

## ***“True Freedom” and the Dutch Tradition of Republicanism***

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POLITICAL DEBATE FILLED A BROAD SPACE IN DUTCH INTELLECTUAL LIFE throughout the seventeenth century. In perhaps no other European country did discussing political issues become such common practice. From learned circles to *schuitpraatje* (“barge talk”), through *Cort bewijs* (“short demonstrations”) or single sheets of *Warachtighe waerschouwinghe* (“true warning”), the proofs of political passions expressed verbally are countless. Due to high literacy levels, many ordinary people were able to take part in written debates, and the numerous printers and booksellers in Dutch cities like Amsterdam, Leiden, or Utrecht took full commercial advantage of the favorable situation.<sup>1</sup> Hence, the number of texts written in the vernacular instead of Latin grew rapidly—an alarming phenomenon in the eyes of those who thought it unwise to present the common people with controversies that had not been “smoothed over” by scholars.<sup>2</sup> With this wealth of printed material, the Dutch were laying the foundation of a public sphere that contributed late in the century to the emergence of the Radical Enlightenment. At the same time, this passion for political debate illustrates one of the striking features of Dutch politics throughout the seventeenth century: the constant reinvention of the newly formed state as it rose to become an independent republic.

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<sup>1</sup> Editions of a thousand or more of what are usually called “pamphlets” were not an exception; see Maarten Prak, *The Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 187–88, 225.

<sup>2</sup> As in a reproach made to Lambert van Velthuysen, who was blamed for having created propaganda pressing his own opinion in the vernacular: “Wat aengaat het boeckje van de Afgoderye, dat is (mijns oordeels) door d. Velthuysen onvoorsichtelyck . . . in’t Nederduyts ende niet in’t Latijn geschreven heeft, want sulcke materien willen wel onder de geleerden eerst was ghekout zijn, eer men die de gemeene man te eten geeft,” quoted in Arnoldus Cornelius Duker, *Gisbertus Voetius* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1914), 3:264.



Secretan, Catherine. “‘True Freedom’ and the Dutch Tradition of Republicanism.” *Republics of Letters: A Journal for the Study of Knowledge, Politics, and the Arts* 2, no. 1 (December 15, 2010): <http://rofl.stanford.edu/node/81>.

Obviously, such an atypical situation—a commercial Republic made up of seven independent provinces—was an intellectual challenge for nearly everyone. From the standpoint of novelty especially, it is simplistic to consider the Dutch to be thoroughgoing pragmatists.<sup>3</sup> Their lack of overarching theories—if indeed Dutch political debate even lacked theories—does not necessarily indicate a purely pragmatic mentality. Moreover, this intellectual trend was similar to one of a few decades earlier, at the time of the Revolt against Spain. In renouncing King Philip II and disseminating a justification of their act (which was, incidentally, translated into French), the Dutch rebels invented a new political configuration. In both cases, the process, strictly speaking, consisted not in creating new formulas but in taking over the available political language and adapting it to the particular case of the Dutch political state. Whatever the newness of the situation, people had to select among a limited range of ideas, provided by antiquity, humanism, or Calvinist theories. Spinoza had rightly noticed that “*experientiam omnia Civitatum genera, quae concipi possunt . . . ostendisse*” (experience has shown all types of State that can be conceived).<sup>4</sup> In striving for an appropriate definition of their *sui generis* Republic, the Dutch were led to focus mainly on the idea of “liberty.” But what did liberty mean and what did it imply in context? These are the questions that this article will try to answer.<sup>5</sup>



Political debate in the Netherlands was dominated by the question of the stadholderate and its role within the Union. If one plunges into these discussions of legitimate sovereignty, one irregularity is conspicuous: to be republican meant to be opposed to the stadholderate (which was not exactly the same thing as to be opposed to monarchy), yet republicanism was equated with a range of precise liberties. The specificity of Dutch republicanism must be grasped through these two somewhat contradictory ideas.

Since its separation from Spain, the Dutch state’s political structure was comprised of Provincial and General States assemblies governing together with the stadholder. Holland’s land advocate became the Grand Pensionary, while the stadholder assumed military leadership and the assemblies, political leadership. At first, the cohabitation ran smoothly. The theoretical propaganda also generally claimed that the best form of state had power shared equally between a prince and the States assembly, the political and the military.<sup>6</sup> But the conclusion of the Truce with Spain in 1609 upset the balance and raised the question of competition between political and ecclesiastical authority, as did the theological conflict between Arminians and Gomarists.

