
APPLYING BEGRIFFSGESCHICHTE TO DUTCH HISTORY: SOME REMARKS ON THE PRACTICE AND FUTURE OF A PROJECT

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Impressed and inspired by the results of German research, and even more by international research in the field of conceptual history, a group of Dutch scholars in the 1990s decided to initiate a research project in Dutch conceptual history. They were aided by an award granted by the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NIAS) during the academic year 1994-1995. Their efforts resulted in the pilot study *History of Concepts; Comparative Perspectives*.¹ The Dutch project, now part of a research program at the Huizinga Institute, the Netherlands Graduate School for Cultural History, is relatively modest in scale in comparison to the existing German projects.

The aim of this article is no more than to offer some remarks on the progress of the Dutch research project in conceptual history. I shall start with a brief outline of some of the main characteristics of the Dutch project. I will then summarize some of the findings made by the research groups concerning the political concepts of liberty, fatherland, and citizenship, whose results have already been published in English and Spanish.² And finally, I will provide some concluding remarks concerning the future of a Dutch project aimed at an international comparison of these three political key concepts and address some of the major problems that have surfaced so far.

1. THE HISTORY OF DUTCH CONCEPTS

From the beginning of 1990 it has been clear that the Dutch project cannot and should not aspire to the scale of either the *Historische Grundbegriffe* or the *Handbuch Politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich 1680-1820*. The Dutch project selects a limited number of concepts – fifteen at most – and studies these in great depth. The history of each individual concept is researched not by individual scholars, but by groups of scholars, always including historians, historians of literature, and art historians. This approach is intended to stimulate both interdisciplinarity and the utilization of a broad and varied range of sources. The discussion about the concepts to be selected for in-depth study is still being conducted, but the majority of participants in the project favor the following criteria for inclusion:

1. The concept must have played a prominent role in Dutch public discourse over a long period of time;
2. The concept must be of such central historical importance that a reconstruction of its history must contribute to a broad discussion about the existence (or non-existence) of a specifically Dutch pattern of conceptual history;
3. The concept should lend itself to international comparison.

Although there are a number of significant differences between the *Grundbegriffe* and the *Handbuch*, both heavily emphasize the second half of the eighteenth century as a crucial period of conceptual modernization. The Dutch project focuses on this period as well. At the same time, however, it includes the whole of the seventeenth century, and for most concepts goes back even further. There are good reasons for following this path. The position of the Dutch Republic was unique in early modern Europe. It was a State without a monarchy (let alone an absolute one); socially, the aristocracy was of relative insignificance; its economic life was dominated by commerce instead of agriculture; its religious and cultural life was remarkably open and pluralist. One of the questions the Dutch project is attempting to answer is whether this extraordinary political, social, economic, and cultural situa-

tion resulted in an equally unique pattern of conceptual development. After the introductory volume in English was released in 1998, four volumes of Dutch conceptual history have been published so far: *Vaderland. Een geschiedenis van de vijftiende eeuw tot 1940*³; *Vrijheid. Een geschiedenis van de vijftiende tot de twintigste eeuw*⁴; *Beschaving. Een geschiedenis van de begrippen hoofsheid, heusheid, beschaving en cultuur*⁵; and *Burger. Een geschiedenis van het begrip 'burger' in de Nederlanden van de Middeleeuwen tot de 21^{ste} eeuw*.⁶ An English volume on the concepts of the republic and republicanism, edited by Martin van Gelderen and Wyger Velema, will soon be published. New research groups are now working on the concepts of cultural heritage, honor, simplicity, gender, state/estate and modernity. Dutch researchers in the field of conceptual history are also internationally cooperating in the History of Social and Political Concepts Group, founded in 1998 at the Finnish Institute in London.

