

The Dutch Patriot Revolution 1780 – 1787:
Continuity or Change?

Danielle Aucoin

Cleveland High School
Reseda, CA

NEH Seminar 2007; The Dutch Republic and Britain:
The Making of Modern Society and a European World Economy

The Dutch Patriot Revolution (1780 – 1787) was a political movement dedicated to reforming the Dutch Republic by transferring power from both the Stadholder and the regents to the people. A key question to consider in studying the Patriot Revolution is whether it was, in fact, a revolutionary movement, or, was it simply a natural progression of previous political reform movements along the continuum of the history of the Dutch Republic. Jonathan Israel, in his comprehensive *The Dutch Republic Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477 – 1806*, (from which this paper takes much of its information) addresses this question which I hope to answer. The Patriot Revolution, though unsuccessful in its attempt to implement political reforms, is interesting and important for its incorporation of Enlightenment philosophy, the ideals of the American Revolution, and as a basis for studying the historical roots of Dutch republicanism.

The Dutch Republic, under the Stadholderate of William V (ruled 1751-95), was in an on-going period of economic decline, mainly due to British maritime superiority and decades of both foreign and internal strife. Politically, there had been, since the 17th century, periods of instability, in which power shifted between the Princes of Orange and their supporters, the Orangists, and the States Party faction—the regents in the provinces. Historically, the debate between the Orangists and the regents centered over the ideological battles concerning the foundations of power, sovereignty, and toleration in the Dutch



William V
(1748 – 1806),
Prince of
Orange-
Nassau, 1789,
Johann
Friedrich
August
Tischbein,
Rijksmuseum,
Amsterdam.

Republic. The Orangist revolution of 1747-51 failed to bring about economic improvement or political contentment, thus giving rise in the 1750s to the deep underlying tensions between the Orangists and the States Party faction in a series of intellectual debates which commented on the decline of the Republic and the political reforms necessary to halt it.

Supporters of both the States Party and the Orangists interpreted the principles espoused by the founders of the Dutch Republic to support their argument. None was more debated than Johan de Witt's mid-17th century principle of 'True Freedom,' or concept of republican government. In 1757, the 'War of De Witt' broke out between two prominent and well-known intellectuals of the day: Elie Luzac, an Orangist



De Witt

publisher from Leiden; and Jan Wagenaar, a States Party supporter and historian from Amsterdam. Luzac argued that De Witt's 'True Freedom' "undermined the very foundations of 'our state,'" weakened the States General and the "sovereignty which springs from the people and which...they had entrusted, at the time of the Revolt, to the Generality, as much as the provincial States, and to the care of Prince William I." He further stated that both "sovereignty, and legitimacy, derived from the 'people', who had changed the regime in 1572, 1618, and 1672 [all periods in which the Princes of Orange asserted their sovereignty—the Revolt of 1572, Maurits' coup d'etat, and the restoration of William III, respectively]" (Israel, p. 1085).



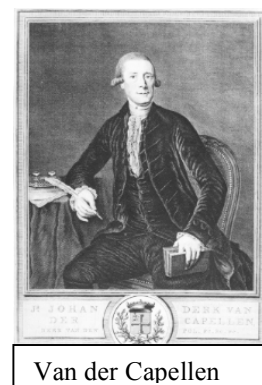
Luzac

Wagenaar found Luzac's arguments absurd, but did fundamentally agree that sovereignty did, in fact, come from the people. Of course, even as "enlightened" as Wagenaar was when stating, "from the people," he did not mean commoners, whose "views and loyalties are inherently shifting and inconsistent," but rather he meant "sovereignty lay absolutely in the hands of the provincial States as the representatives of the people" (Israel, p. 1085).

It would not be until the 1770s, with the model of the American Revolution, that many Dutch intellectuals, literate in the works of Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke, Richard Price, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, began to formulate radical new ideas regarding freedom, the sovereignty of the *common* people, and a sense of national identity, though always in the context of the history of the founding of the Dutch Republic.

Officially, during the American Revolution, the Dutch remained neutral (until 1782 when the States General recognized the new Republic), but several of the provinces—in particular, Amsterdam, as well as the Dutch West India Company—were shipping supplies and munitions to the American patriots. As early as 1777, the British demanded that the States General halt these shipments, threatening “unrestricted boarding and seizure” (Israel, p. 1097) of Dutch ships if the Dutch did not comply. By 1780, war between the British and the Dutch was inevitable as the British continued boarding and seizing Dutch ships and the extent of Amsterdam’s support of the American Revolutionaries came to light. The Fourth Anglo-Dutch War broke out in late 1780 and proved catastrophic for the Dutch. The defeat of the Dutch in 1784 was blamed on William V, but the political consequences of entering the war appeared much earlier, and the anti-Orangist intellectuals used both the American Revolution and the Anglo-Dutch War as opportunities to continue the intellectual debates of the previous decades.