<sup>3</sup> I agree on this point with Wyger R. E. Welema in his essay: “‘That a Republic is better than a Monarchy’: Anti-monarchism in Early Modern Dutch Political Thought,” in *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage*, ed. Martin van Gelderen and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1:9–10.

<sup>4</sup> *Tractatus politicus*, chap. 1, § 3, ed. J. van Vloten and J. P. N. Land (The Hague: Hagae Comitum, apud Martinum Nijhoff, 1882).

<sup>5</sup> On this aspect of the Dutch history of political ideas, see, among others, E. H. Kossmann, “Dutch Republicanism,” in *Political Thought in the Dutch Republic, Three Studies* (Amsterdam: Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie Van Wetenschappen, 2000); E. O. G. Haitsma Mulier, “The Language of Seventeenth-Century Republicanism in the United Provinces: Dutch or European?” in *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe*, ed. Anthony Pagden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); W. W. Mijnhardt, “Over de moderniteit van de Nederlandse Republiek,” Openingscollege 4 September 2001, Universiteit Utrecht, Faculteit der Letteren; id., “The Limits of Present-Day Historiography of Republicanism,” *De Achttiende Eeuw* 37 (2005): 1.

<sup>6</sup> See my *Les privilèges, berceau de la liberté. La Révolte des Pays-Bas: aux sources de la pensée politique moderne (1566–1619)* (Paris: Vrin, 1990), 64–68.

The situation deteriorated, ending, as we well know, with the beheading of Holland's land advocate, Johan van Oldenbarnevelt.<sup>7</sup> From that time onward, tensions never ceased between these two branches of political life, the *prinsgezinden* being in favor of the Prince of Orange as stadholder and the *staatsgezinden*, in favor of the provincial states' supremacy and the Grand Pensionary. Although the intellectual and political differences between these two parties were not always clear-cut and the boundaries shifted, we may see in this opposition something like the birth of the antagonism between republican and monarchical conceptions of the state. The wealthy "regents" (as the members of the governing bodies were called) constituted the main component (particularly in Holland) of the States assemblies and as such could be seen as embodying the republican element, while on the other side, the stadholder and his personal decision-making represented the monarchical element, a state of affairs all the more evident because this function had always been fulfilled by the Princes of Orange.

But this is only a bird's-eye view. The stadholder was not an institution that might be equated with virtual monarchy, in fact or in aspiration. Long ago Herbert Rowen convincingly showed what prevents comparison of the figure of the stadholder with a virtual monarch: the necessary assent of the States assemblies to any decision granting funds, as well as the fact that the stadholderate was not properly hereditary, but instead bestowed upon the Princes of Orange by the provincial states.<sup>8</sup> Moreover—and this may be the strongest argument—the stadholders never showed themselves very eager to become true monarchs. The case of Maurice of Nassau is the most revealing from this point of view: when his courtiers urged him to accept the countship, he appeared rather reluctant to engage in a process that would, in the end, lead to a monarchical status.<sup>9</sup> The next stadholders, Frederick Henry (1625–47) and William II (1647–50), also remained stadholders and never really thought of changing the form of the state (nor did the *staatsgezinden* for their part). Lastly, the praise of central power was in most cases not a true monarchical tendency but rather the survival of Erasmian praise of monarchy that was still in the air.<sup>10</sup> In any case, this monarchical tendency expressed an urgent need for effective power, as when the States of Holland and Zeeland declared in 1581: "Every community and good Republic should be kept in good unity and its founding firmly held, which cannot be realized if there exists too great a variety of wills and opinions. It is then necessary that the government of any Republic be entrusted and recommended to a single head and a single authority."<sup>11</sup> During the seventeenth century, much of the popular affection for monarchy should be interpreted as veneration for the memory of William the Silent.<sup>12</sup>

But if the stadholderate wasn't a monarchy, it wasn't republican either. We cannot conclude that the so-called State party's mode of argumentation fits with what we usually define as republicanism—either in the way in which its members defended their authority or the way they were regarded by the common people. The very specific constitution of the Dutch republic—a fed-

<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall, 1477–1806* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 458–59.

<sup>8</sup> Herbert H. Rowen, "Neither Fish nor Fowl: The Stadholderate in the Dutch Republic," in *Political Ideas and Institutions in the Dutch Republic* (Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1985), 19–23.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>10</sup> "Philosophorum omnium ferme consensus est, saluberrimam esse Monarchiam, nimirum ad exemplar Dei, ut rerum summa penes unum sit." (*Institutio Principis*, chap. 1, col. 576, quoted in P. M. Geurts, *Overzicht van Nederlandsche Politieke Geschriften tot in de eerste helft der XVIIe eeuw* [Maastricht, 1942], 131).

