ECONOMIC REFORM AND NEUTRALITY IN DUTCH POLITICAL PAMPHLETS, 1741–1779

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Introduction

How may pamphlets be used to better understand later eighteenth-century Dutch politics? The aim of this article is to provide a window onto a series of pamphlet debates to show how they may be used as sources for ‘rolling back’, from 1779 to 1741, a series of interconnected debates that accompanied the unfolding of a political process that led to the outbreak of the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War. On the one hand, pamphlets are used to develop a closer understanding of these debates. On the other, the role of pamphlets themselves, not simply as access points, but fulfilling a function in shaping these debates will become apparent.

When Britain declared war on the Dutch Republic in 1780, and previously when it was speculated that another Anglo-Dutch conflict might break out in 1778 and 1779, the situation of the Dutch Republic was widely understood across Europe to signify the final collapse of a national system of trade-based politics that was out of place in the modern world. The famous depictions by writers such as Montesquieu of trade republics as belonging to an interstate configuration that was now relegated to the past, and the explanations by David Hume of the reasons why modern politics had crushed these entities, simultaneously reflected a broad awareness of the problems of the eighteenth-century interstate system as resulting from the curious history of commerce and modern government in Europe since the fall of the Roman Empire.1 In many ways the ideas that dominated eighteenth-century international discussions about the fate of the Dutch Republic

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echoed the famous judgement pronounced in 1673 by the English ambassador William Temple. In 1672 the Republic was attacked from all sides by its neighbours. Temple’s verdict was that since trade in recent years had turned from a business engaged in by territory-deprived republican city states into an object of direct political competition between Europe’s dominant nations, the shelf life of the Dutch Republic had come to an end. Yet, whereas Temple predicted or even observed a complete downfall and near loss of independence, what followed, in the aftermath of the peace settlement of 1674, was nothing sudden, but a protracted process of decline that served as a seedbed for popular debate in which Dutch thinkers discussed the past, present and future of their state’s identity and its viability.

The Dutch Republic did not cease to exist in 1673 as a result of the ‘Revolution’ that Temple saw in front of him when the last of the world’s trade republics was brutally deprived of its dominant role in European politics, but only in 1795, with the establishment of the French-supported Batavian Republic. Whether Temple was wrong in his judgement in 1673 or whether the prospect of the enduring existence of the Dutch Republic simply lay outside the rhetorical design of his Observations with its English audience and its domestic polemical preoccupations is not an issue here. The fact was that after 1673 space was left for the Dutch Republic to rise to the challenge of countering the threat of loss of independence by initiating adequate reforms and alliance arrangements. What happened between 1673 and 1780, between the end of the Third and the beginning of the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War, has been discussed from a number of historical sub-disciplinary angles (by, for instance, diplomatic, military and economic historians) but still it is difficult to see how the events and political debates of this period gave rise to the Patriottentijd (Patriot period). This period, normally seen as spanning from 1776 to 1787, classically, was compared by the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century nationalistic historian H.T. Colenbrander to a puppet theatre play. Behind the

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3 Temple, Observations upon the United Provinces, i–ii.
4 Ibid., ii.