In 1781, the Baron Joan Derk van der Capellen anonymously published a pamphlet entitled *Aan het Volk van Nederland* (translated *To the People of the Netherlands*), which became the “manifesto of the Patriot Revolution” (Israel, p. 1098 – 99). Although Van der Capellen was a regent, he was an enlightened thinker, who openly supported the American Revolution, and was well versed in the political writings of



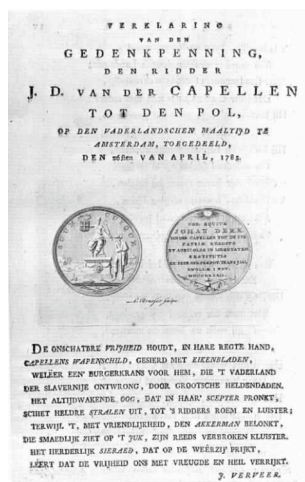
Richard Price, whose 1776 work, *Observations on Civil Liberty and the Justice and Policy of*

the War with America, he translated into Dutch. He also arranged for a large loan of 200,000 guilders, 20,000 of which was from his own money, to the revolutionaries in America.

The key points of Van der Capellen's document (as translated by Arie Wilschut below) were that the people were sovereign and the source of the stadholder's and regent's power. He believed that power inevitably led to corruption and thus the people must always be distrustful and watchful of their leaders:

"If peoples are to safeguard their freedom, they should constantly be vigilant and have no unlimited confidence in any human being - whoever he may be. On the contrary, they must thoroughly distrust all persons having any authority or power, especially princes and aristocrats, constantly keeping an eye on them, because experience of all periods from the beginnings of the earth until our time has shown that even the best are usually weak enough to try to increase the power with which they are entrusted. Power is sweet! So my fellow countrymen, be vigilant and you will remain free!"

Van der Capellen further sites the decline of the people's sovereignty and increase in the power of the stadholder as a result of the shift from burgher militias to professional standing armies:



"In Europe no freedom has existed since princes have started to keep permanent armies in their service. ... As soon as the princes had a permanent army at their disposal ...they could do whatever they liked. No city or land could defend its rights or privileges any longer."

He then goes on to argue, in the vein of 18th century Enlightenment thought and 19th century nationalism, that the country belongs to the people and all source of authority derives from them. The influence of John Locke and Thomas Jefferson, who wrote on the ideas of

popular sovereignty and protection of property rights, is evident:

"The people who live in a country, the inhabitants, townsfolk and countrymen, poor and rich, the great and the little ones - all together - they are the true proprietors, the lords and masters of the country and can say how the country's affairs should be managed, in what manner and by whom they wish to be governed. ... The great that are governing you, the Prince or whoever has any authority in this country, only do this on your behalf. All of their authority derives from you. You are the participants, the proprietors, the lords and masters of the people's company which has been established in this region under the name of United Netherlands. ... You are paying [the regents] with your own money, that is the people's money. They are therefore in your service, they are your servants, and subjected to your majority, to which they owe obedience and responsibility. ... All men

are born free. By nature, no one has any authority over anyone else. Some people may be gifted with a better understanding, a stronger body or greater wealth than others, but this does not in the least entitle the more sensible, stronger or wealthier to govern the less sensible, the weaker and the poorer..."

... "In these companies, usually called civil societies, peoples or nations, the members or participants pledge to promote each others' happiness as much as possible, to protect each other with united force and to maintain each other in an uninterrupted enjoyment of all property, possessions and all inherited and lawfully acquired rights."

He further addresses the stadholder's control and oppression of the people via civic

appointments, education, and, a major theme, the military:

"There is no freedom and no freedom can exist in a country where one single person has the hereditary command over a large army, appoints and dismisses the country's regents and keeps them in his power and under his influence, deals with all the offices, and by his influence on the appointments of professors controls the subject matter that is being taught to the country's youth studying in universities, where the people is kept ignorant, where the people is unarmed and has nothing in the world, God, nothing to say! This is your situation, Netherlanders!"

