Nederland en het verhaal van Oranje
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**SUMMARY**

**THE NETHERLANDS AND THE ORANGE NARRATIVE**

*The Netherlands and the Orange narrative* is an inquiry into the meaning of the ‘Orange narrative’ in the consciousness of the Dutch nation. Since the relationship between The Netherlands and the House of Orange roots in a shared common history, six of the seven chapters of this book are set up chronologically, describing the development of the ‘Orange narrative’ throughout the centuries. Because of the interwoven history of the Orange monarchy and Dutch society, the subject is approached in a broader cultural, social and political framework and, though it remains an historical work, it leans on other relevant disciplines where necessary.

The essence of the introduction is the reassertion that the ‘emotional’ is part of the political and social reality, and cannot be denied without repercussions. Although from the 1960s onwards, the elites have assumed otherwise, recent developments have clearly shown that this is also the case for Dutch national consciousness. The first chapter sketches, with use of the historiography in all its ambiguity, the content and meaning of the ‘Orange narrative’, which is traced back to William of Orange and the Dutch Revolt in the sixteenth century. To explicate its meaning, I embrace Ernest Renan’s vision of this. This French scholar, who pointed out the importance of a shared past for national coherence – especially where

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this was expressed in a dramatic moment – qualified the Dutch Revolt in his famous introduction to the nation as an act of ‘heroic determination’.

Besides this dramatic impact of the Revolt and the shared happiness and suffering of the battle which forged a bond, there were historic events of a later date that would be construed as confirmation. Later generations would find solace and inspiration in it, and the Dutch were beginning to associate the Orange family with certain values. Unique for this narrative that started as a myth of national origin is that it is connected both with a royal dynasty and democratic, republican thought in a remarkably early phase of history.

The salient paradox of republicanism and “Orangism” is a long term pattern in the Dutch history, present from the Revolt until today. An important element is the popular character of Orangism one might say: “the populist credit of the House of Orange”. By this I mean the predominant popularity of the princes of Orange among the ‘common people’, including those of the cities. Because the paradox of republicanism and Orangism determined to a large extent the public discourse in the Dutch Republic and provided the base for a number of political conflicts, it is obvious that the historiography on the Republic predominantly discusses the differences. However, as both groups claimed the Republic and freedom, the similarities are just as relevant. Both this republican-mindedness and the love for the House of Orange hark back to its origins, and had its effects within the realm and the political culture. I am therefore of the opinion that within the cultural-historical context of The Netherlands, each has a legitimate basis, and so deserves recognition. I have found my conviction reflected in the conclusion of the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga at the centennial of the Orange monarchy (1813-1913), that ‘which seemed utterly republican in the national tradition’ after 1813 had been covered with a mild taboo.

The ‘Orange narrative’, or ‘Orange myth’, precedes the Orange monarchy and at the same time determines the character of this institution. The narrative functioned as a frame story, to which the different social groups gave their own interpretation: the liberal idea of William of Orange as a fighter for freedom and tolerance was opposed by the Orthodox-Protestant picture of him as a protagonist of the faith. For the confessionals, the
monarchy ‘by the grace of God’ would even function as a means to check the doctrine of popular sovereignty. However, the radical liberal historian Kernkamp found this contradictory to the essence of the ‘Orange narrative’, even an abuse of this, as in his interpretation Orange represented an early onset of democratic thinking. Despite all these differences in the interpretation of the Orange myth, the young Queen Wilhelmina would emerge at the end of the nineteenth century as the perfect symbol of the nation, the embodiment of a nationalism very much like that of the other European nations.

For the interwar period and the Second World War (1918-1945), I answer the question whether the ‘Orange narrative’, in the Dutch mass democracy of that time, could fulfill the social function attributed to ‘national myths’ by Durkheim and Malinowski. The question could also be phrased: could the Orange myth in this period be qualified as the ‘social capital’ which Ernest Renan reckoned as essential to a sense of a common past? In both cases, the answer is positive. The role of Queen Wilhelmina during the interwar period is significant: an ideologically pillarized and religiously compartmentalized Dutch society still enabled her to operate as a ‘Christian national majesty’. At the same time, with social cohesion and democracy being under pressure by the economic crisis and the rise of fascism, Orange could develop into the anti-totalitarian symbol of national unity. Important moments to test this theory are the commemoration of the birth of William of Orange (1533-1933) and the other events in the House of Orange in the years that followed. During these commemorations, the intellectual and political elites shaped the image of William of Orange in order to make Orange the adequate symbol of unity. Particularly the way in which, in 1933, de SDAP (Labour Party) and the NSB (Dutch National Socialist Movement) defined their attitude towards the House of Orange and the reaction of other movements to this proffer a good insight into the significance of the House of Orange during the interwar period.

