Moorddam: publiek debat en propaganda in Amsterdam tijdens de Nederlandse Opstand (1566-1578)
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Summary

In the summer of 1566, a wave of iconoclastic riots washed over the Netherlands. It reached Amsterdam on August 23rd. A large crowd entered the Old Church and smashed the altars and relics. The Iconoclastic Riot was the provisional climax of the period that came to be known as the ‘time of troubles’ (1566-1567), a period in which suppressed Protestants and other dissenters came out of hiding and claimed their right to practice their religion. The religious and political upheaval was the result of growing discontent among the residents of the Netherlands about the persecution of Protestants and the attempts at administrative centralization by the Habsburg regime led by King Philip II. For a short period of time, Amsterdam functioned as an important center of opposition. In the Spring of 1567, however, power returned to the central government as well as to the orthodox-Catholic city government of Amsterdam. Under its supervision, Amsterdam would remain loyal to Philip II and the Catholic Church until 1578. By then, virtually all cities in the province of Holland had long joined the armed revolt against the ‘Spanish tyranny’ of the Duke of Alba, governor of the Netherlands.

This dissertation analyses the public debate in Amsterdam during tumultuous first phase of the Dutch Revolt. The debate consisted of various, often conflicting, public expressions of smaller or larger groups on matters of common interest. We speak of a public expression when individuals or groups openly communicated with an audience whose size they did not control. These opinions were made public through various media and forms of communication, ranging from seditious pamphlets to acts of civil disorder and from the submission of petitions to the singing of songs. Five parties dominated the public debate in this period: the central authorities; the Catholic city government; the Reformed Protestants, who partly merged with the group of exiles who fled the retaliation of Alva after 1567; the rebels; and the urban citizenry.

This subdivision is not absolute: the boundaries between the different groups were fluid. Various interest groups overlapped with each other, and parties formed different alliances. For instance, the exiles and the rebels overlapped in large part, and to the extent that they did not, they joined forces. This thesis focuses mainly on the city government, on the one hand, and the Amsterdam Reformed Protestants and other exiles, on the other. These were the two main parties that clearly manifested themselves in the public debate, which makes them a good starting point for studying the dynamics of that debate.

During the first ten years of the Dutch Revolt, the warring parties increasingly used and reshaped the available media to appeal to a general audience in order to attract the public to their side. In this way, the public debate was given an important role in determining the political agenda. Indeed, efforts to dominate and control the debate became part of the struggle itself. The
intensity of public debate at a specific time depended on practical and local factors: which media were available? which audience had to be convinced? The existing power relations were of great importance as well as the extent to which parties could control the infrastructure for media and communication and were able to appropriate public and political space. The changes in the public debate can be evaluated correctly only if these aspects are taken into consideration.

For example, during the troubles (1566-1567), but also during the period of armed conflict (1572-1578), certain conditions existed that cleared the way for an open public debate. During the troubles, for instance, the shifting power relations made it possible for the Reformed Protestants to break the city council’s monopoly on the publication of political information. A group of 'outsiders' thus gained direct political participation. After 1572, the uncertainty about the continuing struggle caused an unstoppable flow of rumors. This oral news further deepened the chasm between those in favor of the city government, and those opposed. The rumors furthermore sparked discussions, and a lively debate could develop. In the intervening period (1567-1572), the characteristics of the public debate changed dramatically. At first glance, the Amsterdam burgomasters controlled the medial infrastructure, but the Amsterdam populace found ways to appropriate the propaganda efforts and give them a twist of their own.

Despite the differences in the workings of the public debate during the different ‘regimes’, a shift is visible in this first period of ‘troubles’, especially in the degree to which both parties involved the public in their conflict. The Reformed Protestants, exiles, and rebels – groups which partly overlapped – benefited directly from drawing the urban population into the conflict and convincing them of the truth of the position of the government’s opponents. On the other hand, the burgomasters were increasingly forced to seek the support of the urban population through public forms of communication, even during periods when power lay firmly in their hands. The fact that both parties ascribed to the audience an important role will have had effect on that audience. The Amsterdam citizens regularly claimed a voice of their own and found ways to enter the debate even during the most repressive regimes. Media, public and politics were inextricably linked.