Van der Capellen advocated the election of "good patriots" and the formation of citizens'

militias akin to the American Revolution to secure liberty:

"Assemble peacefully and elect from the midst of you a moderate number of good, virtuous, pious men; elect good patriots whom you can trust. ... Arm yourselves, all of you, and elect yourselves the ones that must command you."

Finally, he strongly indicated the need for a free press, another crucial element of

Enlightenment thought, deeming it necessary for the protection of liberty:

"Take care of the freedom of the press, because it is the only support for your national freedom. If one cannot speak freely to one's fellow citizens and warn them in time, it is only too easy for the oppressors to play their role."

Van der Capellen's pamphlet was banned, but re-published illegally and eventually translated into French, English, and German. The impact of Enlightenment thought and the American Revolution is notable, but it is also reminiscent of De Witt's 'True Freedom.' Van der Capellen argued for dispersal of power amongst the people, as did De Witt, although in the 'True Freedom,' De Witt spoke of "the sharing of power amongst those fitted by background, education, and training to exercise it," and stated this was "the most effective

mechanism for checking abuse and misgovernment” (Israel, p. 719). He also sought to put the military under civilian control, as Van der Capellen would argue for more than one hundred years later.

It is clear that the Patriot leaders were well versed in historical models of democracy and republican virtue as evidenced by the work of Rutger Jan Schimmelpenninck, whom Israel called a “key theorist among the Patriots” (and later, Grand Pensionary of the Batavian Republic). In 1784 he published *Verhandeling over eene wel ingerichte volksregeering* (translated: *Treatise Concerning a Well Constituted People’s Regime*), in which he writes of the need for a “democratic republic which serves the interests of its citizens”



Rutger Jan Schimmelpenninck with Wife and Children, 1801-02, Pierre-Paul Prud'hon, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

(Israel, p. 1104). Israel states this work, while influenced by Rousseau, was also rooted in the history of the Dutch Republic. Schimmelpenninck must have been familiar with the writings of Franciscus van den Enden, a former Jesuit and Latin teacher (most notably of Benedict De Spinoza), who stated in his 1665 pamphlet *Vrije Politieke Stellingen* that “government should not only be for the good of the citizenry, and based on republican virtues, but should create equality of opportunity and be controlled by the people” (Israel, p. 788). In fact, Israel cites Van den Enden’s work as “being one of the very earliest systematic statements of democratic republicanism in the western world” (Israel, p. 788).

The use of the press was a critical element in garnering support for the Patriot



movement, and Patriot leaders, in 1784, compiled a two-volume publication *Grondwettige Herstelling* (translated, *Constitutional Restoration*) calling on the need for reform in the Provinces and the use of citizen militias as the tool by which political reform could occur. Included in this was the idea that the government should be ruled by an “enlightened elite” based on ability

rather than heredity. It was at this time that the Dutch Patriot movement gained more support, in particular, among the well educated, literate, and professional middle “classes” of urban society. The movement was an attempt to continue the goals of the earlier Dutch Revolt against Spain in removing power from the Stadholder and regents, and transferring it to representatives of the people. Additionally, the Patriots’ hoped to “turn the civic militias into an instrument of the people’s will, and finally compel the Stadholder’s representatives and the regents to restore the control of the citizenry in local, and therefore also provincial and national, politics” (Israel, p. 1101).

In creating the new citizens’ militias, emulating the American militia groups used to defeat the British Empire, the Free Corps distinguished themselves from the civic militias in several ways.

Most interestingly, that they would be open to all Dutchmen regardless of religion, again showing a clear



Patriots in Utrecht, 1786, anonymous, Centraal Museum, Utrecht.

connection to Enlightenment thought, but also to the radical element in the historical Dutch Republic. The subject of religious toleration was not new, but even during the Golden Age of the Republic there were limitations on the idea of tolerance. Political writer Pieter de la Court’s 1669 work, *Aanwysinge der heilsame politike Gronden* (Revised version of his 1662 - *The True Interest and Political Maxims of the Republic of Holland and West-Friesland*), was banned by Holland “for its criticism of the public Church and uncompromising plea for the ‘free practice of all religions and sects’” (Israel, p. 786). Although, as in the case of the



De La Court

Patriots who needed men to fill the ranks of the Free Corps, De La Court wrote on toleration within the context of the economic needs of society, “toleration was essential...to stimulate the immigration so urgently needed to sustain the economy and population of Holland’s cities” (Israel, p. 786). Even so, his

writings were considered revolutionary at the time. Another key goal of the Free Corps was

extensive training for the dual purpose of keeping order and fighting regular troops—both Dutch and foreign.