Where Orange and the Second World War are concerned, I sketch how the ‘Orange narrative’ functioned as a source of inspiration in dark times. My research covers both the Dutch population and the resistance movement, and the House of Orange itself. The war seemed to reaffirm the
'Orange narrative', rendering it more popular and general applicable, which in fact came down to a reconfirmation of the Orthodox-Protestant interpretation of the narrative. This means that with the help of God and under guidance of the House of Orange the Dutch were saved again. In this context, the Second World War automatically became a *reprise* of the Dutch Revolt in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. The surprise about the romanticized view on this war is therefore an *a posteriori* surprise, in which the analogy effect is ignored on the basis of historic interpretation. Also the heroism of prince Bernhard, although he was only a prince of Orange by marriage, was predestined in the Orange myth. After the war, the Orange patriotism developed into a true *civil religion*, comparable to the American *civil religion* as introduced by Robert Bellah: a more or less coherent complex of values in a shared story, which has its roots in the national history and includes a religious dimension. I therefore use Robert Bellah’s perspective to look at the influence of Orange on the Dutch national consciousness, which by the way was not at all limited to the Orange narrative only.

Also after the war, the narrative continued to exert influence. The Netherlands did not so much represent a single political idea, but rather a moral disposition and a certain social attitude. With this I mean that the Netherlands were perceived as one national community, in which the drive for consensus was leading and in which a way of life was presupposed that would nowadays be called moralistic and of which the House of Orange was the natural exponent.

Despite several suggestions for political and social reform, the ‘national sentiment’ was rather conservative from a cultural point of view. The fact that the Dutch had fought for democracy alongside the Allied Forces, does not mean that the notion of popular sovereignty was generally accepted. On the contrary, the monarchy ‘by the grace of God’ was largely accepted as a means to keep notions of popular sovereignty at bay. This is clearly visible in the parliamentary debates concerning the transfer of sovereignty to the people of Indonesia. In these debates representatives of the Orthodox-Protestant parties denounced rapprochement towards Indonesian nationalism because it would mean a legalization of the ideas behind the Revolution and be in conflict with the concept of
God-given authority. The image of William of Orange as a revolutionary prince of the Geuzen or Beggars (Kernkamp) and as an early founder of democracy (Berkelbach van der Sprenkel) conflicted with this concept of ‘God, the Netherlands and the House of Orange’. But these interpretations were relatively unknown at that time so that they hardly had a role to play in the public debate. Nonetheless these characterizations would have fitted the origins of the Orange myth and they would have been in line with the recent struggle against the Nazis. Moreover, they would have helped to anticipate the future. It was therefore L.J. Rogier who determined that Berkelbach van der Sprenkel’s interpretation of the image of the House of Orange would in all probability be the most viable.

The ‘long fifties’ (1950-1966) were a period of transition from tradition to modernity. Bellah’s study into the influence of the American presidents on the civil religion in their country, also shows striking results when applied to the Dutch queens. Although the position of a Dutch monarch differs a lot from that of the American head of state, analyses of the speeches of Queen Juliana and Queen Beatrix offer useful insights into their personal convictions. Juliana, for example, did not feel the need to take up the special task of maintaining the Orange-based civil religion (although she did not hesitate to repeatedly appeal to morality). Her idealism and international vision put her ahead of her time, foreshadowing the cosmopolitan mentality of the 1960s. For the average Dutchman, who might have thought of her attitude as too progressive or just too vague and of her performance as a Queen of Orange (certainly in comparison to her mother Queen Wilhelmina) as not striking enough, there was always the contrasting personality of her husband Bernhard, with his uniforms and friendships in the business world. Orange exhibited two faces, thus creating an ambivalence, which could also be perceived as a coincidental completion. But in some aspects these members of the House of Orange should undermine their own narrative.

