

A Few Thoughts concerning Sociability in the Early Nineteenth Century in the Netherlands

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In the Netherlands the rise of civil society in the guise of the 19th century 'herensociëteiten' is strongly connected with the political strife between patriots and orangists in the late 18th century. Secondly a strong undercurrent of theocratic thought in Dutch Calvinism should be taken into account when assessing the divide between public and private, the more so because classical education was not apt to lead to a rift between the two.

Unlike other participants of the Civil Society workshop, I am a novice to the study of the subject. The Institute of Netherlands History in The Hague has started a new programme on societies, and I hope to contribute an inventory concerning political sociability from 1780 to 1870. This inventory will focus on patriotic and orangist societies, 'herensociëteiten' (gentlemen's clubs) and, hopefully, 'kiesverenigingen' as well. One of the underlying ideas is to provide an instrument to study the continuities and discontinuities in the sort of participants who were drawn to these institutions. Also it would be very interesting to acquire more knowledge about the actual amount of local and provincial policy-making that went on in the bosom of the various societies.

The first point I would like to raise is the strong connection in the Netherlands between the rise of general societies, that is, societies unconnected with arts and sciences, and the political upsurge of the last quarter of the eighteenth century. The only other early societies that spring to mind are the religious 'gezelschappen' that did not have an institutional framework. It will be most interesting to trace the affiliations between patriotic and orangist societies and the early nineteenth century 'herensociëteiten'. It is certain that beneath the upheavals and changes in the political life of the nation, sociable life took its own course, not only in the major cities, but also quite strongly in provincial towns and large villages. Even in the eighteenth century, the countryside had awakened to new possibilities of sociability. This certainly is the onset of the broader developments that Ronald Rommes describes for the later nineteenth century.

My further comments stem mainly from a former scholarly life in university history. I am time and again struck by the ease with which, in connection with the early nineteenth century, religion is associated with the concepts 'private' and the 'private' sphere of life, whereas the state is considered to be strictly neutral. In the same way societies and associations in that period, in my view,

tend to get too loosely described as public, and therefore as outside the sphere of religion. I would contend that during this period it is not so easy to construct a dividing line between public and private in religious matters, and to label civil society as strictly public.

In the first place there was a 'theocratic' element in Dutch Calvinism which did not recognize a neutral state as such. Indeed, it was to gain strength again in the nineteenth century in the thought of people like Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer.¹ It is not a coincidence, I believe, that Groen was also a classical scholar of repute. For, secondly, and that is my main point here, classical education, which still permeated the mind of both politicians and professionals, did not support this concept of separated spheres of private and public. We need not go to the roots of the problem here, if only because I am in no way qualified to start a discussion with Habermas and his followers. I confine myself to a few remarks.

In fact, the only thing I want to urge here is, that the strong influence of classical education on the elites that manned the societies and associations of the early nineteenth century be taken into account. This goes especially for the Netherlands, with its long tradition of study of the humanities, that culminated in the eighteenth century in new heights of Greek scholarship. Whereas neoclassicism as a way of imitating antiquity was slow to be adopted in architecture in our country, it never left the political stage between classical republicanism and fully blown liberalism.

In the Netherlands universities remained extremely important for the education of the elites, even when in the eighteenth century they had gone into a strong decline in other countries. Only in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did Prussia, Bavaria, England and Scotland catch up again with several reforms, often modelled on the Netherlands.² France was a different story again which we need not discuss here. The main thing is that in the Netherlands everybody who was anybody in the nineteenth century still was strongly likely to have been steeped in the knowledge of classical antiquity.

Now as to the public and the private spheres in the life of societies, the primary university courses to be taken into account are those on the Greek and Roman antiquities, taught both in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Whereas the course in general history focused on events and their short term causes, the 'antiquitates' took a broad and systematic view of society.³ Antiq-

1 Key texts for the seventeenth century: J. Roelevink, 'De verhouding tussen kerk en overheid in de zeventiende eeuw' in: C. Augustijn a.o. (ed.), *Reformatica. Teksten uit de geschiedenis van het Nederlandse protestantisme* (Zoetermeer, 1996) 131-133. See also J. van Eijnatten and F.A. van Lieburg, *Nederlandse Religiegeschiedenis* (Hilversum, 2005) 172 ff. Important protagonists of 'theocracy' in the nineteenth century were G. Groen van Prinsterer and Ph. Hoedemaker. See a.o. W. Balke, *Gunning en Hoedemaker samen op weg* ('s Gravenhage 1985) 49ff, 62 ff and G. Abma a.o. (ed.) *Hoedemaker herdacht* (Baarn 1989) 177ff.

2 J. Roelevink, 'Alte Liebe, neue Initiativen. Deutsche und niederländische Universitäten im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert' in: *Jahrbuch Zentrum für Niederlande-Studien* 1992, 53-66; Idem, 'Curriculum and practise in university teaching in the Low Countries and England 1800-1850' in: J.M. Fletcher and H. de Ridder-Symoens (ed.), *Lines of contact. Proceedings of the Second Conference of Belgian, British, Irish and Dutch historians of universities held at St Anne's College Oxford 15-17 September 1989*, *Studia Historica Gandensia* CCLXXIX (Gent 1994) 85-97.

unities meant the study of structures, conventions and rites, both in the realm of the state and in family life. Indeed 'vita privata' was family life. But yet again, that was not meant to be the life within the walls of the family home, but the life in which a family displayed itself to society and the structure within which the family was able to deal with its duties towards society. In short, private life was interaction, not a life severed from society in general.

This frame of mind did not lead to any strict division between public and private life nor to any sense of 'neutrality' in religious matters. The state served its own deities for its general purposes and a family served its 'penates', the deities that cared for home and hearth. Together they acted as the pillars of a well-ordered society, and not as two separated societies. It stands to reason that it was not too difficult to transpose this benign and fruitful pervasiveness of religion in society into a Christian context. It was not only classical republicanism that dealt with this transposition, early liberalism in the nineteenth century did so as well. The state was not neutral: it was Christian in a broad sense. The one thing it did not do, was to take a theological stand, or to side with one Christian denomination in particular. On that level it interacted with all citizens and their associations.

As a consequence I would strongly recommend that historians assess the connotations of the concepts of public and private life very carefully in connection with the first half of the nineteenth century. This may serve to recognize a society or an association as a well-defined human phenomenon, without immediately assuming that it was public in the sense that it banned religion from its premises altogether, or conversely branding it as private only because it had religious ends, based on morals inspired by Christianity. Actually, it might prove to be extremely difficult to apply these concepts to societies, because the great majority of the members would cherish Christian beliefs, would not be shy to admit it and more importantly, would act on these beliefs.

All in all it is not easy to label an early nineteenth-century society or association as public in the modern sense. That would be the case only when it could be proved that members of a particular society did not touch on religion in their conversations, did not allow prayers to be said on the premises and shied away from anything to do with religion. In the classical sense a society was a building-block of the community, with its own responsibilities towards the whole. And the whole could not do without at least a modicum of religion lest it fall apart, a truth that was brought home in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries to Dutch elites of all persuasions by the horrors of the radical French revolution.

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3 J. Roelevink, *Gediceerd verleden. Het onderwijs in de algemene geschiedenis aan de universiteit te Utrecht, 1735-1839* (Amsterdam/Maarssen 1986) 178 ff.