By 1785, the Free Corps had taken over several provinces and demanded a new

Exchange of Fire on the Vaartse Rijn near Jutphaas at 10p.m., 9 May 1787, 1787, Jonas Zeuner, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



constitution. William V fled The Hague and sought refuge in Gelderland, an Orangist stronghold. In the summer of 1786, the Patriots established dominance in Utrecht (the most influential of Patriot controlled provinces), Holland, and

Overijssel, while Zeeland, Friesland, and Gelderland remained primarily Orangist. Civil War was imminent. The first battle between the Patriots and the Orangists took place in May 1787 near Jutphaas in Utrecht. During the summer of 1787, Free Corps troops defeated Stadholder troops and took over Amsterdam and Rotterdam. At this time, the United Provinces became Nederland, in which the Patriots hoped to create a republican centralized state.



As quickly as the Patriots gained momentum, the Revolution was crushed, though not through any action of the Stadholder. William V, weak and indecisive, did little to halt the progression of the Patriots. In June 1787, his wife, Wilhelmina of Prussia, Princess of Orange, attempted to seek help from loyalists in The Hague, but she

Frederick William II (1744-1797), King of Prussia, Elector of Brandenburg, 1792, Anton Graff.



was arrested and detained by Gouda Free Corps. This action was the justification for her brother, King Frederick William II of Prussia, to send over 20,000 Prussian troops in September of 1787 to put down the rebellion. There was



Fredericka Sophia Wilhelmina of Prussia (1751 – 1820). Equestrian Portrait of the Wife of William V, 1789, Tethart Philipp Christian Haag, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

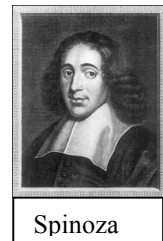
little resistance to the Prussian invasion and “backed by Prussian troops and British cash, William V returned to The Hague in triumph” (Israel p. 1114). Many Patriots, in the wake of Orangist intimidation and pillaging of their homes, fled to France.

In 1795 the Patriots returned to the United Provinces along with French troops during the French Revolution. This event ushered in the revolutionary Dutch Republic, called the Batavian Republic, which was clearly a continuation of the failed Patriot Revolution of the 1780s. According to Israel, “the Patriots now had a free hand to carry through their Revolution” (Israel, p. 1122). The Batavian Republic instituted a number of democratic reforms, including the formation of a National Assembly, in which all males (except those collecting poor relief) over the age of 20 could vote to elect delegates to reform the constitution. The constitution of 1798, which completely changed the existing federal power structure of the Dutch Republic into a unitary body, was passed in the National Assembly, though never implemented due to disagreements between the Patriots who wanted sweeping reforms and those that held to the traditions of the past. The Batavian Republic would only last as long as the French Revolution remained democratic in nature, that is to say, until Napoleon crowned himself emperor in 1805. In 1806 the ideals of the Republic succumbed to the pressure of Bonaparte, who named his brother, Louis Bonaparte, King of Holland, thus ending forever the Dutch Republic.

The Patriots’ demands for a “true republican constitution” (1785) and a restoration of “the dispossessed rights of the citizenry” (Israel, p. 1105) are indicative of their radical, revolutionary nature. Despite that, Israel argues the Patriot Revolution was an extension of earlier republican movements in the history of the Dutch Republic rather than a reflection of the “new revolutionary trend” emerging at this time. He quotes, “Some of the rhetoric was new and revolutionary in tone, and owed much to the American experience; but the reality of

what was demanded...was only a slight extension of what was traditional in the eighteenth-century Dutch Republic and thus...the Patriot Revolution was essentially a further development...rather than...a fundamentally new beginning linked to revolutionary trends elsewhere in the late eighteenth-century Atlantic world” (Israel, p. 1105). Here, Israel expresses the idea of continuity between the foundations of the Dutch Republic and the Patriot Revolution. Therefore, I see the Dutch Republic as an earlier and more significant model of Enlightenment values and “republican virtue” than its predecessor, the American Revolution.

