers’ market-oriented behaviour – made economic growth possible. In other countries, such trends were either less marked or non-existent. This prompted the English historian J. L. Price to revive the old notion that the Dutch social structure must therefore have been modern as well. Instead of a society of orders, in which birth determined the individual’s position, the Republic displayed the characteristics of a class society, in which economic factors were the main determinants. The Dutch Republic was, in Price’s view, a bourgeois society, because social life revolved around the cities and their urban elites, whereas in other countries it was the aristocracy who set the tone.

Culturally, too, the Republic is said to have been in the vanguard. Marijke Spies, an authority on Dutch literature, and the cultural historian

⁴ J. H. Huizinga, *Dutch Civilisation in the 17th Century and Other Essays* (London: Collins, 1968), p. 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁶ Jan de Vries and Ad van der Woude, *The First Modern Economy: Success, Failure, and Perseverance of the Dutch Economy, 1500–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

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Willem Frijhoff have conducted extensive research into the characteristics of seventeenth-century Dutch culture, labelling it ‘a culture of all-pervasive and unremitting debate in which all segments of society took part’.⁷ The Republic distinguished itself from other societies in the compulsive exchange of opinion, in the willingness, often seen as an obligation, to take note of the opinions of others. In this sense the Republic’s culture could, in Spies and Frijhoff’s view, be called ‘modern’.⁸ Jonathan Israel, the renowned English authority on Dutch history, demonstrated in an exhaustive study of the Enlightenment – which paved the way for our present-day world view – that its roots should be sought not in France or in England but in the Dutch debates of the seventeenth century.

Seventeenth-century Dutch politics is the only thing that still refuses to fit into this pattern. Since the nineteenth century, the Republic’s form of government has been denounced in every possible way. Robert Fruin, the first to hold the chair in Dutch national history at Leiden University, considered the period of the Republic a waste of time from a political point of view. While other countries were improving their political structure by centralising government and systematising legislation, the Netherlands was lapsing into medieval chaos. The Revolt against Spain suspended all initiatives for improvement, and the thread was not picked up again until the Kingdom of the Netherlands was established in 1813. The period of the Republic, in Fruin’s eyes, was nothing but a sorry spectacle of discord. As mentioned above, P. L. Muller called the government defective. And Huizinga, in 1941, spoke in no uncertain terms of ‘a constitutional monstrosity’.⁹ In recent years various people have pointed out that the apparently unstable structure of the Dutch state – with a weak political centre but strong local and provincial institutions – was in fact the Republic’s strength, as this created a broad base for political decision-making. No one, however, has yet been willing to characterise the Republic as a forerunner of the modern – meaning democratic and bureaucratic – unified state.

This presents a serious obstacle to the notion that the Republic derived its uniqueness from its ‘modernity’. It was, after all, to political discord that the Republic owed its culture of debate, its bourgeois social structure and perhaps even a part of its economic success. Overly emphasising ‘modernity’ obscures the view of the medieval traditions that were often

⁷ Willem Frijhoff and Marijke Spies, *1650: Bevochten eendracht* (The Hague: Sdu Uitgevers, 1999), p. 218.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

⁹ J. H. Huizinga, *Verzamelde werken*, 9 vols. (Haarlem: Tjeenk Willink & Zoon, 1948–53), vol. II (1948), p. 432.

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eagerly embraced by those living in the seventeenth century. Moreover, in the mid-nineteenth century, when lambasting the Republic's political institutions became fashionable, the Netherlands was in many respects anything but a modern country. This book will therefore paint a very different picture of the Dutch Republic, one in which the emphasis lies less on its relationship to the future (the Republic as precursor) and more on the unique position of the Republic in the seventeenth century itself.

The following pages will clarify to what extent the Golden Age was the product of its own past. In the sixteenth century, before the Republic had emerged as an independent state, the Northern Netherlands was hopelessly divided. Even at that early stage, however, developments already afoot – especially in the coastal areas – were laying the foundations for unprecedented economic prosperity. The Revolt against Spain gave birth to a new state which had to resolve the discord of the preceding period as well as satisfy the need, by now generally felt, for cooperation. The desire to maintain local and regional 'freedoms' had been a major cause of the Revolt against Spanish authority, and the establishment of the Republic had been a triumph for this so-called particularism. The Republic was a league of cities and provinces, each of which derived its identity from its political independence, but the loosely united provinces had to hold their own against one of the most powerful rulers of the time, the king of Spain. Furthermore, the blossoming of its economy caused the young Republic's international interests to increase, making cooperation, especially military cooperation, inevitable. Throughout the seventeenth century, the Republic hovered between unity and discord in a never-ending struggle to maintain its balance.

