A Public and Private Dutch West India Interest

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Introduction

In the historiography, the term West India interest stands for a group of British stakeholders in the plantation economy in the Caribbean. That group emerged in the eighteenth century, and its objective was to forcefully defend the West Indian interests of the members in the British parliament. In her 1921 article “The London West India Interest in the Eighteenth Century,” Lilian Penson distinguished three London-based interest groups that decided to work together: agents from the West Indian colonies, merchants who traded with the colonies, and plantation owners who lived in the city. She describes how various stakeholders formed an effective lobby group after a successful campaign for the introduction of the Molasses Act in 1733. This lobby group managed to keep foreign plantation products from the British market via the parliament.¹ The image of a powerful, homogenous interest group was recently adjusted by Andrew O'Shaugnessy.² He demonstrated that the lobby was initially a fairly informally organized economic interest group, able to apply political pressure during the American Revolution, but that it also suffered from internal dissen- sion. The interests of the group began to diverge more and more at the end of the eighteenth century. Nevertheless there was a lobby in Great Britain that managed to get the West Indian interest on the parliamentary agenda. Did the Dutch Republic have such an interest group, as well? Not according to J.P. van de Voort. In his dissertation on the West Indian plantation loans, he states that it was impossible for a Dutch West India interest to emerge, since the interests of such a pressure group were incompatible with the principles of an open staple market. A monopoly supply of plantation products from the colonies such as in Great Britain was unthinkable in the Republic, simply because the Dutch colonies could not meet the growing demand for sugar, coffee and other colonial products. Import from non-Dutch areas was necessary.³

* I would like to thank Dave Boone and Gerhard de Kok who did a part of the archival research for this article.


The key question in this chapter is whether or not the Republic had some sort of West India interest. Of course there have been individuals as well as organizations with West Indian interests, but around which subjects were they organized? Did these individuals and various groups collaborate and, if so, did that collaboration have similarities with that in Great Britain? A parallel seems hard to draw in advance; the significantly different state structure of the Republic will have affected the interests of various groups. The fragmented governance structure that was so characteristic to the Republic did not exist in Great Britain. This chapter begins with the West Indian interests of the central government and then discusses the conflicts of interest between the provinces of Holland and Zeeland. Afterwards, we will shed light on how interest groups emerged at a local level in the Republic and how they defended their interests. Finally, we will discuss the alleged differences between the Republic and Great Britain and the role the States General played in balancing the different Atlantic interests in the Republic.

Private Interest as State Interest

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the economic interests of Dutch merchants in the Atlantic were still modest. During the initial phase, the Republic had few to no planters overseas, nor sugar refiners at home. In 1609 a group of merchants submitted a petition to the States General for the first time, requesting protection of their trade interests in West Africa. The reason for this was that their ships were continuously being attacked by the Portuguese. Around 1600, however, it was not private interests but rather government interests of a military nature that rapidly sucked the Dutch into the Atlantic. The States General had been making efforts to relocate the battle against Spain from land to sea and from Europe to regions outside of Europe since the end of the sixteenth century. It was mainly the Spanish and Portuguese colonies in

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4 Not only the government but also private organizations with interests overseas had decentralized governance structures. The Dutch West India Company (wic), for instance, had a so-called chamber structure which reflected the economic and political hierarchy of several towns within the Dutch Republic. H. den Heijer, *Geschiedenis van de wic. Opkomst, bloei en ondergang* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2013), 27.