<sup>11</sup> Pieter Christiaenszoon Bor, *Nederlandsche Oorlogen* (Amsterdam, 1679), 2:17 (appendix).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. A. Th. van Deursen, *Mensen van klein vermogen. Het kopersgeld van de Gouden Eeuw* (Amsterdam: Ooievaar, 1996), 181–95.

eration of seven independent provinces loosely united by a rather vague constitution, the Union of Utrecht (1579)—did not really encourage the defense of a national common good by the whole community of citizens; on the contrary, it gave birth to strong provincial sovereignties, which was one of the main characteristics of the Dutch political structure during the golden age. Thus, in this period, the lasting antagonism within the Dutch state was not a classical opposition between advocates of monarchy and advocates of a republican form of government but a conflict over how the hierarchical distribution of power could favor, or impair, very specific interests.

The political administration during what is known as the “Ten Years” [1588–98], established after the failure of Leicester’s government, was a sort of ad hoc government, a makeshift replacement for the Spanish administration. Neither a conscious and deliberate republican state, nor a reaction against monarchic policy, the Republic was first of all a reaction against Spanish tyranny.<sup>13</sup> The political and military chiefs in charge of the country were improvising what they thought to be the most appropriate way of coping with events. In so doing, they were particularizing their state from the first years of their independence, in a way consonant with typical aspects of Dutch intellectual history. One enlightening example comes from Oldenbarnevelt’s response to the French King Henry IV in 1598:

As we were talking about the constitution of our State, the king declared that popular states were prone to greater dangers than monarchies and he asked me if I wouldn’t favor appointing a Prince. I answered that people here were much more inclined towards a good republic; that our state was not popular but aristocratic and entirely governed according to the laws and liberties, by the principals, either nobles or magistrates, of the cities.<sup>14</sup>

From this letter—which provides clear evidence of this process of political self-particularizing—we learn that the Dutch perceived their government as a true republic, a mixture of aristocracy and a pure republic, founded on the specific constitutional situation of the country. Another example can be drawn from Francis Vranck’s *Corte verthoninghe* where he advocates the power of the existing *vroedschappen* (the town councils) as the only form of government really suited to the Dutch country: “For this is clear that these boards of town magistrates and counsellors, together with the corporation of nobles, undoubtedly represent the whole body of the inhabitants, and no form of government could be imagined in which decisions could be taken with a better knowledge of the situation of the country or carried out with greater unanimity, authority or effect.”<sup>15</sup> Close to Italian authors who claimed, as did Francesco Guicciardini, that “the best government that can be established in whatsoever city is the one which is natural to it,” Dutch political thought has often argued that the only suitable form of government for the Dutch state should be drawn from the “nature” of the country and the people.<sup>16</sup> C. P. Hooft, for example, asserted that no good government could be settled without a fair knowledge of these

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<sup>13</sup> See Ernst H. Kossmann, *Texts Concerning the Revolt of the Netherlands* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

<sup>14</sup> Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, *Bescheiden betreffende zijn staatkundig beleid en zijn familie*, ed. Sikko Poppe Haak and A. J. Veenendaal, Groote ser. (The Hague: Rijks Geschiedkundige Publication, 1962–67), 2:246.

<sup>15</sup> *Corte verthoninghe van het recht by den ridderschap, eedelen ende steden van Hollandt ende Westvrieslant . . .*, in W. P. C. Knuttel, *Catalogus van de pamflettenverzameling berustende in de Koninklijke Bibliotheek* (Utrecht: HES, 1978), 1:n°790.

<sup>16</sup> *Cambridge Translations of Renaissance Philosophical Texts*, vol. 2, *Political Philosophy*, ed. Jill Kraye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 200 *et seq.*

facts.<sup>17</sup> Because of the particular circumstances of its birth, the Dutch Republic seemed to require a specific type of government, a form never before imagined.



