

The Dutch Golden Age and Globalization: History and Heritage, Legacies and Contestations

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I. Context

In 1579, seven of the seventeen Provinces of the Netherlands unenthusiastically declared their independence from the Habsburg King of Spain, to form the United Provinces, also known as the Union or the Dutch Republic. The new country achieved full international recognition in 1648, even though many states recognized its sovereignty much earlier.

The Dutch Republic was small in both size and population. It covered more or less the same territory as the present Dutch state, and had approximately 1.5 million inhabitants in 1600, and about 1.9 million by 1700.¹ In 1600, France had 18 million inhabitants, Spain (including Portugal) 11 million, and Great Britain 7 million.² The province of Holland contributed some 45 percent of the country's total population.

Two most striking demographic features of the Dutch Republic were its high population density and in particular its early and high level of urbanization, especially in Holland and Zeeland. In the early sixteenth century as much as forty percent of the population in these provinces was already living in cities. By the middle of the seventeenth century, the twenty or so major cities in Holland were home to some sixty percent of the total population of this province, while nearly half of all residents of Zeeland lived in towns. The large number of towns and high degree of urbanization were unique in Europe. As such, the Dutch Republic can justifiably be labeled a "city-rich" society. If Amsterdam was by far the biggest city, albeit more so in the late seventeenth century than in the early decades of the Golden Age, many other Dutch cities equally rose to greater prominence in this era. Another interesting demographic feature of the Dutch Republic was the large number of residents who had their roots outside the seven provinces, an issue I will return to below.

The Dutch Republic adopted a rather atypical form of government. It was neither a city-state like Venice, nor a modern (equating modern with centralization) territorial state, such as France. Instead, the seven United Provinces constituted a confederation without a strong central authority and in which the nobility was less prominent than other elites. The rather loose federation of sovereign provinces operated through changing coalitions of provinces, cities, regents, and the *stadtholder*, each having slightly different ideals and interests. In many respects, the Union still retained the character of a league of city-states or city-regions.³ It was "strikingly local in its economic and political organization."⁴ The particular political structure of the Republic as a whole and of the individual provinces gave the cities a great degree of autonomy.

Above all, the Republic was a state of cities, governed by collectives of (self) elected members of the urban elites. The city government normally consisted of a council of elders and magistracy. The twenty to forty councilors were appointed for life and were selected, usually by the councils themselves, from "the wisest, most respectable and richest citizens." These "city fathers," or "wise men," were considered to represent the

local citizens and to advise and supervise the magistracy. This magistracy consisted of two to four *burgomasters*, the magistrates or aldermen, and the sheriff. As a rule, the burgomasters and most aldermen were annually recruited from the council and continued to be members of that body. The members of both the council and magistracy were known as regents (*regenten*).

Foreign authors in particular have frequently used the term “middle class” in order to describe the regents’ social background. Compared to the aristocratic, often noble power elites elsewhere in Europe, this seems accurate. Socio-economic and political power in the Republic was based primarily on trade and industry, rather than landownership. To most other seventeenth-century elites in Europe, landownership was far more important. The Dutch regents regarded themselves as an elite within the citizenry, and they were also seen as such by most citizens. It should be added, however, that the “middle class” or “bourgeoisie” (*burgerij*) was not a homogeneous group either. Its upper echelons claimed a distinct status, enjoying a lifestyle that set them apart from its lower segments. Although upward social mobility was certainly possible at the time of the Republic, the boundaries between ruling elite and *burgerij*, as well as between *burgerij* and the “crowd,” were real and far from easy to cross.

The political structure and the multitude of individual interests required a considerable willingness to compromise, and a sense of balance on the part of the local elites. This often resulted in policies that had a strong local basis and that also presumed a relatively high level of mutual trust between local citizens and governments, as well as among the local population.⁵

Aside from well-known classical virtues (such as moderation, harmony, truthfulness, sincerity, perseverance, prudence, and vigilance) and traditional Northwestern-European values (such as incorruptibility and wisdom of judges, equality of all persons under the law, and the importance of statute law), the main political values during the Dutch Republic centered on securing peace and harmony, consultation and persuasion rather than conflict, obedience and compulsion, and moderate and gentle government. Civic authority was made, not born. Foreign observers were struck by the widespread sense of civic pride, as reflected in the attention to public buildings and by the extent to which city governments took local public opinion into account.⁶ Local authorities at least listened to their citizens—to the *populus*, not to the *plebs*. For all these various yet interrelated reasons, the United Provinces have been nicknamed the “Republic of Persuasion.”

Political tensions and open conflicts within towns, between towns and provinces, between *stadtholder* and *regenten*, and especially conflicts and war with other states were generally seen as undesirable because they would threaten peace, prosperity, and the status quo. This attitude can be accounted for in part by the small size of the Republic and its economic vulnerability in times of war. But specific cultural values play a role as well. Unlike many French or German noblemen, most Dutch local leaders were not looking for personal glory on the battlefield. They valued other activities much more. At the time of the Republic, one would rarely see paintings of battle scenes in Dutch private homes or public buildings such as town halls, whereas such representations were quite a common sight in nearby countries.⁷

Most Dutch regents let their political decisions be guided mainly by local and regional commercial or economic interests. Generally, they were more concerned with protecting favorable economic conditions and economic networks than with territory and territorial

expansion. Elsewhere in seventeenth-century Europe, by contrast, the political-military *raison d'état*, or the private interests of kings and emperors, would often prevail.

Within the provinces and towns of the Republic, the medieval citizenship system largely remained in place, as was true of the medieval walls and gates. Being a citizen, or *poorter*, was a prerequisite for holding political office, getting a job as a local civil servant, receiving charity, or gaining access to one of the guilds. Guilds were fraternities of professionals in a particular trade, and dated back to the Middle Ages. These various rules and traditions implied that professional life was virtually impossible for non-citizens. Citizenship was a valuable privilege protecting the local “haves” against the “have-nots.” It safeguarded the local population against unwanted competition from outsiders and foreigners. But local citizens had to perform particular duties as well. For instance, they had to serve in the civic militia (*schutterij*).