The discord that frequently prevailed in the Republic was often seen as a shortcoming. Measured against the standards of the modern state, with its centralised decision-making and bureaucratic apparatus, the Republic was indeed a political freak. In the seventeenth century, however, the modern state as such had huge problems to contend with in countries like France and England. Governmental decisions were counteracted in the provinces; the bureaucratic fabric was still very thin in places. The Republic, lacking both an adequate central government and a well-oiled bureaucracy, could, however, boast reasonably efficient local authorities. The proximity of these local authorities to those they ruled meant that people usually had faith in the government, even if they had no right to elect its officials. Such faith was often lacking in other countries. By the same token, local authorities in the Republic lent a willing ear to the opinions of entrepreneurs and merchants, from whose milieu they often stemmed. Thus from the very beginning there was a healthy climate for investment, which was in turn conducive to expenditure and innovation.

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The dominant role played by local and urban communities in the social life of the Dutch Republic contributed greatly to the cultural climate that was so characteristic of the Golden Age. Certainly the Calvinist Reformed Church enjoyed a privileged position, but other religious denominations were also allowed to practise their faith. The Republic was not a tolerant country on principle, but in many cities there seemed to be no alternative to the sufferance of all religious persuasions. Rivalries between cities, as well as the variety of cultures brought to the Republic by the steady stream of immigrants, go a long way towards explaining why this very period witnessed such advancements in science and philosophy. The cities were also the most fertile breeding grounds for the innovations which occurred in painting around 1600 in the Republic. This upsurge in artistic production was the answer to the increased demand for paintings by the quickly swelling ranks of middle-class burghers whose financial circumstances were also improving with lightning speed.

By the mid-seventeenth century, therefore, the Republic seemed to have found the golden formula for success. It had its ups and downs, of course, but for a long time its problems were pushed to the background by the revolutions and civil wars raging in other countries. The Republic's small size created problems, the most worrisome being that the sky-high cost of military defence had to be borne by relatively few people. Another recurrent problem was maintaining the political order of the Republic, which depended on the willingness of the ruling elite to compromise – something they were not always prepared to do. Holland, the province in which economic growth was largely concentrated, was called upon to solve many thorny issues, and this created a great deal of friction between Holland and the other provinces. Over the years the problems became more serious, if only because other countries began to put their own affairs in order, enabling them more successfully to confront what was often seen as the impertinence of the Dutch. Opposition from abroad, military threats and lack of cooperation at home, combined with a general decline in the European economy in the second half of the seventeenth century, led at first to increasing tension in the Republic and finally to stagnation and exhaustion. By 1715 there was no longer any doubt that the Golden Age had come to an end.

The end of the Golden Age meant that the Dutch Republic had again become an 'ordinary' country. In future it would be extraordinary only by virtue of having such a glorious past. For much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Dutch intellectuals continued to be obsessed with the Golden Age and the question of what should be done to revive it. That long period – in which self-glorification, owing to its undeniable successes, and self-loathing, because of its subsequent decline, fought to

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gain the upper hand – has certainly shown that the Republic cannot be seen unreservedly as the pioneer of modernity. If that had been the case, the Netherlands would have experienced fewer problems between 1700 and 1900. In those two centuries the Netherlands had to rediscover modernity at least twice: around 1800 in politics, with the introduction of the unified state, and around 1900 in economic and social life, with the rise of industry and the industrial proletariat. In the seventeenth century the Republic had been a unique combination of old and new: unique, not because similar combinations did not occur elsewhere, but because of the period of history in which it manifested itself. In the early-modern period, between the Middle Ages and the world of industry and democracy, a voluntary alliance of urban societies was able to combine economic prosperity with international successes – both diplomatic and military – and cultural florescence. The formula that sparked this spectacular chemical reaction is the subject of this book.

The Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century is therefore an overview with a particular slant. It encapsulates for everyone interested in Dutch history the results of historical research carried out in recent years. This survey, written from the perspective outlined above, makes no attempt to be complete – that would be impossible even in twice as many pages – but emphasises instead the way society functioned. Comparison with other countries will show time and again that seventeenth-century Dutch society was indeed in a league of its own.