The importance of the local aspects for the form and content of public debate is made clear by the battle for control of the communications infrastructure. The position of the parties in the urban communications infrastructure was crucial to their success (or lack thereof) in dominating the public debate. These positions also determined the extent to which the groups themselves were able to appropriate the public domain, practically or symbolically. The Reformed Protestants traditionally had a significant advantage over the Catholic magistrate because of their strong position within the broader inter-regional news network. During the troubles, the Reformed Protestants could extend their power over the infrastructure and manifest themselves in a highly visible way in the public domain. For a short period of time the
Catholic religion was driven back behind the walls of the churches and monasteries, and the Beggars and Protestants dominated the city’s streets.

Even after the protagonists of the troubles had fled the city and become exiles, they contributed to public debate. Despite the physical absence of the exiles, the public domain remained the battleground of the two original opponents. During the regime of Alba, the importance of the exiles was visible in the fear they invoked in the burgomasters. In the period of armed resistance (1572-1578), the exiles used their local networks to reach their former fellow citizens. It seemed as if Amsterdam was on the brink of surrender, which motivated the exiles to become even more active in the debate. The cooperation between exiles and rebels in propaganda letters and Beggar-song campaigns shows the sophistication of these media strategies.

Within the public debate, we find continuous interaction between local and ‘national’ parties. The local conflict between the moderate, Protestant-minded Boelen-Heijnjen clan and the Catholic magistrate became part of a wider political and religious struggle between the - mostly Protestant - nobles and dissidents, on the one hand, and the Catholic central government, on the other, in the period 1564-1578. These two ‘layers’, local and supra-local, influenced each other constantly. The Amsterdam city council was bound by the policy of Brussels, although it found ways to resist it when the city’s interests were threatened. In addition, intensive contacts existed between the ‘national’ resistance movement and the Amsterdam dissidents.

The Amsterdam Protestants and dissidents were inspired by the broader resistance in their willingness to involve the general public in the conflicts. This public aspect of the ‘tradition of opposition’ arose from the need to get the message of conversion across to a wide audience. The Protestants and the leaders of the opposition were also influenced by humanist debates and by classical rhetoric, the art of persuasion, in which the teaching of a general public played an important role. On the other side of the spectrum stood the Catholic authorities. They had to preserve public peace and were therefore bound to the norms of secrecy. Political and religious matters were not to be discussed by the common man. This conviction was part of the reason why the authorities rarely used the printing press to defend themselves against the attacks of their opponents. They did not want to be guilty of the very thing they accused the dissidents of: involving a broad audience of lay people in matters with which they ought to have nothing to do. Even so, the mayors increasingly showed a willingness to violate their own standards and actively enter the debate, by using other media.

The ideals of civic unity and the common good were among the most important stakes in this propaganda battle. Throughout the period, both parties tried to depict themselves as the group that best represented these ideals, with varying success. During the troubles, the Reformed Protestants were protected by the civic militias, who depicted themselves as the true
representatives of the urban population and as the custodians of civic harmony. During Alba’s regime, the mayors went quite far in their attempts to spread the image of themselves as protectors of concord. With that goal in mind, they extended their hand to the Amsterdam populace a number of times. Their tactic was successful, as can be seen in the pride the Amsterdam citizenry expressed at the city government’s resistance against Alba’s unpopular tax measure, the Tenth Penny. At the same time, the mayors’ position was a difficult one: they depended on the support of the central government and therefore could not offer much resistance. At an earlier stage, they had obediently executed Alba’s strict policy of persecution. The severe punishment of their fellow citizens had aroused resentment amongst the Amsterdam citizenry, a resentment that had not suddenly disappeared.

From 1572 onwards, the rebels, under the guidance of William of Orange, cleverly capitalized on this sensitive issue. The unwillingness of the mayors to protect civic concord became a central theme in the propaganda aimed at Amsterdam. The bloody persecution of its own citizens was pointed at as one example of this obstinacy. The fact that the city council did not participate in the various peace talks was used by the rebels to emphasize the council’s lack of dedication to the cause of peace. After the Pacification of Ghent in 1576, the rebels suggested that the only thing preventing the province of Holland from peacefully reuniting was the stubbornness of Amsterdam. The interaction between different media reinforced this message. The hatred of the rebels for Amsterdam was echoed in rumors, while songs emphasized the bloody reputation of Amsterdam and suggested that the city had only itself to blame for its miserable situation. In propaganda letters, the rebels and exiles tried to stir up the urban population against the mayors by pointing out that the latter refused to negotiate about a peace agreement.

