Review Article

Political Thought in the Dutch Republic in an Age of Decline


This important study brings together ten essays by Wyger Velema on the history of Dutch political thought, seven of which appear in English translation for the first time. Although Republicans contains materials originally published between 1992 and 2006, it is not a mere reprint of journal articles. Quite a few chapters have been substantially rewritten in order to reveal thematic interconnections and provide the book with a clear focus. Following the publication of his monograph Enlightenment and Conservatism in the Dutch Republic (1993), Velema has continued with his groundbreaking research on political discourse and concepts in the Dutch Republic in the eighteenth century. His methodology is a felicitous combination of the Cambridge School of Political Thought and German Begriffsgeschichte, as practiced by Reinhart Koselleck (pp. 25-28, 140-141). Dutch political thought is analyzed with reference to a) the changing meanings of words like ‘liberty’ and ‘constitution’ in the era of democratic revolutions, and b) the vociferous debates between, first, the Orangists (Prinsgezinden) and the States-Party (Staatgezinden), and then, in the 1780’s, between the Orangists and the Patriots (Patriotten). Velema’s canvas is a rich one indeed.

Republicans puts paid to the twin notions, still prevalent among Dutch historians (pp. 31, 54-55), that the inhabitants of the United Provinces were not given to philosophizing or, if they did engage in abstract thought, that it was irrelevant to political practice. According to Velema, these assumptions are highly suspect on two counts. As shown in the methodological writings of the Cambridge School, language does not just reflect
reality, but also forms a constituting element of it. Linguistic domination in any shape or form remains, of course, an important topic of discussion for postmodernists. Secondly, an enormous quantity of political pamphlets and treatises was published in the United Provinces throughout the two centuries of the state’s existence. In times of political crisis, the pace of publication increased markedly. As Velema notes, over 2,000 pamphlets were published in Dutch in the *Patriottentijd*, the revolutionary years between 1780 and 1787 (p. 143). The Patriots did not just turn against the Stadtholder and the regent elite of the Dutch Republic, but also demanded a new form of government based on the sovereignty of the people and the citizenry’s direct and active participation in government. To suggest, then, that political theory was an unknown quantity in the land of Grotius and Spinoza or that it did not matter in day-to-day politics seems ludicrous in the extreme.

In terms of political concepts and discourse, the Patriots had to travel a long and winding road before they could arrive at their revolutionary conclusions. Velema confirms that the debate between the Orangists and States-Party dominated Dutch political theory for over a century, until the 1770’s at least. Largely under the influence of the Dutch historian Pieter Geyl, English-speaking scholars have a tendency to conceptualize it as a debate between “monarchists” and “republicans.” Velema shows that this dichotomy is profoundly anachronistic and mistaken. Both the Orangists and the States-Party conceived of themselves as republicans first and last (hence the title of the book), but differed on the question whether, and to what extent, republican government should incorporate a monarchical element, making the United Provinces a “republica mixta” (pp. 1-2).

The debate between the Orangists and States-Party reached a crescendo at the end of the second Stadtholderless era (1703-1740). In his analysis, Velema pays particular attention to the *Treatise on Liberty in Civil Society* (1737). Its author, the Zeeland regent Lieven de Beaufort, espoused a classical republicanism, which included, however, the ‘negative liberty’ usually associated with rights and contract theories (pp. 57-58). According to De Beaufort, the inhabitants of the United Provinces enjoyed the rule of law and the protection of life, liberty and property. Yet ‘negative liberty’ was subsumed under the citizen’s right to participate in politics, the fulcrum of classical republicanism. Strictly speaking, no government post was heritable in the Dutch Republic (p. 45). “[T]he constant reversal of roles between regents and citizens, the alternation of ruling and being ruled” was axiomatic for De Beaufort. All members of the political community had to