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1 A turbulent beginning

On Friday, 25 October 1555, at around three o'clock in the afternoon, an important gathering was convened at Brussels. Representatives of the seventeen provinces of the Netherlands had been summoned to the palace to assemble in the great hall. Also present were the knights of the order of the Golden Fleece, the members of the three Councils of State of the Netherlands, and various higher nobles. Benches had been made ready to seat them all. Interested members of the public were permitted to watch from behind a railing. When the guests of honour had taken their places, the door to the hall opened and Emperor Charles V hobbled in, leaning on the arm of William, the young prince of Orange. They were followed by Charles's son, Philip II, and the emperor's sister, Mary of Hungary, regent of the Netherlands. Even though Charles was only fifty-five years old, he could barely walk without support. Born in Ghent in 1500, he had been forced at the age of fifteen to assume the reins of government, not only of the Netherlands but also of the Spanish and Austrian possessions of the House of Habsburg. King of Spain since 1516 and Holy Roman Emperor since 1519, Charles V had been compelled to criss-cross Europe dozens of times, waging war repeatedly at the head of his troops. Charles had not succeeded in suppressing the Reformation, which had broken out at the beginning of his reign, nor in restoring the authority of the Catholic Church. Deeply disillusioned and plagued by gout and other ailments, Charles, having decided that he could rule no longer, now intended to abdicate in favour of his son Philip. This news was communicated by a councillor, who explained the emperor's decision to the assembled dignitaries. When the councillor had finished, Charles took the floor, clinging to the prince of Orange. He spoke of his love for his native country and the many sacrifices he had made during his forty-year reign. He asked his subjects to pardon his mistakes and entreated them to be as faithful to Philip as they had been to him. According to eye-witness reports, there was not a dry eye in the hall.

It was in fact a minor miracle that a meeting of this kind could take place at all. When Charles assumed control of the Spanish Netherlands in

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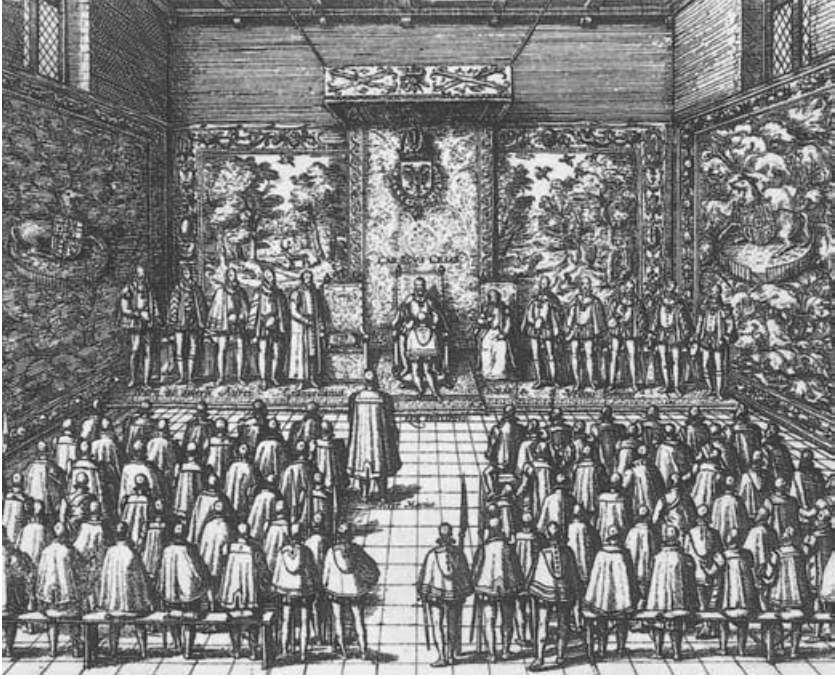


Figure 1 On 25 October 1555, Charles V abdicated, handing over the Netherlands to his son Philip II, here depicted kneeling before him (Frans Hogenberg; Printroom, Rijksmuseum fm 412).

1515, political turmoil and instability, especially in the North, banished all thoughts of unity. Formal unification did not come about until 26 June 1548, when the Diet of the Holy Roman Empire, assembled in the German city of Augsburg, decided at the emperor's behest to bring together the patchwork of Netherlandish provinces under one separate *Kreits*, a self-governing entity of states within the empire. The formation of the Netherlands was confirmed the following year, when all seventeen provinces endorsed Charles V's Pragmatic Sanction, which stipulated that Charles's successors were to treat the Netherlands – now separate from both France and the Holy Roman Empire – as a single entity and not divide it up among a number of successors, thus guaranteeing the unity of the seventeen provinces of the Netherlands. When Charles abdicated, that union was just seven years old.