Evidence of continuity can be found at the end of the seventeenth century, when political and intellectual leaders in the Provinces, such as De Witt, De La Court, and Spinoza, were writing and attempting to implement ideas of popular sovereignty twenty years before Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government*. Spinoza, the most radical of the Dutch seventeenth century philosophers, wrote in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670) that “‘democracy is of all forms of government the most natural and most consonant with individual liberty’, and generally the most apt to generate the ‘benefits of freedom in a state’” (Israel, p. 787). This idea, though radical at the time, certainly became much more accepted as the era of Enlightenment thought progressed and, though by no means mainstream in the eighteenth century, did gain a following amongst the educated upper and “middling” classes seeking a place in the existing power structure.



Though the Patriot Revolution failed to achieve its political objective, it succeeded in introducing a more contemporary model of democracy, which furthered the concepts of popular sovereignty and nationalism, opening the floodgates for other revolutionary movements to follow. It demonstrates continuity of thought rooted in the ideological battles, not only between the Orangists and States-party faction, but even amongst political allies

regarding popular sovereignty. Although the Patriot Revolution had its foundations in the history of the Republic, it was a more progressive movement and, I think, fundamentally different in its inclusion of the common people: “Behind this pattern of political conflict lay an unprecedented degree of popular mobilization and a novel pattern of popular politics...” (Brake, p. 202). While Israel argues this was not a fundamentally new movement, he does concede it was a partly a result of the period: “The Dutch Patriot Revolution was a product of the Enlightenment and age of Atlantic Democratic revolution. Its assumptions and outlook show many affinities with the thought-world of men throughout the western world eager for fundamental reform, and the sovereignty of the people...And yet, while a few contemporary English and French writers were drawn on...in the main, Patriot ideas grew out of the Dutch ideological debates of the mid-eighteenth century...and were ultimately rooted in the seventeenth-century controversies about the nature of the revolt against Spain...” (Israel, p. 1103-4).

It seems as if there is no clear cut answer, then, to the question of continuity or change, and I would assert the Patriot Revolution in Dutch history is both a reflection of its tradition as well as a product of its time. In that, I agree with Israel that the Dutch philosophical and political debates of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were crucial to the development of the Patriot leaders’ ideology, and in fact, were its cornerstone. What was new and different about this movement was the idealization and incorporation of the people and the formation of a “national” identity. The use of the press, the formation of the Free Corps and its inclusion of previously discriminated religious minority groups also indicated a new process—one clearly influenced by the Enlightenment and the American Revolution. It is in this complexity and intertwining of tradition and progress that I am moved and impressed by the Dutch Patriot Revolution.

Bibliography

_____. Background: Atlantic World – The Involvement of the Dutch in the American War of Independence. “Joan Derk van der Capellen tot den Pol (1741-1784).” “The Smouldering Revolution.” Accessed: July 22, 2007.

<<http://www.kb.nl/coop/geheugen/extra/tentoonstellingen/atlanticworld4EN/tentoon2.html>>.

Dutton, Blake D. “*Benedict De Spinoza (1632 – 1677)*.” The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Accessed August 12, 2007. <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/s/spinoza.htm>> 2006.

Israel, Jonathan I. *The Dutch Republic Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477 – 1806* (Oxford, 1998).

_____. Rijksmuseum. “*Battle near Jutphass*.” “*Wilhelmina of Prussia*.” “*Schimmelpenninck Family*.” “*Stadholder William V*.” Rijksmuseum. Accessed July 29, 2007.

<<http://www.rijksmuseum.nl/index.jsp?lang=en>>.

Te Brake, Wayne P. “Popular Politics and the Dutch Patriot Revolution.” *Theory and Society*, Vol. 14, No. 2. March, 1985, pp. 199 – 222. JStor. Accessed July 24, 2007.

<<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0304-2421%28198503%2914%3A2%3C199%3APPATDP%3E2.0.CO%3B2-7>>.

_____, University of Leiden, Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences. “Pieter de la Court.” University of Leiden. Accessed August 12, 2007.

<<http://www.childandfamilystudies.leidenuniv.nl/index.php3?c=268>>.

Van Vliet, Rietje. “Bookseller of the Enlightenment.” November 1, 2005. University of Leiden. Accessed July 31, 2007.

<http://www.nieuwsbrief.leidenuniv.nl/images/051101_2.jpg>.

Wilschut, Arie. Translation into English of Joan van der Capellen *Aan het Volk van Nederland*. January 15th, 1998. Casema. Accessed July 22, 2007.

<<http://home.casema.nl/wilschut/ahvvne.htm>>.

_____. World History at KMLA: History of the Netherlands, The Patriots, 1787. Accessed July 22, 2007. <<http://www.zum.de/whkmla/region/lowcountries/patriots.html>>.