Furthermore, each town had a special register in which the names of all new citizens were recorded. To become a citizen, a person or his parents had to be born in the city, or this formal status had to be acquired through marriage, purchase, or a gift from the town government. In case citizenship was bought and not inherited, the new citizen had to take an oath and wait a certain period of time before being able to enjoy all rights. It was impossible to become a citizen for poor migrants and—in many cities—for members of some religious minorities, such as the Jews.⁸

This implies that not all city residents were also citizens. After economic and social conditions started to deteriorate in many Dutch cities during the second half of the seventeenth century, local governments made it increasingly difficult to obtain citizenship, thus hoping to reduce the numbers of the poor and unemployed in their city. These various rules and policies underscore that in the local world of the Dutch Golden Age cities, local governments gave priority to the interests of their own citizens.

The Dutch Golden Age has been internationally admired and acclaimed for its impressive economic performance and its role in developing a world-economy. Peter Taylor has argued that in so-called world-systems analysis, the Dutch Republic is usually identified:

...as one of the three hegemonic states that have defined the basis trajectory of the modern world-system. However compared with the British in the nineteenth century and the US in the twentieth century, the seventeenth century Dutch appear to be a pale shadow of what a ‘world hegemon’ should be. A very small state both territorially and demographically, it hardly seems feasible that this still new polity could set the path along which the modern world-system embarked to eliminate all rival systems...because it is not overt power that defines a hegemon but its infra-structural power: the Dutch developed a social formula, which we have come to call modern capitalism, that proved to be transferable and ultimately deadly to all other social formulas.⁹

Likewise, the Dutch Republic plays an important role in Immanuel Wallerstein’s famous books on the origins and the consolidation of the modern world-system. Wallerstein argues that the special novelty of the capitalist modern world-system (including the secret of its strength and success—it has been around for five centuries

already) is that it remained predominantly one economic system incorporating or accommodating many different political systems.¹⁰ The earlier world-systems had been very unstable structures, which all tended to change into political empires or disintegrate. For Wallerstein, capitalism is based on the (presumed) fact that economic factors are stronger than what any political system can achieve or control, which gives capitalists structural freedom to act.

The renowned French historian, Fernand Braudel, agrees with Wallerstein that during their Golden Age, the Dutch created a new, enlarged European world-economy; one that is Transatlantic in Wallerstein's view and worldwide in that of Braudel.¹¹ However, Braudel's world economy (*l'économie monde*) should not be confused with what he called *l'économie mondiale*, which refers to the fact of covering the whole world.

Another relevant difference between Braudel's and Wallerstein's analysis of the emerging world-economy concerns the role of cities. Wallerstein tends to focus on states and national economies (preferring to incorporate the latter into a world-economy), while partially overlooking the fundamental role of cities in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Individual cities do play a role in his analysis, but in general just the few most influential cities like Seville or Amsterdam. In contrast, towns and the mutual relationships among cities are central to Braudel. His concept of a world-economy is city-centered (i.e., a network of centers of capital circulation). Similarly, I would argue that cities and city-economies, rather than states or national economies, were the dominant economic forces in the long sixteenth century. The creative agents of economic change often congregated in cities like Amsterdam; they served as "information exchanges" for the city network, which was at the center of the world-economy. Almost all information exchanges went through the predominantly informal networks of families and firms. Reliable personal networks were essential for local and regional trade—the bulk of all Dutch trade—as well as for long-distance and overseas trading, just as for almost all other economic, social, cultural, and political activities.

For both Braudel and Wallerstein the creation of a world economy was the logical result of the forceful and nonstop expansion of capitalist Europe after the fifteenth century. Europeans penetrated into other economic systems, subjugating the "periphery" to their own capitalist interests. In this sense, however, the Dutch did not create a true world economic system, according to P. W. Klein and others.¹² Also in the sense of "making an impression on the continental, mainly rural subsistence economies of the peoples of East and Southeast Asia," and on Asian maritime commerce and shipping, the seventeenth-century intervention of the Dutch and other Europeans was rather minimal and barely powerful enough to claim that European capitalists subjected Asia into their modern world system.¹³

Is Wallerstein's picture of the Dutch Republic's capitalist economy and its influence on the world too modern? According to Maarten Prak, Jan de Vries, and others, the economy of the Netherlands during its Golden Age certainly showed modern characteristics, including technological innovations.¹⁴ Specifically, these authors identified market economy expansion; urbanization resulting in more specialized, commercial, efficient, and often large-scale agricultural production; migration from the countryside to the growing towns; a dynamic labor market; and a sharp increase in the numbers of hired laborers. Some of these characteristics can be seen as capitalist in Schumpeter's definition of capitalism (for instance, the introduction of new products, new production

techniques, creation of new markets, use of new raw materials, and improvement of the organization of production).¹⁵ In the view of John Merriman, however, organizational change in manufacturing was far more important than technological innovation for growth in the seventeenth century.¹⁶

Although the Netherlands was economically advanced, the Dutch were not the only ones to modernize their economy; it also happened in other parts of Europe. Furthermore, economic modernization was not exclusive to the seventeenth century, but actually started in the late Middle Ages. Most Dutch economic historians caution against interpreting everything in the Republic as “modern,” let alone “capitalist,” as well as against too “modern” definitions of *modern* and *capitalist*. In fact, in many aspects the Dutch economy of the Golden Age was neither modern nor capitalist. Prak has mentioned, for example, the absence of self-sustained continuous growth and of the continuous and substantial increase of per capita income.¹⁷ In fact, if we absolutely want to apply the word “capitalism” to the Dutch Golden Age, we should qualify it as “trade capitalism” (as different from nineteenth- and twentieth-century industrial capitalism), marked by slow and gradual innovations in trade.

In his classic and groundbreaking study of early modern entrepreneurship, P. W. Klein has clearly demonstrated that many seventeenth-century merchants and entrepreneurs preferred low or medium risk (securing a low or moderate income) over the combination of high risk and high profits.¹⁸ Because the pre-industrial world was already full of hazards, deliberately taking large economic risks in order to maximize profits amounted to a dangerous economic policy. In the short or even long run, it could easily lead to financial disaster, meaning personal and social tragedy. Entrepreneurial risks were considered by many a necessary evil to acquire or maintain family wealth, power, and prestige. The majority of Dutch Golden Age “capitalists” turned to safer and more secure investments (in land and obligations), and many of them reduced their risk-taking as soon as they had earned “enough.” The notorious (mercantilist) striving for trade monopolies was aimed not solely at maximizing profits, but perhaps even more at reducing risks. Acquiring capital was not an end in itself, but rather a means to the ends cited above.