Liberty was the key word of Dutch republicanism. As soon as relations between the Prince of Orange and the Grand Pensionary began to deteriorate (that is, at the moment of the Ten Years Truce, 1609–20), the question of liberty revealed itself as the ground of the question of sovereignty: in what form of government (single-headed government or republic?) would citizens enjoy the greatest liberty? The question was neither just a form of rhetoric nor propaganda, but the expression of a real concern. Since the Union was composed of seven provinces, each one being sovereign in all that concerned its internal affairs, a true problem of competition would arise between the provincial administration and the federal government, conducted by the States General and the stadholder, each partner being afraid to see its liberty threatened by the other's ambitions.<sup>18</sup> Thus the main political concern seems to have been as much a practical question as a theoretical one about the political structure of the state: was a single-headed form of government of any usefulness (*nutbaerheit*)? Not till the middle of the century, when the Republic without a stadholder came into being, did the Dutch feel the need to theorize their system. And even then, the issue of sovereignty was not raised for itself but mainly with regard to "inutility" and the dangers of the stadholderate.<sup>19</sup> The reflections of men like Johan de Witt or the brothers de la Court produced strong critiques of personal power—echoing the warnings of Machiavelli interpreted in a republican sense—while praising the sovereignty of provincial states mostly composed of wealthy burghers.<sup>20</sup> These writings help reveal what "republicanism" meant for them.<sup>21</sup>

Johan de Witt supplied one formula to summarize the republican government as he saw it: *ware vrijheid* ("true liberty").<sup>22</sup> The expression is developed at length in the de Witt's *Deductie* ("Demonstration"), written to justify the Act of Exclusion that barred the Princes of Orange from the stadholderate and captaincy-general. Actually, it was a defense against the attacks of the other provinces that denounced the Act passed by the States of Holland as a violation of the Un-

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, C. P. Hooft: "In alle regiering een voorneme point is de nature ende aerdt der landen ende luyden wel te kennen," *Memoriën en Adviezen*, ed. H. A. E. van Gelder (Utrecht, 1925), 2:42.

<sup>18</sup> Willem Frijhoff en Marijke Spies, 1650. *Bevochten eendracht* (The Hague: SDU Uitgevers, 1999), chap. 2, 94–105.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. G. O. van de Klashorst, "Metten schijn van monarchie getempert. De verdediging van het stadhouderschap in de partijliteratuur, 1650–1686," in *Pieter de la Court in zijn tijd (1618–1685)*, ed. H. W. Blom and I. W. Wildenberg (Amsterdam: APA-Holland University Press, 1986), 134.

<sup>20</sup> See E. O. G. Haitsma Mulier, *The Myth of Venice and Dutch Republican Thought in the Seventeenth Century* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1980), 126–30; 138–42.

<sup>21</sup> Johan and Pieter de la Court were cloth manufacturers and tradesmen in Leiden. They composed many texts, almost all of which were published by Pieter between 1660–63. The *Interest van Holland ofte Gronden van Hollands Welvaren* was published anonymously in 1662. It was attributed to Johan de Witt in its translation into French and English. The book enjoyed a wide audience inside and outside the republic. On the brothers Johan and Pieter de la Court, see Ivo W. Wildenberg, *Johan en Pieter de la Court (1622–1660 & 1618–1685). Bibliographie en receptiegeschiedenis* (Amsterdam: APA-Holland University Press, 1986).

<sup>22</sup> Ernst H. Kossmann, "Freedom in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Thought and Practice," in *The Anglo-Dutch Moment*, ed. Jonathan I. Israel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 282–98; see also W. Frijhoff en M. Spies, *Bevochten eendracht*, 322–42.

ion of Utrecht.<sup>23</sup> But in a country whose trademark in the eyes of all its contemporaries was liberty, such a formula might also have appeared to be the motto of the state. At the same time, the stress put on *ware* ("true") suggested a polemic: the *staatsgezinden* were defending their position against something that appeared in their eyes to be an "incorrect" liberty. Admittedly, this way of arguing was not unusual among Dutch people at this time. Consider another case: Gisbert Voetius, the uncompromising Calvinist theologian of Utrecht (and enemy of Descartes) who strove to demonstrate that a "true Christian liberty" did not consist in liberty of philosophizing (*libertas philosophandi*) but in subordinating philosophy to theology. In order to grasp what the Dutch meant by *ware vryheid* when discussing political issues, two levels should be taken into account: the concrete situation and the proper philosophical meaning, which carries the weight of an ideological program.