If one discerns a certain demythologization of Orange in the 1960s, it certainly included some form of self-demythologization. This had already started in the 1950s with the Greet Hofmans-affaire when the Queen associated with a faith healer, Juliana’s and Bernhard’s marriage was in crisis and there could almost be said to be a political crisis. Also the choices
of their children, the princesses, made for partners, a German diplomat who had been serving in the Wehrmacht, a carlist prince with claims to the Spanish throne and a Dutch commoner, were not at all reaffirming of the Orange tradition. The critical reactions from politicians – also from the traditionally Orange supporting Protestant parties and even from the circles of the League for Christian Orange Associations (Bond van Christelijke Oranje-Verenigingen) – show that the mysticism and self-evidence of the Orange monarchy had been reduced since the 1960s, despite the persisting popularity of Orange in the polls.

The cultural revolution brought by the 1960s, combined with developments such as de-ideologising, meritocratization and globalization, would shed a different light on religious, political and social ideas and this certainly affected the way the Dutch perceived nationalism and the monarchy. This would eventually lead to the disappearance of a ‘shared language’. I specifically deal with the end of the dominant Christian-national public theology that had continued to shape the way that Orange was perceived. The downfall of this theology, with its outspoken idea of authority, had far-reaching social and political consequences. Salient is the role of the League, which presented itself as the martial guard of the triple alliance of ‘God, The Netherlands and Orange’. It was mainly about repeated public statements in which it made it clear that there was anxiety about the spirit of the sixties, and more specifically about the changing attitude towards the House of Orange. I relate this to the transformation of ‘Orange patriotism’, the civil religion around Orange (still so ubiquitous after the war) into a much vaguer notion of the ‘Orange sentiment’. In this, there was a superficial combination of feelings of affection for the House of Orange, national character and pride – which could also be felt towards sportive and other achievements. Especially popular journals as Elsevier and De Telegraaf were sensitive to this trends and paid attention to them. This development coincided with the diverging of national interpretations by the elite of progressive babyboomers on the one side, and the Dutch people on the other.

The consequences also directly affected the reign of Queen Beatrix. With her predominantly modern upbringing and education, she had to form and color the Dutch monarchy in a new context. Here, I con-
ceptually divide the monarchy *per se* – as a pre-modern institution in a post-modern society – from the specific Orange monarchy, which roots in the ‘Orange narrative’ and had been closely related to the Dutch national sentiment since the sixteenth century. In relation to the first aspect, Queen Beatrix has always distinguished both the weak and the strong sides of the institution, which, despite its ability to adapt, does not fit easily in the modern logic. In relation to this, I answer the question how she has managed to remake this institution that had lost much of its self-evidence in the cultural revolution of the 1960s serviceable to modern Dutch society. Besides studying her own ideas and strategies, I take a close look at the opinions expressed by representatives of the Dutch elites. From their speeches at the occasions of Beatrix’s jubilees, a significant level of appreciation for the professionalism with which she performs her function becomes apparent.

As for the second aspect, the specifics of the ‘Orange narrative’ and its connections to Dutch national sentiment, I study to what extent Beatrix, in comparison with my analyses of her mother and grandmother, perceived herself as the protagonist of the ‘Orange narrative’ and if she, from that perspective, has deliberately chosen to function as a keeper of the *civil religion* around Orange or if she has rather opted for a connection more plausibly convivial with the *Zeitgeist*. For this I look, again in line with Robert Bellah, especially at her own speeches and to the reactions they provoked from politics and society. A complicating factor was formed by the aforementioned widening gap between the Dutch elites and the common people in interpreting the monarchy as a symbol of national unity. The question then is how Beatrix has taken position in this conflict, and for what reasons. Was she still aware of the ‘populist credit’ of Orange? Or was the Queen already too much integrated in the circles of progressive, ‘decent-minded’ Dutchmen and did she rather speak the tongue of the elites, or in its historical context, the ‘language of Loevestein’. The changing appreciation of nation-consciousness of the elite leads to a limited understanding for the specific tasks and contributions that the Queen could make in this case. Furthermore, Beatrix speaks predominantly in the vocabulary of the elites, including their cosmopolitan outlook, sympathizing with matters such as the European integration
and multiculturalism. Critiques of this attitude do not resent the House of Orange for its international orientation or its calls for solidarity, but they do regret that it does not seem to do so from the perspective of, and the appreciation for, the particular national identity of the Netherlands, an orientation for which the very ‘Orange narrative’ provides the best tools.