Even though the Republic was “ruled by merchants,” as contemporaries claimed (and often deplored), the Dutch political elites were geared to trade, not necessarily or principally to “free trade” as defined by Adam Smith. Every town or province tried to protect its own interests by regulating and often restricting trade. Free (international) trade was favored by the Dutch if and when it best served the interests of the majority of their towns and provinces. Elaborate and detailed rules and regulations controlled production and trade. Moreover, the guilds were not abolished, which allowed the strict organization of manufacturing and distribution—with its virtual exclusion of all non-locals from practicing a trade—to persist.

A last point of criticism is related to Wallerstein’s description and interpretation of the diverse groups of seventeenth-century Dutch citizens with their strong local and regional orientation, as a bourgeoisie, with a class consciousness and self-perception as a universal class recruiting its members from all social layers and developing a sense of national sentiment. This view should also be modified for being too modern, a point made by Simon Schama as well. The Dutch *burger*, or citizen, was not a proto-capitalist or primarily a *homo economicus*, nor does bourgeoisie (loaded at it is with nineteenth-century assumptions) fully coincide with *burgerij*.¹⁹

The Dutch were not the first Europeans to explore the possibilities of direct trade with other continents. The first explorers, traders, and colonists were predominantly late-medieval Spanish and Portuguese. Spanish ships had reached the Americas in 1492 and six years later Portuguese ships made a financially extremely successful first trip to India. The return cargo of spices paid for the costs of the expedition sixty times over.²⁰ Since the early sixteenth century, small flows of people, goods, and money have connected Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas in an exchange system dominated by Europeans. During the second half of the sixteenth century and into the seventeenth century, the commercial center of Europe (including its overseas trade with Asia, Africa, and the Americas) and its manufacturing center shifted from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, northwestern rim of Europe.²¹

According to Prak, the Dutch gave a new impetus to the development of intercontinental trade through their ability to integrate the various commercial flows due to their shipping capacity and nautical knowledge.²² Just before the middle of the seventeenth century, the 2,500 Dutch ships accounted for about half of Europe's shipping.²³ For a considerable part of the seventeenth century, the Northern Netherlands and in particular the city of Amsterdam functioned as the main hub, as the central or staple market of Europe's overseas trade. During the first half of the eighteenth century, it would lose its position as preeminent trading and banking center to London.

It is illustrative here to give a short overview of the impressive rise of Dutch overseas trade outside of Europe.²⁴ In the 1590s, Dutch ships became regular visitors to the African coast, buying sugar and precious metals from the Portuguese. In 1593–94, direct trade links with the Caribbean islands were established. In 1594, for the first time, a Dutch ship arrived in the port of Aleppo (present Syria), trading silver for spices and silk. That same year, the first of three consecutive expeditions was mounted by a consortium of merchants and investors to find a northern sea route to India. In 1595, four ships left for the East taking the southern route, circumnavigating Africa. Two years later only one ship returned, but this was enough encouragement to send another 61 ships to the East between 1598 and 1602. Then the United East India Company (VOC), one of the first joint-stock companies, was founded in 1602 and granted a monopoly on trade with the East Indies. During the same period, the Portuguese, who had set up a trading network in Asia almost a century before, could send no more than 46 ships. In 1596, the Dutch built a fortress at the coast of present-day Guyana, its first stronghold in Africa.

Next, in 1609, Henry Hudson set foot on Manhattan Island, which from then on would be systematically colonized by merchants from Amsterdam. Half a century later, in 1664, almost 7,000 Europeans lived in the colony of New Netherland, approximately 2,500 in New Amsterdam, about 1,000 in Albany, and the rest in some twenty small rural settlements.²⁵

As a counterpart to the VOC, the smaller and less successful West India Company (WIC) was founded in 1621, receiving from the States-General the monopoly on trade with Africa and southern America. The main pursuit of the WIC was sugar, and sugar meant growing sugarcane on plantations. In 1629, the company fought a costly war with the Portuguese in Brazil, with its many sugar plantations. Already by 1654 the WIC had to give up Brazil. The colony had not brought the projected earnings, just as the slave trade with Brazil proved to turn hardly any profit. In 1634, several of the Antillean islands were conquered. In 1664, New Netherland surrendered upon the arrival of a huge

British fleet. Ten years later, the Republic officially accepted the loss of New Netherland in exchange for recognition of the Dutch claim to Surinam, which colonizers from the province of Zeeland had taken by force in 1667. Surinam and its plantations (initially owned and exploited by a private company) became the main Dutch colony in the West, although the island of Curacao developed into the main slave trading station. The possession of Surinam and the small Antillean islands was the only lasting result of the colonization efforts of the WIC, a company that was almost permanently on the verge of bankruptcy.

Between the two companies another interesting and important difference existed, due to the different economic and political situation in Asia and in the Americas. The VOC set up trading posts in Asia to purchase the desired goods, and in general it opposed colonization. Structural settlement was a means to an end for this trading company, although the VOC did lay the foundation of what was to become much later (in the nineteenth century) one of the biggest colonial empires. The WIC was much more in favor of, and dependent on, establishing colonies in America in order to produce the necessary goods, which were not produced sufficiently by the indigenous populations. This explains the different demographic imprint of the two companies and the greater profitability of the VOC. Another difference pertains to the prevailing attitude toward the non-Europeans. In Asia the employees of the VOC often had to beg, bribe, intrigue, or pay in order to receive the goods and services of the native peoples. The use of force and violence was virtually unthinkable in the relations with Japan, China, and other well-organized states in the East. Yet such force marked the behavior toward the “wild,” “primitive,” and “uncivilized” natives of Africa and the Americas in arduous colonization attempts.