The outstanding liberty for which the Dutch Republic was praised in seventeenth-century Europe was due to specific conditions. The *Deductie* of Johan de Witt and the *Interest of Holland* of de la Court are among the best apologies produced out of this situation and are generally considered to be the first expressions of republicanism, together with Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*.<sup>24</sup> In these writings the concrete meaning of *vrijheid* appears in several registers: provincial sovereignty, freedom of religion, free trade. Provincial sovereignty was the first maxim of the regent class's (*staatsgezinden*) political doctrine. Since the Union of Utrecht, *vrijheid* was considered the foundation of the Dutch state. Attachment to this tradition of particularism dating from the Burgundian state was still very intense in these provinces. "It must be taken into consideration above all that the firm foundation of the relations among all the provinces is beyond controversy the complete and absolute sovereignty of the respective provinces. . . ."<sup>25</sup> The *Deductie* of Johan de Witt declared this principle to be "indisputable," although it should be remembered that such a principle meant the supremacy of the province of Holland, which assumed the leading economic and political role within the Union. From this point of view, provincial liberty was considered to depend on a very specific clause: the rule of majority in voting, instead of unanimity. Fierce controversies erupted on this seemingly restricted issue, opposing *staatsgezinden* to *prinsgezinden*, as reflected in pamphlets published around the 1650s.<sup>26</sup> Holland wished to have all decisions in the provincial states taken by majority vote (*meerderheid der stemme*) so as to deflate opposition from the church or the nobles. On the contrary, the defense of provincial sovereignty entailed that the States General would strictly observe the rule of unanimity (*eenstemming*) in order not to have some provinces oppressed by a group of others.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Israel, *Dutch Republic*, 718–19; Herbert H. Rowen, *The Low Countries in Early Modern Times: A Documentary History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 197–200.

<sup>24</sup> *Deductie, ofte declaratie van de Staten van Hollandt ende West-Frieslandt; Behelsende een waerachtich, ende grondich Bericht van de fondamenten der Regieringe van de vrye Vereenichde Nederlanden; . . .* (The Hague, 1654); cf. Herbert H. Rowen, *John de Witt, Grand Pensionary of Holland, 1625–1672* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 383–84; Haitsma Mulier, "Language of Seventeenth-Century Republicanism," 179–96.

<sup>25</sup> "Soo dient voor al wel in achtginge genomen het vast fundament tusschen alle de Provincien buyten controversie, dat namentlijck by de Staten van de respective Provincien, yeder in den sijnen, is de volle, ende absolute Souveraineteyt, mitsgaders het indisputabel recht, ende d'onbepaelde macht, omme over alle saecken . . . by hun selven te resolveren," *Deductie, ofte . . .*, 12.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Knuttel pamphlets n°6740, 6843, 7544.

<sup>27</sup> Pieter de la Court, in his *Politike Discoursen* (Leyden: P. Hackius, 1662), is perfectly clear on this point and equated the rule of majority to the authority of the law instead of the authority of a single person or the arbitrary will of a group of men: "Welke Staat de Grieken en Latinen hebben genoemd vryheid: also niemand aldaar verbonden is, te leeven

When discussing this specifically Dutch reality—closely connected, in the eyes of the contemporaries, to the conditions of the *ware vrijheid*—Dutch political thought met with a much wider issue that was systematically dealt with, at the same time, by philosophers like Hobbes; to be taken over by Locke, a little later, in 1690. Both asserted that no state could function without agreeing that the rule of majority would be authoritative: “We must consider that every one of the multitude, by whose means there may be a beginning to make up the city, must agree with the rest, that in those matters which shall be propounded by any one in the assembly, that be received for the will of all, which the major part shall approve of.”<sup>28</sup>

Next to provincial liberty, *ware vrijheid* implied religious freedom, “freedom of all sorts of Religions differing from the Reformed.”<sup>29</sup> It went back to the Union of Utrecht, which had assumed two crucial principles for the future of the republic: the recognition of the Reformed Church as a public church and the freedom of conscience. The two principles were closely interdependent: the fact that the Reformed Church was not established as state church but only as a “privileged” church ensured religious freedom to non-Reformed religious groups (Catholics, Lutherans, and Mennonites) and formed the basis for Dutch tolerance. This religious dimension of the concept of *vrijheid* met with wide agreement in the Dutch Republic throughout the seventeenth century, from radical republicans like Franciscus van den Ende to ambiguous conservatives like Lieuwe van Aitzema.<sup>30</sup> In the minds of such authors, freedom of religion was an integral part of the tolerance they all supported. Not only was it essential to commercial activity of men and the movement of goods, but it also laid the foundation for a country giving refuge to religious dissidents as did the Netherlands from the end of the sixteenth century. In his *Politike Discoursen*, Pieter de la Court explicitly praised the superiority of countries hosting foreigners or refugees coming from war-torn places:

Some countries have such a nice government that they can let foreigners live in full liberty among them and by this way, they increase their cities, because foreigners always take their goods with them when moving and are not prone to swallow up their fortune and become destitute. As soon as they reach a foreign country, people zealously get down to work in order to support themselves through commerce or any art they have previously practised in another country. Since unceasing wars continuously expel some inhabitants from their country, these latter always try to flee towards a country that grants freedom of citizenship, of conscience and of commerce. Therefore, new inhabitants continuously come and in-

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naar den wil en zin van een mensch (daar zeer wel op te letten staat), maar naar de zin van de ordre en Wet, aan welke alle Ingezeetenen van dien Staat, gelijk als aan de Reeden, eenpariglik onderworpen zijn” (310–11).