2. THE DUTCH CONCEPT OF LIBERTY

If there was one State in early modern Europe that was generally seen as – and conceived itself as – the very embodiment of liberty, it was certainly the Dutch Republic. The choice of the concept of liberty as one of the first Dutch concepts to be studied in depth was therefore almost self-evident. The research group that was formed to reconstruct the development of the concept of liberty in the Netherlands consisted of fifteen scholars: eight historians, three historians of literature, an art historian, a theologian, a political scientist, and a philosopher. Since the concept of liberty is so complex and used in many different contexts, it was chosen as one of the main focuses of our inquiries at an early stage in our research. What this meant in practice was that all members of the group, regardless of the type of sources they were working with, would primarily be looking for the political uses and meanings of the concept of liberty. Thus, to give an example, Henk Duits, whose main source was seventeenth-century plays, did not investigate the idea of freedom of the playwright versus classical rules of theater, **but focused on the ways in which** the plays he studied handled the theme of Dutch political liberty. Equally, Frans Grijzenhout, who studied the representation of liberty in various genres of art, concentrated on the genesis and development of the iconography of political liberty. Chronologically, the research started in the late Middle Ages, with a contribution by Wim Blockmans on the concept of freedom in

the Burgundian Netherlands, and runs into the twentieth century, ending with an article by Huub Spoormans on the concept of liberty between 1848 and the years 1917-1919, in which general suffrage was introduced in The Netherlands. The main chronological focus, however, is on the period of the Dutch Republic that starts with the Dutch Revolt and ends with the Batavian Republic. I shall, therefore, concentrate the remainder of my remarks on the study of the concept of liberty during that period.

By the end of the seventeenth century, the Dutch concept of political liberty had acquired several layers of meaning in various stages. As Martin van Gelderen shows in his research, as early as the Dutch Revolt liberty already meant national independence and liberty of conscience – later to be protected by the state. Early in the seventeenth century a clear mutual link was established between liberty, defined as the rule of law and commerce, and prosperity. It took slightly longer for the concept to acquire specifically republican connotations.

In that respect, the years between 1650 and 1672 – known as the First *Stadholderless Era* in Dutch historiography – seem to have been crucial. This period witnessed the production of a heightened awareness of the republican nature of Dutch liberty, saw the formulation of a principled notion of republican liberty that rejected the presence of a court in the Dutch republic, and witnessed the genesis of the ideological opposition between the States party and the Orangists, which would dominate Dutch political debate for most of the eighteenth century. During the first three quarters of the eighteenth century the adherents of the States party (*Staatsgezinden* or *Loevesteiners*), who presented themselves as the upholders of “true liberty,” argued that liberty was only secure in a republic without a head, or with a head with severely restricted powers. The Orange *Stadholders*, they maintained, were always waiting for an opportunity to establish themselves in a monarchical position and were therefore a perennial threat to Dutch liberty. The Orangists emphatically denied this and argued that the *Stadholders* were an indispensable element in the mixed and balanced form of government of the Dutch Republic. They described the *Stadholders* not only as the protectors of national liberty against foreign threats, but also as the protectors of the people against aristocratic-oligarchic oppression. Despite these important differences, in this debate about political liberty both parties shared some fundamental assumptions. First of all, they accepted the 1579 Union of Utrecht as the legitimate basis of the existing free and republican political order. Secondly, although it

did frequently function as the ultimate theoretical source of political power, both parties did not ascribe an active political role to the people in their definitions of liberty. The people were free, or at least enjoyed certain liberties. However this popular liberty was not connected to an active and permanent role in politics. Both *Staatsgezinden* and Orangists, in other words, were primarily interested in the distribution of power within the existing political order and paid very little attention to the relationship between liberty and the political power of the people. Even in the work of a classical republican such as Lieven de Beaufort, whose works were published in the 1730s, republican popular participation was interpreted as no more than an equal opportunity for all citizens to compete for political appointments.