Between 1602, the year in which the VOC was founded, and 1700, a total of 324,000 persons, many of them Germans and Scandinavians and other non-Dutch, left for the East on company ships (on average 20 to 25 ships per year).²⁶ Of this number, 113,000 of them eventually returned. The figures for the eighteenth century are even more impressive: 671,000 traveled to the East, of whom 266,000 returned. The VOC was a huge company for its time, employing nearly 12,000 Europeans in Asia at the end of the seventeenth century. But even 12,000 is an extremely small number compared to the size of the Asian populations. The two biggest VOC outposts, in Ceylon and Batavia (at the site of the Indonesian city of Jakarta), counted less than 3,000 Europeans each by the end of the seventeenth century.²⁷ Because of the small numbers, the shortage of European women, the desire or need to establish and strengthen networks with native elites, and—compared to the situation in the Americas—the more equal relationship between the indigenous people and Europeans in Asia, relations between the two groups were frequent and intense, including many “mixed” marriages. Such a background was no social disadvantage. Children of mixed marriages did not encounter any discrimination in Batavia’s urban society life.²⁸

At the same time, it is important to repeat that although the Dutch trade with Asia was spectacular in the views of past and present observers, the trade balance was almost always negative because the people living in Asia were barely interested in goods from Europe. In the seventeenth-century, inter-Asian or Asian country trade was actually more important and more profitable for the VOC than the import of Asian goods into Europe, according to P. W. Klein.²⁹ This famous economic historian has argued that long-distance

trade with Europe before the second half of the nineteenth century was too insignificant for the integration into the world market of the East Asian economy. Only then, Western—not Dutch—“technology, shipping and communication had developed sufficiently for establishing an indissoluble direct bond between the world market” and China and Japan.³⁰

As pointed out earlier, due to the political, economic, and religious circumstances in Early Modern Europe, migration was an important aspect of the Dutch Golden Age. In their book on the history of immigration into the Netherlands, Lucassen and Penninx distinguish four categories of immigrants.³¹ The first category consists of those who were forced to leave their country because of religious and/or political changes. These migrants often came in groups and within a short period of time. In general, this category of immigrants has attracted more attention than the other three categories. Within this category, the first and biggest group was formed by the approximately 100,000 immigrants from the Southern Netherlands (present day Belgium, Luxemburg, and the French departments Nord and Pas-de-Calais). Because of the political, religious, and economic consequences of the Spanish Reconquest in the last quarter of the sixteenth century, many left for England and the Protestant German states, but the majority came to the Northern provinces. It is important to keep in mind that, despite some cultural differences (for instance, language), the arrival of these newcomers did not result in ethnic or ethnological diversity. And because of their education, skills, contacts, and wealth, many made a valuable contribution to the economic, scientific, and cultural bloom of the Republic. In the eyes of a Haarlem or Gouda citizen, probably most of the Flemish newcomers were no more different than someone from the northern province of Groningen or from Maastricht in the South.

The second biggest migration wave was formed by French Protestants, Huguenots, who fled France during the last two decades of the seventeenth century because of the persecution after the revocation in 1685 of the Edict of Nantes by Louis XIV. Out of a total of 200,000 refugees, an estimated 50,000 to 60,000 Huguenots settled in the Netherlands. Initially they were welcomed and even actively invited by individual cities. Among the first Huguenots there were many specialized traders and skilled craftsmen so Dutch town governments were eager to attract these fellow-citizens and Protestant brothers. They offered free citizenship and temporary fiscal and other advantages. However, poorer Huguenots, who arrived later, did not meet with the same hospitality and generosity.³² The influx of tens of thousands of Huguenots did not create ethnic diversity either, but they made a much appreciated and much sought after contribution to Dutch economic and cultural life.

Jewish refugees formed another, much smaller group of immigrants. In the first decades of the seventeenth century a few thousand Portuguese Jews arrived in the Dutch Republic, in particular in Amsterdam. Almost all of them were officially Roman Catholics. Because of their Jewish roots, however, the Inquisition in Portugal (united with Spain at that time) persecuted these *conversos*. The Inquisition did not want to believe that these new Christians were true Christians. After their escape to the Netherlands many preferred to reconvert to the Jewish religion. Many of these Portuguese or Sephardic Jews were rich and well educated. Because of their economic position and connections, Amsterdam in particular (and a few other cities) welcomed

Sephardic Jews, sometimes officially presenting them as Christians to make them more acceptable to the local population.³³

Between 1635 and 1750, some 10,000 Jews from Central and Eastern Europe sought refuge in the Netherlands, trying to escape from bloody persecutions, pogroms, and anti-Semitism. Compared to the Portuguese Jews, these immigrants were very poor. As a rule, Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews did not mingle or mix. The influx of the poor, unwelcome Ashkenazi Jews in some way re-marginalized the Jews within Dutch society, notwithstanding the fact that “the degree of their acceptance and absorption was still a unique success in the otherwise miserable history of the Jews and gentiles in early modern Europe.”³⁴

The official and public Dutch response to both groups of Jewish newcomers was very different than the attitude shown toward the Protestant refugees from the Southern Netherlands and France. As indicated above, the latter were often welcomed because in general they were seen as culturally alike and economically valuable, while the former were converted Roman Catholics or Jews. In addition to this religious and/or ethnic difference, the poverty of most of the Ashkenazi was also seen as problematic. A few cities were willing to grant citizenship to those Jewish immigrants who could afford it financially. However, even Jews with citizenship were almost always excluded from the guilds.³⁵ A number of edicts also banned foreign and poor German and Eastern European Jews from certain towns and provinces.

Many more small groups of Protestant religious dissenters and refugees from all over Europe found a new home in the Dutch Republic, where they could enjoy a comparatively high degree of religious freedom.

The second category of (temporary) immigrants was formed by those who had to be in the Netherlands for a certain period of time because of the nature of their economic activities. These people were “passers-by,” predominantly engaged in trade and manufacturing.

The third category consisted of those who traditionally worked as temporary migrant labor, following the cycle of seasons. Seasonal work was often in agriculture and many seasonal workers came from German states.

The many tens of thousands of individuals and families who migrated to the Republic—in particular to the Western provinces—were attracted by the better economic opportunities and relative prosperity. They made up the fourth and last category. In general, the temporary or permanent presence of the last three categories of newcomers did not cause major problems because they were not different, from a cultural and ethnological point of view. Simon Schama rightly emphasizes the importance of settlement and the desire of migrants to settle, to become an “insider,” in his terminology.³⁶ The Dutch citizens regarded vagrants or vagabonds as a menace to the civic and moral order. Vagrants and gypsies were banned, imprisoned, or sent to houses of correction.