The resolutions of 1548 and 1549 and the transfer of sovereignty in 1555 represented the tail end of a process that had started more than a century and a half earlier, in 1384, when the county of Flanders fell into

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the hands of Philip the Bold, duke of Burgundy. Philip's wife was the daughter of his recently deceased predecessor, the duke of Flanders. In 1396 Philip acquired the duchy of Limburg. In 1406 the House of Burgundy also gained possession of the duchy of Brabant upon the extinction of the ducal line. Over the course of the fifteenth century, various other territories in the South were acquired: Namur in 1429, Hainault in 1433, Picardy in 1435 and Luxemburg in 1441, to name only the most important. To the north of the Rivers Maas and Rhine, which cut the Low Countries in two, the Burgundians managed in 1433 to annex the rapidly rising province of Holland, thanks to the crisis of succession that ensued when Countess Jacoba of Bavaria died without a legal heir. Zeeland, closely allied to Holland since the thirteenth century, fell into the Burgundians' lap at the same time. Other territories in the North managed to elude their grasp for the time being.

The Low Countries were a valuable asset. Since the twelfth century, Flanders and later Brabant had been developing into the most important commercial centres in north-west Europe. In Bruges, Italian merchants sold luxury goods such as spices and silk, which they acquired from their agents in the Middle East. At first such trade was conducted overland, and merchants met at the annual fairs held in the Champagne region of France. From around 1300, however, there was also a direct maritime route between Bruges and the most important centres of trade in Italy: Venice and Genoa. These trade routes encouraged the emergence of industrial centres which developed spectacularly in such cities as Bruges and Ghent. In the Flemish countryside as well, spinning and weaving were engaged in with an eye to export. The Flemish textile centres also functioned as processing points for English cloth, imported as semi-finished goods to Flanders, there to be dressed and dyed and finally sold. It was this finishing stage in the manufacturing process that yielded the greatest profits.

The Burgundians were well aware of what the Low Countries had to offer. First and most importantly, the flourishing urban economies were a rich source of revenue. The money thus acquired enabled the Burgundian dukes to pursue their great ambition of ruling a territory stretching unbroken from Burgundy to the North Sea. However, the Low Countries would yield up their riches only if they were treated properly, and this required a great deal of tact. The Burgundians exercised provincial sovereignty; they held no claim whatever to the Low Countries as a whole. Since each province had its own political structure and traditions, the only thing binding them was the duke himself. Each time a new duke was sworn in – which took place in each province separately – he reconfirmed the 'privilege' whereby he granted each

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province certain rights and immunities. Moreover, these provincial governments were under a great deal of pressure from the prosperous cities, especially those in Flanders and Brabant, which had long been used to getting their own way. Anyone hoping to govern the Low Countries successfully, therefore, had to win the confidence of the urban patriciate and persuade them to open their purse strings. The duke's word was not enough, however, to wheedle money out of the cities and provinces: he had to negotiate, and the great number of provinces made such negotiations tedious. This prompted Philip the Good to summon representatives from all the provinces under his rule to discuss common issues such as money. These assemblies evolved into the States General, which met on a fairly regular basis from 1464 onwards. Other government bodies started to take shape at the same time. Many provinces came to have governors, or stadholders, who exercised authority on behalf of the sovereign. The Burgundians underlined this institutional strengthening of their authority by engaging in a forceful, if symbolic, expansion of power. The magnificence of their court, with all the trappings of princely power, gave a strong boost to the arts in the Low Countries.

Not everyone appreciated the splendour of the Burgundian court and the inevitable political intrigues. The power of the opposition became painfully obvious when Charles the Bold died in 1477. The duke had been in the process of consolidating his conquest of Lorraine, which in 1473 had finally linked the House of Burgundy's hereditary lands to its possessions in the north. The people of Lorraine had risen in revolt, and during the siege of their capital city, Nancy, Charles was fatally wounded. His frozen body lay on the battlefield for a week, while the news spread like wildfire. Charles the Bold was survived only by an unmarried daughter, Mary of Burgundy. The French king, Louis XI, promptly sent troops to occupy Burgundy. At the same time, the weakened regime in the Low Countries was inundated with grievances, nearly all of which called for a halt to the policy of centralisation, urging instead the restoration of provincial and local privileges. Mary was forced to yield to many of these demands by signing the *Grand Privilège* of 1477. In the same year, however, she married Maximilian of Austria, of the illustrious Habsburg dynasty. Maximilian was determined to restore authority and, where possible, to extend it. He began to cast his eye upon the North.

Conquering the North, however, was easier said than done. The territories to the north of the great rivers differed in many respects from those to the south. Friesland, never colonised in Roman times, had always been a law unto itself. A central authority had never established itself there, and feudalism was largely unknown. Friesland was in fact a collection of peasant republics. In small districts the law was laid down by *hoofdelingen*,