In Dutch historiography it has frequently been assumed that the nature of this debate on liberty did not fundamentally change until after the outbreak of the French revolution. One of the most interesting outcomes of our research into the development of the Dutch concept of liberty is that we are now definitively able to dispel this misconception. Evidence gleaned from literature, the arts, contemporary historiography and political writing clearly and unambiguously demonstrates that the years between 1783 and 1787 were years of tremendous change in the meaning of the concept of liberty. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to remark that in this short but decisive period the most radical adherents of the so-called Patriot party succeeded in completely transforming Dutch political vocabulary, including the meaning of the concept of liberty. When the Patriot movement started around 1780, the members of this group still assumed, as the adherents of the States party had always done in the past, that the lack of liberty they saw in the Dutch Republic was mainly caused by the despotic power of Stadholder William V. Soon, however, they realized that an attack on William's position was insufficient to restore liberty. They therefore began to reflect upon the various means available within the established political order to guard the liberty of the citizen. Essential to the maintenance of liberty, they now argued, were freedom of expression and of the press, the right to submit petitions to the authorities, and the right to bear arms. The dynamics of the revolutionary process and the growing resistance of many regents against increased popular participation within the existing order, however, soon forced many Patriots into a momentous conceptual move. They arrived at the conclusion that so-called ancient liberty was largely a figment of the imagination, that the Seven United Provinces had, even without Stadholders, never been a free state, and that it

was an illusion to think that liberty could ever be realized within the existing political order. The Dutch patriots, in other words, within a very short time span – and well before the outbreak of the French revolution – came to reject the *ancien régime* in the name of a new concept of political liberty. True liberty, they now maintained, consisted of the active and permanent sovereignty of the people. Neither the Patriots, nor their successors after 1795, the Batavian revolutionaries, succeeded in satisfactorily embodying this new conception of liberty in a political order, and after 1800 it was discredited for quite a while. Nevertheless, it continued to haunt Dutch political discourse during the nineteenth century and, however much changed, is still with us today.

3. THE DUTCH CONCEPT OF FATHERLAND

After *Vrijheid* (liberty), *Vaderland* (fatherland) was chosen as one of the first pilot studies in the history of Dutch concepts. Looking back, it seems an obvious choice. Over the past few years, the study of nationalism has proliferated enormously. However, at the moment this concept was chosen this was not altogether clear. The reason why fatherland seemed worthwhile studying over a long period of time and in-depth had more to do with one of the main goals of our project: our chosen concepts had to be different and in a sense “typically Dutch,” but at the same time comparable to the German and French projects already in progression. Remarkably enough, the concept of *Vaterland* had not been included in the plan of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, though the editors compensated for this apparent omission by giving great scope to the concept of *Volk*, which also covered *Nation*, and indeed *Masse*. In the *Handbuch* for France, *Nation* and *Patrie* are generously covered and there is also the article on *la Patrie* by Norman Hampson in the second volume of *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*.

Like *Vrijheid*, *Vaderland* was studied by a group of scholars, who were basically working on their own, but met every few months to compare notes and to discuss progress and problems. The original group consisted of twelve members: five historians, five “neerlandicists” (of which four were historians of literature and one of language), one art historian and one theologian. After the preliminary results came in, however, three more historians were commissioned to fill in the gaps. As will be clear from the composition of this group, a serious effort was made to work in a truly multi-disciplinary, even inter-disciplinary man-

ner. All along it was realized that this might interfere with the unity of purpose that might have been achieved had only “hard boiled” conceptual historians been invited to contribute. All participants were given quite a bit of freedom to define their particular subjects within the general limits of the project’s broad definition of conceptual history. From the outset it was accepted that not every angle, not every period could be fully covered. On the other hand, we hoped that by bringing together specialists from various disciplines – particularly historians and literary scholars – we could create a sort of “surplus value” over the type of conceptual history practiced so far, which clearly born the mark of the state of the historical discipline in the 1960s and the 1970s.

I will now attempt to give the briefest of overviews of the results of the fatherland group. In order to give at least some attention to the pre-history of the Dutch State, which formally came into being with the late sixteenth-century Dutch Revolt, the late Middle Ages were chosen as the starting point. Obviously, in these early days the word most in evidence was *patria*, in Latin. The “conceptual stretching” of *patria* was investigated in the various Netherlands, including the Southern provinces and particular cities, and also in relation to the concept of *Volk*. Interestingly enough, pre-Revolt sources had some intuition about later developments in the Dutch Republic (this in contrast with what has been suggested in traditional historiography). Well before the Revolt one encounters the distinctive tone of a historically inspired feeling of the nation and of the concept of *patria* in political rhetoric.