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Man and Citizen*, ed. with an intro. by Bernard Gert (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1972), chap. 6, 2. See also John Locke: “And thus every man, by consenting with others to make one body politic under one government, puts himself under an obligation, to every one of that society, to submit to the determination of the majority, and to be concluded by it,” *Two Treatises of Government* (London, 1764), bk. 2, chap. 8, “On the Beginning of the Societies,” § 97.

<sup>29</sup> [Pieter de la Court,] *The True Interest and Political Maxims of the Republic of Holland and West Friesland...*, quoted in Herbert H. Rowen, *The Low Countries in Early Modern Times*, 208.

<sup>30</sup> The case of Aitzema is enlightening insofar as it provides a good example of how complex adherence to definite opinions could be. Although hostile to the *staatsgezinden* on the question of the stadholderate, he could join them on the question of tolerance and, like them, oppose the rigorous attitude of the “predicants”; see, for example, in his *Saken van Staet en Oorlogh, in, ende omtrent de Vereenighde Nederlanden* (The Hague, 1669–72), 4:1009–10; Gees van der Plaat, *Eendracht als opdracht. Lieuwe van Aitzeman’s bijdrage aan het publieke debat in de zeventiende-eeuwse Republiek* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2003), 216–24. Franciscus van den Ende, on the contrary, was an unambiguous champion of democratic republicanism; see Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 175–81.

crease real estate, land estate and houses and thus, the former inhabitants, till then largely apathetic, grow richer.<sup>31</sup>

Apart from recalling a history that had been his own family’s past (the de la Court family had come from the southern Netherlands and had settled in Leiden at the time of Johan and Pieter’s father, and they soon became wealthy burghers in the textile industry), de la Court clearly stated the various practical advantages of a tolerant social system. But the question of religious liberty became mixed up with the issue of the civil authority’s right to decide ecclesiastical matters, thanks to the Synod of Dordrecht (1618–19) and the bitter polemics between strict and liberal Calvinist theologians over predestination; it thus extended its scope.

Liberty of trade meant “commerce, navigation and manufactures established and continued.”<sup>32</sup> Dutch merchants like the brothers de la Court strongly advocated freedom of enterprise and were opposed to guilds and monopolies, but also to various regulations, ones that forbade industries to settle in rural areas or maintained the guild system of industrial control: “Our Fishermen, Dealers in Manufactures, Owners of Freight-Ships, and Traders, being so burdened with all manner of Imposts, to oppress them yet more in their necessity by these Monopolies of Guilds, and to believe that it redounds to the good of the Land . . . is to me incomprehensible.”<sup>33</sup> Although the de la Courts were not unanimously accepted by the Amsterdam merchant class, many of these merchants agreed that “in no other place can industry better flourish than in places where freedom exists” (Nergens can de neringe beter bloeyen als daer liberteyt blijft).<sup>34</sup>

To what extent did these various liberties, each of them reflecting an aspect of “true liberty” and fulfilling some crucial requirements of civil and economic life, maintain the tradition of “rights and privileges” that was at the forefront of the revolt against the Spanish monarchy? Could the Dutch republican “liberty” of the mid-seventeenth century have also been the *ware vrijheyt* of the rebels? The question is worth raising since republicans frequently made reference to the recent past. When constructing the country’s historical identity, someone like Grotius, in his *De Antiquitate Reipublicae Batavae* (1610), compared the Dutch “ancient liberty” to privileges and used this argument to justify the political government of the Union.<sup>35</sup> But, at the time of the Exclusion Act against the Princes of Orange, the rhetorical context had become complicated since opposing the stadholderate could also appear to be a betrayal of the hero of Dutch liberty, William the Silent. The abundant pamphlet literature published around 1650 was proof of this constant affection among the population.<sup>36</sup> However, unlike Grotius, some authors like de la Court would also argue against the privileges, as did some critics during the Revolt when they protested that “privileges are intended to provide freedom to do what right and virtue command and not to prevent us from hav-

<sup>31</sup> *Politike discoursen*, 2nd “Discourse.”

