

Civil Society and Dutch History

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Dutch historians do not consider civil society as a separate social world, but as part of a society where the state has had a benevolent role. Unlike Tocqueville they do not consider societies as a safeguard that prevented democratization from turning into dictatorship of the majority. Moreover, the liberal concept of civil society supposes a sharp distinction between state and society, but Dutch socialist and religious political parties acted as a link between the two. They became the nucleus of a world of 'pillarized' organizations which formed an intermediate level between state and citizen, but often had a clear connection to the state.

It is a paradox that Dutch historians have rarely participated in the debate about civil society. It could be argued that the Dutch have been a nation of joiners since the eighteenth century at least, and Dutch historians have written extensively about all kinds of 'verenigingen' (societies), but the concept of civil society does not figure prominently in their work.¹ Because much work on civil society has been rather presentist and perhaps also American or British in orientation, Dutch historians have not often found it useful to extensively use the concept in their work. The work by Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann is especially welcome because it addresses both these problems by offering a truly historical and transnational approach. His approach contains at least two elements that make it worthwhile to reconsider the Dutch position in the debate about civil society. Firstly, Hoffmann's conception of entangled and transnational history makes it possible to look for the different functions (more or less) the same form of associations could have in different societies. This approach avoids presenting Great Britain or the United States as the yardstick of developments everywhere, at least in principle. Secondly, Hoffmann's open approach is an invitation to rethink the historical connection between democracy and civil society, which is also useful in the Dutch case.

The Dutch case is interesting because the flourishing of associational life reminds us of the Anglo-American situation, an impression that is even stronger when one realizes that the Dutch have always had a rather liberal state, as early as the Republic in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and more in par-

¹ See for instance the comprehensive overview in Wijnand Mijnhardt and Joost Kloek (with Eveline Koolhaas-Grosfeld), *1800: Blueprints for a national community* (Assen / Basingstoke 2004).

ticular since the 1840s. However, the Dutch have never cherished the British and American idea that societies with a political goal should first and foremost *protect* citizens against the state. They thought that societies should rather *use* the state. In their conception of state and politics the Dutch found themselves somewhere between the German statist position and the Anglo-American societal position.² This is, of course, a rather crude summary of a complicated situation, but it will perhaps do for present purposes.

Seen from the Netherlands the American glorification of free societies seems a bit exaggerated. The Dutch are not used to considering civil society as a (completely) separate social world, but as part of a society where the state has also been playing an important and often benevolent role. That brings me to the connection between civil society and democracy that I will focus on. Hoffmann shows that social scientists already questioned the self-evidence of this connection around 1900, but he is less clear about his own thoughts about the issue. Perhaps it would help if Hoffmann had defined more clearly the central concepts civil society and democracy. Is civil society just equivalent to societies, and if not, what is it? And do all societies qualify as part of civil society or do their purposes and ideas matter? What about a (secret) society of terrorists aiming at overthrowing the social order by violent means?

Even more important is the concept of democracy, because this is central to the idea of societies as a means of the 'democratization' of society. For an adequate historical study of civil society it is essential to realize that our current notion of democracy is in fact shorthand for parliamentary democracy. This has been the outcome of a historical process of the coalescing of two different traditions: the rule of law, individual rights, parliamentary representation and liberalism, on the one hand, and mass participation in politics, majority vote, popular sovereignty, or elements of direct or populist democracy, on the other.³ At the end of the nineteenth century the two traditions began to merge, a process that was completed by the end of the Second World War when the defeat of fascism had dispelled most doubts about parliaments and democracy.⁴ So what do we mean when we say that societies contributed to a process of democratization, for instance during the nineteenth century? Perhaps the literature about civil society implicitly supposes that societies were a prefiguration of the merger of the two traditions by broadening political participation *and* educating the new participants in the mores of civilized intercourse and liberal parliamentarianism.

These rather broad issues also lead to or entail two more empirical questions concerning the relationship between democracy and civil society. Hoffmann summarizes the ideas of Tocqueville about the issue and situates his contribution to the debate in its historical context. I would like to confront his ideas with

2 Cf. Henk te Velde, 'The organization of liberty. Dutch liberalism as a case of the history of European constitutional liberalism', *European Journal of Political Theory* 7 (2008) 65-79.

3 See for instance Bernard Manin, *Principles of representative government* (Cambridge 1997).

4 Mark Mazower, *Dark continent. Europe's twentieth century* (London 1998).

the Dutch case in order to find an additional explanation of why civil society is a concept that Dutch historians have not often deemed very useful. Tocqueville was a French aristocrat, and he lived in a postrevolutionary period. He was looking for an answer to at least two different but connected sets of questions.