In the study of the literature and especially the poetry produced by the rhetorical chambers in the half a century immediately following the Revolt, the conceptual stretching of fatherland was again the main question. Was the concept only used to stir up local emotions, did it take up only one province (particularly Holland), or did it refer and reach out to the whole Dutch Republic, to all of the seven united provinces? The somewhat surprising answer was that even highly local institutions did not restrict their sense of community to their own city. More often than not their poetry touched upon the community of interest between various cities within one province and indeed outside of it. When the military successes of Prince Maurits made the Dutch Republic a serious player in international politics, a new self-confidence was reflected in changes in the concept of fatherland, for instance in detailed comparisons with the Romans, often stressing the superiority of the Dutch.

The notion of “fighting for the fatherland” and, if necessary, *pro patria mori* was followed in Dutch literature from the mid-seventeenth to mid-eighteenth century, in other words, from the acknowledged high point of Dutch political power – and the self-consciousness that it engendered – to a period when the decline of the Dutch Republic was already patently visible. The group also investigated the emotional content vested in certain symbols such as the Maiden (particularly since these maidens were on hand in various guises: as local patronesses, but also as symbols of a particular province and even of the Republic as a whole); the Dutch lion (which, interestingly enough, during the whole of the seventeenth century remained in use as a cartographical ply to cover all of the Netherlands: the seventeen provinces in the North and the South); and last but not least the cow as a perennial icon of Dutchness, a prime symbol of Dutch prosperity in both literary and pictorial sources. A tentative conclusion from the evidence that was drawn from a wide range of sources from the sixteenth until the eighteenth century seems to suggest that political historians have neglected at their peril these evocations of Dutchness which point to a wider ranging sense of an all-Dutch nationality – geographically, socially, and politically – than has thus far been accepted.

After the mid eighteenth century – I hardly need mention that we are now entering the celebrated *Sattelzeit* – literary sources provide ample proof of a new sense of “urgency” contained in the concept fatherland. A statistical survey of the use of the word *Vaderland* in titles of books and pamphlets shows an amazing increase in the decades after 1750, only matched by the number of poems dedicated to fatherland. A heightened sense of nationality was already clearly visible in the period before the so-called Patriot revolution of the 1780s, when the notion of fatherland was politicized to such an extent that for some years it came to be one of the central political concepts.

The self-styled “Patriots” – that is the loose coalition of anti-Orangist and anti-English reformers – claimed the exclusive use of the word “patriot,” a move which was, however, vehemently contested by the Orangist party, whose theoreticians during this period developed an authentic brand of Dutch conservatism. What this political debate – accompanying a very real struggle for political power – showed beyond doubt was that loyalty to the fatherland was of prime importance to all shades of political opinion, including the adherents of the semi-monarchical *Stadholder* and indeed to the *Stadholder* himself. Thus, well before the Batavian Revolution of 1795, which after extended po-

litical strife finally brought about the unification of the Dutch state (in 1798), the idea of a Dutch Nation going above and beyond the still medieval constitutional peculiarities of the Republic, was well established in the minds of the enlightened elite, whatever its political leanings. One of the interesting features of the political debate in the Batavian Republic was the idea that unification of the state would be quite useless unless there would occur a parallel unification of the nation: a moral revolution, brought about by education and enlightenment, to accompany the constitutional one.

In the fatherland group the study of the *Sattelzeit* has received special emphasis: the art, literature, sermons, historiography, and politics of this period have all been thoroughly studied from the viewpoint of conceptual shifts and changes in the use of fatherland and related concepts. Despite the well-known problems concerning the use of a 1750-1850 *Sattelzeit*, this notion has nonetheless provided the fatherland group with a useful framework – certainly in terms of chronological emphasis – to contain the main part of its research. An interesting parallel with both the French and the German lexicons was the way in which *Volk* emerged as a highly charged political concept in the early and much politicized years of the Batavian Revolution. With *Vaterland* in a sense being on hold as a concept and merely used in a copycat manner for rhetorical and propaganda purposes, now the various uses of *Volk* – both in the *oben-unten* and in the *innen-aussen* sense – are being explored in political debate. And perhaps the most interesting conclusions that have been reached regarding the second half of the nineteenth century also concern the use of the concept of *Volk*.