The concluding chapter is called ‘the weight of the imponderable.’ I return to my point of departure, the thesis that the ‘emotional’ is part of the social reality, including the desire for sense of belonging. To put it shortly, this means that national sentiment is a reality, which is not easily denied. Also, it implies that public discourse in a democracy is incomplete, both when it remains theoretical and surpasses the world of experience of the wider audience and when it underestimates the meaning of cultural context. To strengthen this approach, I look for support in the ideas of Paul Ricoeur, Richard Rorty, Rüdiger Safranski, Peter Sloterdijk and Michael Walzer, who have affirmed the meaning of experience and cultural context. In the Netherlands, scholars such as Jacques van Doorn, Wim Couwenberg, Willem Frijhoff, James Kennedy, Coen Tamse, Henk te Velde and Anton Zijderveld have offered stimulating ideas.

Especially the plea by Rorty for a ‘renewed historical consciousness’, which comes down to ‘actualizing narrative accounts of ourselves at our best’, is attractive. This should be done with narratives from a national tradition, in which people take pride, by which they want to be inspired again and which they can use as common points of reference for social and political norms and values. What we need is an enlightened patriotism, without exclusion or conclusion, but with an inspirational and didactical value, which the elites have to take into account. Since these shared narratives could thus offer a new shared tongue in democratic discourse, I deem Rorty’s ideas intrinsically democratic.

My thesis is that the Netherlands, blessed with the ‘Orange narrative’, still carry a strong and original trump card that could be useful to social cohesion, because the narrative refers to an inspiring, common start and is attached to patriotism and values such as freedom, tolerance and unity through diversity; an orientation that easily equals the narratives from the American and French Revolutions. Also, the narrative provides the
particular Dutch identity with a face in a way that has been described by Safranski as an ‘anthropological precondition’ for mobility and openness towards the world. So a ‘renewed historical consciousness’ does not imply a static view on history and the stories rooted in it. Narratives and myths influence society and are influenced by it. That is why, inspired by Frijhoff, I propose a farewell to the historical ballast and, from now on, a reinterpretation of the Dutch cultural heritage, including the ‘Orange narrative’, in the spirit of Kernkamp en Berkelbach van der Sprenkel. For them, Orange was the revolutionary prince of the Beggars, who offered an early opportunity for democracy and outspoken citizenship, and founded a free republic. This interpretation opens a path towards the modern democratic world view and could reconcile Orange sympathy with the Dutch republican tradition.

Such an interpretation is consistent with the speech by Johan Huizinga at the monarchical centennial ‘1813-1913’ and is appropriate for the upcoming bicentennial (‘1813-2013’). He described 1813 as ‘a reward and a rupture’; a reward of the Orange dynasty of stadtholders and their significance for the Dutch nation, but – by putting them on the throne – a rupture in the republican tradition of the past centuries. Huizinga wished for a reconciliation of both. A reinvention of the ‘Orange narrative’ in this spirit would mean a full recognition of its revolutionary germ and, as a consequence, affirm the fundamental principle of popular sovereignty. Appreciating the Orange monarchy and pride for the early republican past, could easily go hand in hand and would imply more attention for the founding age of the Dutch Republic and its unique position in Europe, for example through the founding texts: the *Unie van Utrecht* (1579), *Oranjes Apologie* (1581) and the *Plakkaat van Verlatinghe* (1581).

A way to symbolize this shifting interpretation, could be to change the national holiday from April 30 (the anniversary of former Queen Juliana), to a week earlier, April 24, the birthday of William of Orange. He was both the founder of the free Republic and the patriarch of the Orange dynasty. Thus Queen’s Day (*Koninginnedag*) would, without by any means losing its current popularity, become Orange Day (*Oranjedag*). The “Orange narrative” should be valued and reinforced for the nation’s future benefits. The Orange monarchy should not be seen as an uneasy
relic from the past, but rather as a unique bond with the nation’s history and the specific character of Dutch democracy. The monarchy preserves its relevance only through the repeated recognition of the sovereign people of the Netherlands. In constitutional terms, the monarch keeps his or her advisory role, described by Bagehot as ‘the right to be consulted, the right to encourage, the right to warn’. This is both the minimum and the maximum influence within constitutional boundaries. In short, the honourable task that the current and future Orange rulers are bestowed upon is to personify the ‘crown on the Republic’, a binding and symbolic representative function.