It is important to keep in mind that although immigration was considerable, the estimated percentage of inhabitants of the Republic born abroad never exceeded ten percent. In 1550, it was less than two percent. It increased to nine percent in 1600, was eight percent in 1650, and dropped to five percent in 1700. During the eighteenth century, immigration numbers fell drastically due to the worsening economic and social situation, as well as a growing inhospitality. In 1900, the percentage was equal to that of 1550.

Furthermore, overseas emigration numbers were rather insignificant compared to immigration numbers.

Calvinism, religious heterogeneity, and tolerance of other religions are time and again mentioned in relation to the Dutch Golden Age. At the end of the sixteenth century, the Calvinist Protestants were but a small minority in the Netherlands. Many more inhabitants belonged to other Protestant groups (including Mennonites and Lutherans), while Catholics made up about one-third of the total population of the young Republic. A century later, the percentage of Calvinists had increased at the cost of other, often more moderate Protestant groups, although the Calvinists never formed a majority. The change of the religious landscape was to a considerable extent the result of what Henk van Nierop has described as a deliberate policy of “confessional cleansing” by city governments, especially during the first years of the revolt against Spain.³⁷ The treaty of the Union of Utrecht granted *individual* freedom of conscience in religious matters, but not the freedom to actively practice, for instance, Catholicism. An important distinction was made between individual and collective, and between private and public. Catholics formed about 30 percent of the population of the towns in the province of Holland and more than 40 percent of the population of the Republic as a whole. The strong presence of non-Protestants in the United Provinces calls for a re-evaluation of Wallerstein’s statement that Protestantism was bound to become (and became) the religion of the center-states of the modern world-system.³⁸

Calvinism was not a true state religion and the Calvinist, or Reformed Church, was not a true state church either. While the regents did agree that the Reformed Church embodied the one and only true religion, they did not accept claims that this church should have any formal influence on policies and politics. In the words of Henk van Nierop: even “champions of tolerance as Erasmus, Cornelis Pietersz Hooft, merchant and burgomaster of Amsterdam, and even the maverick Dirck Volkertsz Coornhert ultimately strove for religious concord, not diversity. If tolerance of the unorthodox was acceptable as a temporary expedient under certain conditions, it was not a goal to be striven for.”³⁹ Furthermore, recent studies have strongly underscored the limits of toleration. They have warned against seeing this limited and pragmatic religious tolerance as an early policy example or a first step toward the modern separation between church and state.⁴⁰ Especially in the urban, local-lead societies with important trading interests and the presence of sizeable religious minorities, a certain degree of tolerance, and a certain degree of separation between church and state, made sense.⁴¹

Notwithstanding the fact that Catholics were excluded from city government and officially could not practice their religion, they were never limited in their civic rights. They had good reason to trust the protection of the rule of law, something that cannot be said of religious dissenters living in other seventeenth-century countries, where, as in France and England, religious diversity had led to civil war. For some groups within Dutch society, however, the rule of law could be rather severe. For example, sexual intercourse between Jewish men and Christian women could and often did lead to corporal punishment.

What is more, tolerance for sexual deviance was definitely not a characteristic of the Dutch Golden Age. In this respect, Voltaire, in his *Dictionnaire philosophique portative*, first published in London and Geneva in 1764, wrote under “love, the so-called Socratic” that it was well known that this “error of nature” is much more common in mild climates

than in the frosty cold of the North. According to Voltaire, what is seen as a weakness in Southern Europe is a “repulsive horror” in the eyes of the Dutch sailor and the Russian market-woman.⁴² Indeed, homosexuality was not tolerated at all in the Republic. On the contrary, many male homosexuals were persecuted and executed, often in a particular painful and dishonorable way and after having been tortured. The death penalty for this “unnatural vice” and “horrible crime” was commonly believed to be right and necessary in order to stop the corruption of society and to avert God’s anger and punishment.⁴³

Although the paintings of Vermeer, Rembrandt, Hals, and Steen may not immediately spring to mind when discussing the Dutch contribution to globalization, they are an integral feature of the Dutch Golden Age and perhaps also its most popular and well-documented aspect. In the eyes of John Merriman, Dutch paintings of the Golden Age reflect “not only its precocious commercial wealth, but also its toleration and openness to secular styles and subject matter.”⁴⁴ Mariët Westermann, Director of the Institute of Fine Arts of New York University, singles out the unprecedented concern for a “reality effect,” the lifelikeness and realism of the pictures. Many pictures were not “real” or “true” in the sense of a faithful reconstruction or honest depiction of reality. They suggest reality, what they want to show is a technically very accomplished but artificial reality, “offering meaning” through a positive or negative articulation of certain social ideals.⁴⁵ According to Westermann, Dutch artists were more concerned with this verisimilitude than their colleagues in “almost any other western culture.”⁴⁶ However, in comparison, Dutch seventeenth-century pictures are less idealized and more truthful and realistic.

The existence of an open art market, dominated by the taste and demand of private, middle-class citizens—instead of being dependent on commissions from courts and churches—was also rather special. Painting as a trade in the Republic resembled a modern industry, with specialization in the production of certain genres of pictures. Knowing the preference for certain themes can add to our understanding of the Dutch Republic and its inhabitants. Westermann, for example, mentions landscapes, cityscapes, animal paintings, still lifes, paintings of everyday life, and portraits as popular genres. Many pictures show economic activities, markets, ships, fleets, harbors, naval battles, and seascapes. Marine painters were highly rewarded.

Dutch seventeenth-century pictures “show little of colonial working life, concentrating rather on colonial benefits to trade, art and science.”⁴⁷ In the arts such a difference between the Dutch views of Asia and of the Americas and Africa is visible. Paintings of Dutch Brazil, for example, “mark the indigenous scene as Dutch indeed, easily and rightfully accessible to Dutch cultivation...Dutch portrayal of the indigenous peoples was structured as much by received opinion as by observation.”⁴⁸ These peoples were depicted as primitive and sometimes as cannibals. Pictures of Asia showed the exotic, seldom the barbaric.