4. THE FUTURE OF THE DUTCH PROJECT: DUTCH CONCEPTUAL HISTORY IN COMPARATIVE AND INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

In the course of the research on liberty, fatherland, and citizenship, it has become clear that not all the intentions formulated in the original theoretical discussions have been fulfilled, and that a number of problems to be solved has arisen. First of all, the strong focus of most participants on the Dutch component has prevented them from paying sufficient attention to the element of international comparison. As it turned out, international comparison has mainly become a matter for the introductory essays and has largely been left to the editors. Secondly, the Dutch pretension to question the con-

ceptual importance of the *Sattelzeit* has so far been less than successful. The adoption of a broader chronological framework has led to the conclusion that important conceptual shifts were certainly not limited to the period around 1800, yet for both the concepts of liberty and fatherland, the *Sattelzeit* proved to be of crucial importance – Dutch conceptual history seems to have been in step with the rest of Europe. Thirdly, the original ambitious aim of interdisciplinarity has largely and regrettably resulted in a practice of multidisciplinary. A true synthesis of the various disciplines involved has not been sufficiently achieved so far.

An attempt to overcome at least some of these problems has been made in the group that has explored the vocabulary of Dutch republicanism. International comparison has been more systematically integrated by this group, which concentrated on the concept of republic. Thus, for example, they have explored the meaning of that concept not only in Dutch, but also in Latin and French. Also an effort has been made to stimulate true interdisciplinarity by inviting each contributor to utilize sources other than those of his or her own discipline. Thus, historians have looked at literary sources, literary historians have included visual materials in their research, and so on. As for the *Sattelzeit*: it is evident that it will play a larger role in the Dutch project than originally anticipated. In the case of the vocabulary of Dutch republicanism, however, it marked the end of a tradition rather than a period of transition and modernization.

Finally, some words on the future of the Dutch project on the history of concepts. As is clear from the above, the concepts that have so far been selected for in-depth study have been largely from the sphere of politics. It is a high priority on our agenda, however, to broaden the scope of the project by initiating the study of Dutch cultural concepts such as virtue, love and sin. Nonetheless, all is dependent on the project's ability to stir up the interest of Dutch scholars and to find sufficient sources of funding. Two members of the History of Concepts Group, Wyger Velema and myself, have received a grant from the Dutch Research Council (NWO) for an international cooperation project named *Towards a European History of Concepts: Dutch Conceptual History in Comparative and International Perspective* that will be carried out from 2006 until 2008. What is this project about?

The Dutch conceptual history project has been generously received by academic critics and has been praised for charting a territory in Dutch history that had so far remained largely unexplored. Yet several reviewers

of the first volumes of the project, among them Willem Frijhoff and the late Ernst Kossmann, have stressed the need to further explore and develop the international and comparative dimensions of Dutch conceptual history. This suggestion is entirely justified and can even be further extended to include the other existing projects in conceptual history, for they all tend to write the history of concepts primarily in national context. By firmly placing its findings within the European context, the Dutch project is starting to overcome this limitation. Such an enterprise will not only benefit Dutch conceptual history, but also the conceptual history research being currently carried out in other European countries.

There are, so it would seem, two ways to transcend the hitherto dominant national framework for studying the history of concepts, both of which will be explored in the internationalization project here proposed. The first and most obvious one is to compare systematically the history of various key concepts in different European countries over a longer period of time in order to illuminate the parallels and differences in national conceptual development. By, for instance, comparing the history of the Dutch concept of citizenship to the history of that same concept in Germany, England, and France, important insights into both national peculiarities and common patterns of conceptual development may be gained. Crucially important as such cross-border comparisons may be, they do not tell the whole story of the international dimensions of conceptual development. To bring that out in all its richness and complexity, it is necessary to go beyond the comparison of various national patterns of conceptual development and to attempt to study the process of international interaction in the development of concepts. Thus, for instance, the radical redefinition of the concept of liberty during the latter part of the eighteenth century took place in a way that clearly defied national borders and that can only be studied as an international conceptual dialogue. The exploration of this latter aspect of conceptual development could and should eventually lead to the formulation of a wide-ranging research project on the European history of concepts.