<sup>32</sup> [Pieter de la Court,] *The True Interest and Political Maxims of the Republic of Holland and West-Friesland . . .* (London, 1702), 375.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Rowen, *Texts Concerning*, 210; see also J. G. van Dillen, *Van rijkdom en regenten. Handboek tot de economische en sociale geschiedenis van Nederland tijdens de Republiek* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1970), 180–82; Violet Barbour, *Capitalism in Amsterdam in the 17th century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), 70–71.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in van Dillen, *Van rijkdom en regenten*, 180.

<sup>35</sup> G. O. van de Klashorst, “De ‘ware vrijheid,’ 1650–1672,” in *Vrijheid. Een geschiedenis van de vijftiende tot de twintigste eeuw*, ed. E. O. G. Haitsma Mulier and W. R. E. Welema (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999), 157–82.

<sup>36</sup> P. Geyl, “Het Stadhouderschap in the partij-literatuur onder de Witt”, in: *Mededeelingen der Koninklijke Nederlandsche Akademie van Wetenschappen, afdeling Letterkunde*, Nieuwe Reeks 10, 1947, 17–84.



ing our property at our disposal.”<sup>37</sup> The restatement of history throughout the seventeenth century led to new interpretations of history because individual liberty was now at stake. Besides its concrete implications, grounded in historical circumstances, the meaning of “true liberty” also took on a philosophical dimension. Drawing from Cartesian psychology and Spinozist philosophy, it became equated with rational knowledge and the possibility, for everyone, to achieve his “conatus” as self-conservation required: it ranged from economic activity to freedom of speech, but was in no sense embedded in the meaning of “privileges.”<sup>38</sup>

Yet, authors like de la Court and Spinoza put real limitations—as we well know—on this socio-juridical liberty: the former, close to the classical philosophy, excluded servants and, generally speaking, all dependent people; the latter reserved this liberty to *sui juris* individuals, that is, the juridically and economically autonomous.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, a crucial stage was reached thanks to such authors, who—relying on new science and philosophy—conceived and defined a kind of individual liberty of which the coming generations would make the most with the help of new social causalities.



Because the Dutch Republic was not the product of a theory but the fruit of practical reflections, it gave birth to specific understandings of some key words of the political language of the time.<sup>40</sup> This is the case with absolutism and its Dutch interpretation, which combined the new anthropology drawn from Cartesian psychology under the influence of Hobbes’s political theory and Spinoza’s philosophy. From the Cartesian theory of passions, Dutch republicans learned how to justify a political “balance” able to neutralize the effect of human passions and convert them into a beneficial harmony for the civil society.<sup>41</sup> From Hobbes, the conception of indivisible sovereignty helped the *staatsgezinden* to dismiss a constitutional form of government and to justify the danger of sharing political authority with a stadholder: “Since in a civil state, it is necessary that there exists an absolute power able to drive out any danger, otherwise the state would immediately be annihilated, it follows from this that the absolute power to lay down the law cannot belong to one man and the power to have it executed to another, regardless of the former.”<sup>42</sup> Therefore, undivided sovereignty meant peace and stability because, in the hands of “good Rulers,” there could be no offensive war but only “effectual provision for good Fortifications on the Frontiers of our Provinces. . . . We who are naturally Merchants, cannot be turned into Sol-

<sup>37</sup> *Brief discours sur la negotiation de la paix, qui se traite présentement à Cologne entre le Roy d’Espagne et les Estatz du Pays bas . . .*, 1579 (Knuttel n°492).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. *Les privilèges, berceau de la liberté*, 156–64.

<sup>39</sup> See my “La démocratie absolue, ou le défi politique des Lumières radicales,” in *Qu’est-ce que les lumières “radicales”? Libertinage, athéisme et spinozisme dans le tournant philosophique de l’âge classique*, ed. Catherine Secretan, Tristan Dagron, and Laurent Bove (Paris: Editions Amsterdam, 2007), 350–52.

<sup>40</sup> On several points, the Dutch conception of republicanism is comparable to the case of tolerance or freedom of the press: it did not stem from a systematic theory or any philosophical ideal but mainly from practice and immediate needs; see, among others: J. L. Price, “‘By their fruits, shall ye know them’: The Cultural Legacy of the Revolt,” *Zeventiende Eeuw* 10, no. 1 (1994): 49. For the current discussions on this matter, see R. Po-Chia Hsia and Henk van Nierop, eds., *Calvinism and Religious Toleration in the Dutch Golden Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>41</sup> Rowen, *John de Witt*, 401–12.