Much has been written about the moral economy of the Dutch in general and about the moral meanings and messages of Dutch paintings. Simon Schama is not the only one who emphasized the tension between enjoying success and celebrating prosperity and enterprise, and the fear of the moral consequences of riches and the obsessive recognition of God’s benevolence. Still lifes and many other pictures can indeed also be “read” as

warnings and moral lessons, but I would like to counsel against seeing all paintings as full of hidden messages. Neither can we assume that every Dutch citizen saw and understood those messages in the same way. And many pictures in the popular genre of banquets and good food had no visible or covert warning.

One of the main debates concerning the Dutch Golden Age focuses on the question of how modern its society and culture were (“modern” often being equated with “positive”). As we have seen, economists and economic historians have heralded the (relatively) modern economy of the Republic. Others, like the British historians Lesley Price and Simon Schama, have emphasized its modern social structure, a predominantly middle-class urban society in a century in which estates characterized the social order in most other countries in Europe. Dutch cultural historians Willem Frijhoff and Marijke Spies have highlighted the modern culture of debate.⁴⁹ In his controversial *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity and the Emancipation of Man 1670–1752*, Jonathan Israel traced the roots of modernity through the Enlightenment to the late seventeenth century Republic, with its radical thinkers like Spinoza (who, by the way, was barely tolerated in the Republic) and culture of debate.⁵⁰

The only non-modern element seems to be politics. At least until the middle of the twentieth century, most authors were quite negative about the rather medieval, decentralized political system of the Republic, in which division, particularism, compromise, and slow decision-making were standard. According to nineteenth-century historians and political scientists, the odd and old-fashioned political system of the Republic had no future. They assigned much of the blame to this particular polity for the fact that the Dutch Republic in the eighteenth century was superseded by “modern” states. Still, this political system worked rather well in the seventeenth century. Especially the old fashioned primacy of local and regional government helps to explain why Dutch citizens had more trust in their governments, which was favorable for innovation and investment.⁵¹ It may also be a reference point for the future organization of a globalized world, in which cities are back, as some authors like Jean Gelman Taylor claim.⁵² The seventeenth and eighteenth century Dutch city network may offer an alternative to territorial or national state political economy. In this respect, it is important to note the substantial difference between Wallerstein’s image of strong, centralized states within the modern world-system of the long sixteenth century and the actual political organization of the United Provinces.

II. Legacy and Heritage

I would like to briefly address the collective image of the Dutch Golden Age: how we like to present the seventeenth-century Republic to others and how we want the Golden Age to be seen and known.

Johan Huizinga, probably the most famous Dutch historian, preferred to characterize the Dutch seventeenth century as an age of wood and iron, pitch and tar, and courage and energy, rather than using its later, eighteenth-century designation of Golden Age.⁵³ Huizinga still believed, however, that the Dutch civilization of the seventeenth century

was unique, an exception to the common European civilization, because of its distinct *burgerlijk* character (which unfortunately was gradually lost in the late seventeenth century and the first decades of the eighteenth century).

In espousing this view, Huizinga follows in a long tradition, beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, of Dutch moralists who sought to understand the relative decline of the Republic, as well as to find ways of reviving its success. One of their basic assumptions was the partly mythical idea of the seventeenth-century Republic's social and cultural homogeneity, of citizens and regents sharing basic values, having similar lifestyles, and belonging to one and the same social and cultural "middle class" or "bourgeois" universe. In this persistent view an important role is played by the attributed and exaggerated cultural alteration or "aristocratization" of the wealthy elites, who became more "French" and less "Dutch." These elites seemed eager to weaken their ties with and to distance themselves from the common people, the honest and simple folks who were believed to have preserved the "old Dutch" values, habits, customs, and social manners. What the eighteenth-century Republic needed was a revival of the old norms and values—a return of traditional, honest, and freedom-loving republican leadership of active and thrifty merchants and manufacturers. Here we see some reminiscences of Simon Schama's *Embarrassment of Riches* and Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which stressed the elements of self-control and of saving and investing money in new and profitable activities instead of spending it on conspicuous consumption.⁵⁴

This still popular view is based on a primarily moral explanation of the process of a Golden Age turning into a "Silver" one, ignoring structural economic and political factors and developments. Although this image still betrays much exaggeration and idealization, it proved to be a powerful political weapon in the hands of the so-called Patriots at the end of the eighteenth century, criticizing the *stadtholder* and his supporters among the regents.⁵⁵ With respect to the legacy issue it is interesting to observe that this first group of "inventors" of the special Dutch Golden Age character failed to mention issues associated with tolerance and diversity!

Finally, I will focus on the legacy of the Dutch Golden Age and its role in the United States, before drawing some general conclusions. In 2009, much attention was given to the celebration of 400 years of Dutch-American relations, which started in 1609 when a small expedition of the Dutch East India Company, captained by the Englishman Henry Hudson, arrived at Manhattan. The Dutch government considered this celebration an opportunity to further strengthen the economic bonds between the two countries. The city of Amsterdam, branding and marketing itself as the "Gay Capital of the World," emphasized its special role and mission, which was "continuing its commitment to openness and tolerance." It sent its deputy mayor, Carolien Gehrels, who issued a statement in support of equality and tolerance for the gay community and who participated in New York Gay Pride Parade.⁵⁶ Moreover, during his visit to New York, Amsterdam Mayor Job Cohen joined in marriage five American-Dutch same-sex couples brought in by the city of Amsterdam for the occasion.

At the same time, Joep de Koning, a very active Dutch New Yorker, tried in vain to get official support for his Tolerance Park project on Governors Island. This park was meant to appeal to the imagination of Americans in the same manner as such popular recreations as Jamestown and New Plymouth, serving as permanent sites of Anglo-

American cultural heritage. As the park's projected central theme, De Koning envisioned the continuing cultural consequences of the Dutch settlement of New York for contemporary America. He claimed that its "unique historical contribution" is to be found in the instruction given to the colonists in 1624, reiterating one of the founding treaties of the Republic, the Union of Utrecht of 1579. In his view, it specifically refers to "religious tolerance as the basis of ethnological diversity in the American culture of freedom (then, now and in the future)."⁵⁷ These examples reveal active efforts to promote tolerance—in different fields and meanings—as the Dutch Golden Age's legacy to the world.