The current project, however, is only intended as a initial exploration of the various comparative and international dimensions of conceptual history by taking Dutch conceptual history as its starting point and central focus, and by applying the two approaches of international comparison and international interaction to the Dutch case. In order to do so fruitfully, this project will limit itself to the three political concepts of fatherland, liberty,

and citizenship, both because political concepts have been the main focus of the first volumes of the Dutch project and because the history of these concepts has been thoroughly researched in other relevant European countries. The exploration of the comparative dimension and the international interaction of these concepts will, moreover, be limited to the three major and most important European countries surrounding the Dutch Republic, that is England, France and Germany or, to be precise, the Holy Roman Empire, and will focus on the early-modern period from 1550 till 1850.

The project will take the shape of three academic meetings, organized by the Huizinga Institute in Amsterdam, the European University Institute in Florence and the Max Planck Institut für Geschichte in Göttingen, respectively. In each of these three academic conferences the concepts of fatherland, liberty, and citizenship will be discussed by the same group of fifteen scholars, consisting of specialists on the history of concepts in their countries and period: six experts on the Netherlands, three on Germany, three on England, and three on France. Each participant will eventually contribute an article to the planned volume to come out of this project, which will also include contributions by the three senior scholars who will each attend one of the conferences as commentator. The volume to come out of the project will be entitled *Dutch Political Concepts: Comparative and International Perspectives*. The editors of this volume will be the two Dutch initiators of this project, Karin Tilmans and Wyger Velema. The aim of this undertaking is to initiate the formulation of a major international research project entitled *Towards a European History of Political Concepts from the Renaissance to the Nineteenth Century*, to be submitted collaboratively for funding to the European Science Foundation.

The dates for the workshops are:

Workshop 1, “Fatherland,” University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Thursday June 15 and Friday June 16, 2006;

Workshop 2, “Liberty,” European University Institute, Florence, Thursday June 28 and Friday June 29, 2007;

Workshop 3, “Citizen,” Max Planck Institut Göttingen, Thursday June 19 and Friday June 20, 2008.

The research team for all three workshops consists of: Prof. Dr. Terence Ball (Arizona State), dr Hans Bödeker (Max Planck Institut Göttingen), Prof. Dr Brian Cummings (Sussex University), Prof. Dr Martin van Gelderen (EUI Florence), Prof. Dr Ido de Haan (Utrecht University), Dr Rachel Hammersley (University College London), Prof. Dr Iain Hampsher-Monk (Exeter University), Dr Annie Jourdan (Amsterdam University), Prof. Dr Lucian Hölscher (Bochum University), Prof. Dr Diethelm Klippel (Bayreuth University), Dr Paul Knevel (Amsterdam University), Dr Jörn Leonhard (Historisches Institut, Universität Jena), Prof. Dr Rolf Reichardt (Justus-Liebig-Universität, Gießen), Prof. Dr Niek van Sas (Amsterdam University), Prof. Dr Jonathan Scott (Pittsburg University), Prof. Dr Willibald Steinmetz (Bielefeld University), Dr Karin Tilmans (Amsterdam University/EUI Florence), Dr Wyger Velema (Amsterdam University).

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NOTES

- ¹ Iain Hampsher Monk, Karin Tilmans, and Frank van Vree (1998).
- ² The English version is by Karin Tilmans (2004) and can be found at <http://cf.hum.uva.nl/geschiedenis/medewerkers/tilmans/146-171%20Tilmans.pdf>. For the Spanish version see Karin Tilmans (2005).
- ³ Niek van Sas (1999).
- ⁴ Eco Haitzma Mulier and Wyger Velema (1999).
- ⁵ Pim den Boer (2001).
- ⁶ Joost Kloek and Karin Tilmans (2002).

ABSTRACT

This article is a progress report on the Dutch national conceptual history project. The project places emphasis on interdisciplinarity, the resort to the widest possible range of sources, and the prospect of international comparison. The initiative, started by a group of Dutch scholars in the 1990s, has so far focused on the concepts of liberty, fatherland, and citizenship, all of which have had a prominent role in a specifically Dutch political discourse.

KEYWORDS

The Netherlands, history of concepts, liberty, fatherland, citizenship.