Firstly: according to Tocqueville and others, the French Revolution had destroyed the Ancient Regime with its intermediate bodies between state and individual, such as estates and the aristocracy in particular. Nothing seemed to be left except the state and the individual, because the old order had disappeared. So Tocqueville *cum suis* were looking for a substitute for the old intermediate bodies.⁵ Secondly: for Tocqueville democracy did not mean the rule of law, the vote or even popular sovereignty, but the equality of formal conditions in a modern society without legal privileges for classes. Formerly politics had been the privilege of the aristocracy. What would become of politics in a democratic society?⁶ In this situation Tocqueville saw in societies a protection against a despotic state in a democratic society (i.e. a society without intermediate bodies). Societies were supposed to soften the undesirable effects of the 'democratic' condition.

Historians specializing in Dutch societies do not regard the nineteenth-century situation in this light. They are rather looking for the contribution of societies to the development of democracy in the sense of politicization, participation of new groups, or broadening of public debate (for instance about the crucial issue of religion).⁷ Whereas the French of the period thought they were living in a democratic age and that politics was everywhere, Dutch liberals were convinced that the early nineteenth century was a period with not enough instead of too much politics (because of the all-too-quiet social and political life, the lack of power of parliament and the dominant role of the King in politics).⁸ Whereas to Tocqueville societies might seem crucial, all-important instruments for regulation of politics and society in a democratic age, to Dutch historians they are instruments of democratization in several senses of the word, but far from a crucial safeguard that prevented democratization from turning into dictatorship of the majority. Nor were Dutch historians interested in (liberal) societies and *Zivilgesellschaft* as an alternative to (semi-)authoritarian rule as German historians might be. This might offer part of the explanation for the lack of enthusiasm of Dutch historians for the idea of civil society.

There is still another reason why the debate about civil society does not seem to 'fit' the Dutch case. The concept of civil society is a liberal concept in the

5 See for instance Annelien de Dijn, *French Political Thought from Montesquieu to Tocqueville. Liberty in a Levelled Society?* (Cambridge 2008).

6 See for instance the recent biography by Hugh Brogan, *Alexis de Tocqueville. Prophet of democracy in the age of revolution* (London 2006).

7 E.g. Maartje Janse, *De afschaffers. Publieke opinie, organisatie en politiek in Nederland 1840-1880* (Amsterdam 2007) and an older body of literature about religious organizations.

8 Cf. Henk te Velde, 'Onderwijzers in parlementaire politiek. Thorbecke, Guizot en het Europese doctrinaire liberalisme', *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 113 (1998) 322-343.

sense that it supposes a sharp distinction between state and society. This was not only an Anglo-American idea, Dutch (nineteenth-century) liberals also advocated the 'art of separation'.⁹ However, there was a difference. In the Anglo-American situation, civil society was often seen as a kind of opposition to the state, whereas in the Netherlands it was often considered as merely a correction of the state, or even a stimulus. The state was hardly ever the enemy, even if liberals thought that it should leave most matters to society.

At the end of the nineteenth century the configuration of society changed. Modern political parties started to emerge that abhorred the separation of state and society. Socialist and religious parties consciously acted as a link between the two; they wanted to join them together and import the until-then peripheral social and religious convictions of large parts of the 'common people' into politics. They became the nucleus of a whole world of new organizations catering for the citizen from the cradle to the grave, which the Germans call the 'Milieus' and 'Milieuparteien' of Catholics and socialists, and the Dutch the 'verzuiling' or 'pillarization' of society by Orthodox Protestants, Catholics and socialists. The pillarization of society has sometimes been exaggerated and has become a bit of a cliché in popular histories of Dutch society, but it is useful here, because the model of pillarization has dominated Dutch historiography about societies from the end of the nineteenth century onwards. The pillarized societies do not easily fit into the model of a civil society that is separated from the state. They formed an intermediate level between state and citizen, it is true, but they often had a clear connection to the state by their ties with a political party. And they could be seen as a kind of protection of the citizen against the state, but at the same time as an organized attempt to use the state in order to promote the interests of one of the pillarized groups, sometimes even almost as part of the state, as in cases where pillarized societies ran schools or hospitals which, apart from their world view, distributed many services the state would otherwise have provided itself and for which the state paid by providing subsidies.

How should we conceive of these types of organizations? In a sense they were the most common manifestation of civil society in the Netherlands during at least the first half of the twentieth century. But they were not liberal in the 'partisan' sense of the word and often were closely connected to the state. In what sense would it be helpful to use the concept of civil society to describe their activities? Perhaps it could be useful, because there used to be a tendency to regard the pillarized societies as instruments of social control by a social elite. If they were studied as if they were nineteenth-century societies, this might present a new perspective on a classic subject.

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⁹ Michael Walzer, 'Liberalism and the art of separation', *Political Theory* (1984) 315-330; Henk te Velde, *Gemeenschapszin en plichtsbefef. Liberalisme en nationalisme in Nederland 1870-1918* (The Hague 1992).