Two years before the 2009 celebration, the city of Leiden officially celebrated the historical fact that in 1607 the British Pilgrim Fathers, coming from Plymouth, sailed to the "promised land," after staying several years in exile in Leiden. They landed near Cape Cod and built a new Plymouth. The Lakenhal, one of Leiden's museums, showed an interesting exhibition called "Holland Mania: American and Japanese Views of the Netherlands." Japan was included because in 2007 the Dutch also celebrated 400 years of trade relations with Japan. In the introduction of a book published on the occasion of the exhibition and bearing the same title, the director of the Lakenhal argues that the Pilgrim Fathers did more than just start a settlement: they "laid the foundation of the values and mores of the United States: honour and loyalty to home and family, the Protestant work ethics, respect for nature and for the principles of democracy."⁵⁸ Elsewhere in this study, it is indicated that in the nineteenth century the pious, heroic, and hard-working Pilgrim Fathers were even presented as role models for later waves of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe.⁵⁹ The Pilgrim Fathers tend to be considered as representative of the Dutch Republic and its values. They came to Leiden because they were welcome in Holland, where they "belonged," but were they actually more Dutch than British, if not typically Dutch?

In *Holland Mania*, several authors describe and analyze what Americans have considered to be typically Dutch characteristics: freedom, entrepreneurship, the struggle against the sea, cleanliness, and domesticity. Entrepreneurship was and is often equated with the so-called "VOC mentality." In recent years, the former Dutch Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende, echoing voices of the past, has used this expression several times in his speeches and political analysis to indicate what, in his view, the current Dutch people should hark back to as a source of inspiration. This reference to the Dutch past has met with severe criticism because, as his opponents argued, it is uncalled for to hold up the example of a company that made fortunes for its stockholders by exploiting the native peoples of Indonesia and other regions.

Holland "mania" is said to have existed in the U.S. ever since the middle of the nineteenth century. In my view, it largely amounted to a sentimental celebration and glorification of everything "Old Dutch" or all that could pass as such. At that time, it seems, many Americans were convinced that American democracy was firmly rooted in the form of government first established by the Dutch Republic. Moreover, the American ideal of liberty also involved a legacy of the Dutch, who, after all, had liberated themselves from an oppressive monarchy, much in the same way the Americans would do 200 years later.⁶⁰ In this same vein, such late nineteenth-century American historians as Henry Morton Dexter and William Elliott Griffis argued that typical Dutch Golden Age values like religious tolerance, a free press, local self-government, free education, and a written constitution had been decisive for the development of the United States.⁶¹

They were certainly wrong with respect to free education and a written constitution, which did not exist in the Dutch Republic. Nor were religious tolerance and freedom of press absolute or comprehensive; there was some, but within certain limits and motivated at best by pragmatism and business sense, rather than by principles and ideology.

I will close this short and quite preliminary survey of authors writing on the Dutch Golden Age legacy and heritage with Russell Shorto, one of the advisors of the Dutch Government with respect to the celebrations of 2009. According to *The New York Times*, his bestselling and highly praised *The Island at the Center of the World: The Epic Story of Dutch Manhattan and The Forgotten Colony that Shaped America* “will permanently alter the way we regard our collective past.” In the last chapter, “Inherited Features,” Shorto mentions the creation of a society with more open spaces, in which “the rungs of the ladder were reachable by nearly everyone,” a state policy of tolerance being the essence of the “mixing-of-cultures idea.”⁶² The text on the cover even goes one step further: “The Dutch Colony was multi-ethnic, and its citizens valued free trade, individual rights, and religious liberty. Their champion was a progressive young lawyer named Adriaen van der Donck, who emerges in these pages as a forgotten American patriot....”

My argument here was meant to underscore that many elements of the various Dutch Golden Age legacies to the modern world have rightly been contested by historians. It is anachronistic and historically incorrect to present the seventeenth-century Dutch as modern, capitalist, multi-ethnic, and principled believers in (and advocates of) religious and sexual freedom and tolerance. The seventeenth-century Dutch republic was a unique mixture of old and new.⁶³ The “modern” picture starts from the concept of “heritage,” a version of the past based on present needs and ideals and regarded as useful for future use. It is a selective and fabricated version of the past, a past as it should have been, providing cultural standards for today and tomorrow. Heritage is dynamic and linked up with identity by definition. No version or interpretation of the past is absolute, or can last forever.⁶⁴ It should be added, though, that contemporary images and identities often differ from each other just as much as historical ones did. If and to what extent the twenty-first century Dutch citizens and Dutch society can be described as modern, open, inclusive, cosmopolitan, tolerant, and freedom-loving is a topic for another conversation.

Of course, it is rather easy to contest the principled, comprehensive, and modern character of Dutch Golden Age tolerance and freedom, and the existence of a true world economy made by capitalist, internationally oriented merchants. Similarly, it is not difficult to contest its uniqueness for the seventeenth century or for the Republic. But in a relative, comparative sense, the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic was special because of some of its particular values, including protection of the rights of the individual, the influential voice of its citizens, pragmatic tolerance toward other religions in an age of religious hatred and civil war, and a political system and culture based on consultation, persuasion, compromise, and trust. The common well-being and prosperity were principal goals, instead of personal glory or the dynastic interests of kings and princes. From this more modest, more historical perspective, the Dutch Republic certainly had something to offer to the modern world-system, one that Dutch merchants, manufacturers, regents, sailors, soldiers, and scientists all helped to develop.