<sup>42</sup> [Pieter de la Court,] *Consideratien van staat ofte polityke weeg-schaal* (Amsterdam, 1661), 27–28; Kossmann, *Political Thought*, 38–40; Haitsma Mulier, *Myth of Venice*, 127–29.

diers.”<sup>43</sup> Such an interpretation implied two crucial ideas. First, absolutism did not mean thirst for power as in a monarchy or single-headed government, but desire for independence, for self-sufficiency. It corresponded to the *sui juris* status of the individuals, which is another definition of freedom in Spinoza’s philosophy.<sup>44</sup> Second, war was radically incompatible with freedom: “Any war is an obstacle to freedom,” declared Johan de Witt in his *Deductie*.<sup>45</sup> The strong pacifism of the Dutch republicans was expressed at length in their critiques of the political ambitions of the stadholders. The only war that could be admitted was a maritime one because it aimed at protecting Dutch freedom of trade.

Dutch republicanism in the seventeenth century was inspired by a strong practical claim on liberty rather than matters of principle. In a country where “shipping and trade [were] the soul and the inward subsistence of the state,”<sup>46</sup> the ideal of liberty referred to very concrete conditions (provincial sovereignty, religious toleration, free trade) resulting from the specific circumstances in which the Dutch state had emerged and been founded. If seventeenth-century philosophers (Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza) helped both justify and conceive the political system that seemed to best suit the “true interest of Holland,” the tradition of particularism and the needs of commercial activity had shaped the republican mind of the Dutch from the beginning; it explained this new type of republicanism founded on *negotium*, urbanization, and peace. In such an ideological framework, the main feature retained from civic humanism was not participation in governing the Republic (the traditional *virtu*) but the idea of “pious Rulers” (*vrome Regenten*)<sup>47</sup> whose private interests coincided with the common good.<sup>48</sup> While condemning any “supreme head,” de la Court defined the virtue of a Republic as this intrinsic solidarity between individual and common good, and he gave it the name of a constitutional mechanism: *politike weegschaal* (“political balance”). In the Dutch language of the time, republican virtue resided in contribution to a lasting political “balance.”

Despite these realist views, republicanism came to be endowed with philosophical value. By associating the seemingly contradictory idea of absolutism with their republicanism, Dutch authors defined the republican state as the place par excellence where man can cultivate his own intellectual and moral development and ensure his well-being.<sup>49</sup> According to Pieter de la Court, “All politicians generally know that the highest perfection of politics and human society consists in that sole thing, i.e. that the greatest possible natural freedom be left to the citizen,” and he adds: “because having the right to own and control one’s own body and properties according to what will be considered the most useful to one’s self-conservation and self-perfecting makes a

<sup>43</sup> [Pieter de la Court,] *The True Interest*, quoted in Rowen, *Low Countries*, 213.

<sup>44</sup> Paolo Cristofolini, “Esse sui juris e scienza politica,” *Studia Spinozana* 1 (1985): 53–72.

<sup>45</sup> “. . . soo moeten de voornoemde Provincien oock wederom naer waerheyt bekennen, dat alle oorlogh is een beletsel vande exercitie vande vryheyt” (*Deductie, ofte . . .*, 36).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>48</sup> As conceived by Gaspar Barlaeus in his *Mercator Sapiens* (1632).

<sup>49</sup> The Dutch interest in absolutism within the republican circles started in fact as soon as the political discussions began after the fail of Leicester’s government (1589). In Grotius’s *De imperio summarum potestatum circa sacra* of 1614, references to Jean Bodin can be found, therefore much earlier than attention to Hobbes’s political doctrine around 1650. For a reference to the important historiographical debate on absolutism, see Franco Venturi, *Utopia e riforma nell’illuminismo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969; Torino: Einaudi, 2001), 32–33.

paradise on earth.”<sup>50</sup> The emphasis put on the relationship between rational human liberation and civil society is a typical feature of Dutch republicanism. Following the religious conflicts of the sixteenth century and their contribution to the articulation of an abstract idea of liberty, the joint influence of economic conditions and intellectual history led the Dutch to see the aim of the republican state as congruent with human freedom. A

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<sup>50</sup> *Het Welvaren van Leiden*, quoted in H. A. Enno van Gelder, *Getemperde vrijheid* (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff nv, 1972), 251.