Notes

1. For the demographic development of the Dutch Republic, see A. M. van der Woude, "Demografische ontwikkeling van de Noordelijke Nederlanden 1500–1800," *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 5 (1980): 102–168.
2. Carlo M. Cipolla, *Before the Industrial Revolution. European Society and Economy, 1000–1700*. 2nd edition (1981), p. 4.
3. J. C. Boogman, "The Union of Utrecht: Its Genesis and Consequences," in *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, vol. 94, part 3 (1979): 377–407.
4. Marriët Westermann, *The Art of the Dutch Republic 1585–1717* (1996), p. 21.
5. Maarten Prak, *Gouden Eeuw. Het raadsel van de Republiek* (2002).
6. Joop de Jong, "Visible Power? Town Halls and Political Values," in *Power and the City in the Netherlandic World*, edited by Wayne te Brake and Wim Klooster, 149–175 (2006).
7. *Ibid.*; and John Merriman, *A History of Modern Europe from the Renaissance to the Present* (1996), p. 271.
8. Willem Frijhoff and Maarten Prak (red.), *Geschiedenis van Amsterdam. Centrum van de wereld, 1578–1650* (2004), p. 200. In Amsterdam the average annual number of new citizens equaled forty percent of the total number of immigrant bridegrooms.
9. Peter J. Taylor, "Dutch Hegemony and Contemporary Globalization," paper presented at PEWS Conference, Riverside, California, May 2002, p. 2.
10. Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System, Vol. I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York and London: Academic Press, 1974); and *The Modern World System, Vol. II: Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World-Economy 1600–1750* (New York: Academic Press, 1980).
11. Fernand Braudel, *The Perspective of the World: Civilization and Capitalism 15th–18th Century*, Vol. 3 (1984).
12. P. W. Klein, "The China Seas and the World Economy between the Sixteenth and Nineteenth Centuries: The Changing Structures of Trade," in *Kapitaal, Ondernemerschap en beleid. Studies over economie, politiek in Nederland, Europa en Azië van 1500 tot heden*, edited by C. A. Davids, W. Fritschy, and L. A. van der Valk, 385–408 (1996).

13. Ibid., p. 396.
14. Prak 2002; and Maarten Prak, ed., *Early Modern Capitalism. Economic and Social Change in Europe, 1400–1800* (2001); and Jan de Vries, *The Economy of Europe in an Age of Crisis, 1600–1750* (1976).
15. O. Gelderblom and J. L. van Zanden, “Vroegmodern ondernemerschap in Nederland,” *NEHA – Bulletin* 11, vol. 2 (1997): 9.
16. Merriman 1996, p. 184.
17. Prak 2002, p. 123.
18. P. W. Klein, *De Trippen in de 17e eeuw. Een studie over het ondernemersgedrag op de Hollandse stapelmarkt* (1965).
19. Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches. An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (1987), p. 568.
20. Merriman 1996, p. 40.
21. Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II* (1949).
22. Prak 2002.
23. Ibid., p. 265.
24. See J. van Goor, *De Nederlandse koloniën. Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse expansie 1600–1975* (1994); Femme S. Gaastra, *De geschiedenis van de VOC* (1991); Henk den Heijer, *De geschiedenis van de WIC* (1994); and Prak 2002, pp. 110–112.
25. Prak 2002, p. 128.
26. Gaastra 1991, p. 79.
27. Prak 2002, p. 134.
28. J. L. Blussè van Oud-Alblas, *Strange Company. Chinese Settlers, Mestizo Women and the Dutch in VOC Batavia* (1986); and Jean Gelman Taylor, *The Social World of Batavia: European and Eurasian in Dutch Asia* (1983).
29. Klein 1996, p. 387.
30. Ibid.

31. Jan Lucassen and Rinus Penninx, *Nieuwkomers. Immigranten en hun nakomelingen in Nederland 1550–1985* (1985).
32. Ibid., p. 34.
33. The Amsterdam burgomasters in 1598. Prak 2002, p. 237.
34. Schama 1987, p. 595.
35. Lucassen and Penninx 1985.
36. Schama 1987.
37. Henk van Nierop, “Sewing the Bailiff in a Blanket: Catholics and the Law in Holland,” in *Calvinism and Religious Toleration in the Dutch Golden Age*, edited by Po-Chia Hsia, Ronnie, and Henk van Nierop, 102–111 (2002); and Henk van Nierop, “Confessional Cleansing: Why Amsterdam Did Not Join the Revolt (1572–1578),” in *Power and the City in the Netherlandic World*, edited by Wayne te Brake and Wim Klooster, 85–102 (2006).
38. Immanuel Wallerstein, *Europese wereld-economie in de zestiende eeuw. Het moderne wereld-systeem* (1978), p. 221.
39. Nierop 2002, p. 104.
40. Nierop 2006.
41. Prak 2002, pp. 241–42.
42. Voltaire, *Voltaire Filosofisch woordenboekje*. Selected and translated by Jean A. Schalekamp (1975), p. 84.
43. Schama 1987, 601–06; Leo J. Boon, “Dien godlosen hoop van mensen,” *Vervolging van homoseksuelen in de Republiek in de jaren dertig van de achttiende eeuw* (1997); Theo van der Meer, *De wesentlijke sonde van sodomie en andere vuyligheeden. Sodomietenvervolgingen in Amsterdam 1730–1811* (1984); and *Sodoms zaad in Nederland; het ontstaan van homoseksualiteit in de vroegmoderne tijd* (1995).
44. Merriman 1996, p. 269.
45. Westermann 1996, pp. 15, 71–97.
46. Ibid., p. 88.
47. Ibid., p. 114.
48. Ibid., p. 115.

49. Willem Frijhoff and Marijke Spies, *Dutch Culture in a European Perspective*. Volume 1: 1650 Hard-Won Unity (2004).
50. Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity and the Emancipation of Man 1670–1752* (2006).
51. Prak 2002.
52. Taylor 2002.
53. Johan Huizinga, *Nederland's beschaving in de zeventiende eeuw* (1941/1963).
54. See also Han van der Horst, *The Low Sky. Understanding the Dutch* (1996), p. 39.
55. Joop de Jong, "Revolution, Patriotism and the Concept of Changes in the Culture and Lifestyle of Dutch Urban Elites," *History of European Ideas* 11 (1989): 637–644.
56. See website i-do-iamsterdam.nl.
57. Quote from an email by Joep de Koning to the author and others, 8 November 2009.
58. Jori Zijlmans, Arti Ponsen, and Nicole Roepers. *Holland Mania: Amerikaanse en Japanse beeldvorming over Nederland* (2009), p. 6.
59. cf., p. 132.
60. Ibid., p. 55.
61. Ibid., pp. 95–96.
62. Russell Shorto, *The Island at the Center of the World. The Epic Story of Dutch Manhattan and the Forgotten Colony that Shaped America* (2005), pp. 317–318.
63. Prak 2002.
64. David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (1998); and Willem Frijhoff, "Cultural Heritage in the Making: Europe's Past and its Future Identity," in *Annual of Medieval Studies at CEU*, edited by J. A. Rasson, K. Szende, and R. Forrai, 1–14 (2008).

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