Ultimately, the burgomasters could no longer maintain that they embodied harmony and peace. However, the rebels could not persuade the urban population that they would ensure peace and unity once they had taken over power. The rebels’ propaganda had overshot its mark: by focusing on the sins of ‘Moorddam’, the rebels had caused Amsterdam’s population to worry that they would be persecuted once the city had surrendered. They feared arbitrary punishment at the hands of the rebel soldiers, which explains why the Amsterdam citizens, however much they wanted peace, warded off a rebel invasion in 1577.

The interaction between the local and national players was of great importance for the effectiveness of propaganda. Both parties adapted existing media to draw a wider audience into the conflict. Media thus obtained a new dynamic. Both parties showed a clever understanding of the workings of the media: they tried to discover through which media and what messages the Amsterdam populace could best be reached. The efforts of the rebels were especially effective
because of the combination of locally oriented propaganda and the 'national' campaign. The propaganda messages in both were reinforced by constant repetition. The rebels showed great inventiveness in tailoring propaganda to a specific location or audience. They used 'flexible' media such as oral communication, songs and correspondence that could easily be adapted to local conditions either by them or by the public itself. An essential advantage of these flexible media was that they could circumvent the censorship measures.

The use of petitions is an excellent example of how an existing form of communication could be transformed into an instrument to reach and represent a broader audience. Petitions played an important role in the early opposition, which was closely allied to the existing tradition of resistance. The legitimate nature of petitions, combined with their radical content, fitted perfectly with the campaign of ambiguous criticism carried out by the League of Nobles and the Compromise, a group of the lower nobility. In this period, Protestants and other dissidents in Amsterdam attached - at least officially – great value to the legitimacy of their actions. By using petitions to voice their protests, demands and requests, they made it appear as if they respected the authority of the institutions and persons in charge. At the same time, petitions often carried a completely different message, particularly when they were accompanied by riots. The authors of petitions actively sought support for their petitions to give them more power. Some of these petitions found their way to the printing press, but petitions were also spread through handwritten copies.

Another important form of communication that was consciously shaped by the parties was the proclamation. Oral proclamations were traditionally used by the authorities to inform the public about their policy. During the first years of the Revolt this instrument underwent several changes, to manipulate its reception amongst the public. For example, during Alba’s regime, the mayors adapted the proclamations to win over the Amsterdam people. Forced by the growing unrest of the population, the mayors accompanied proclamations of the despised Tenth Penny Placards with protest statements in which they depicted themselves as guardians of the privileges of the city and of civic harmony. An important side effect was that, through these statements, a larger audience repeatedly came into contact with sophisticated political argumentation.

During the period of armed revolt, the city council underlined the Catholic character of the city by using processions and other Catholic ceremonies and stressing the religious origins of the war, a connotation the rebels tried to downplay in their propaganda. Through the public announcements of the punishments of captured rebels, the mayors kept alive amongst the citizenry fear about the intentions of the insurgents. In the proclamations of the punishments, they claimed - falsely - that the rebels were planning to massacre the city’s population. However, the burgomasters could not prevent spectators of or participants in these public rituals from
seizing the opportunity to air criticism or opposition. The emphasis on public rituals by the burgomasters not only confirmed the Amsterdam populace further in the knowledge that their opinions counted, but the people were also given a chance to publicly demonstrate their views.

Written communication played a decisive role in the public debate in Amsterdam during the first decades of the Revolt. Letters, tracts, songs, but also official documents were written, copied and disseminated with the aim of reaching a wide audience. Texts in manuscript and manuscripts had the same function as printed pamphlets: they were used to persuade and inform a general public. Because of the public nature of correspondence, the contents of these texts were more often than not spread further through oral transmission. Handwritten and printed publication from this period share more similarities: both consisted for the most part of letters, petitions, songs, by-laws and treatises. Thus, prints and manuscripts belonged to the same corpus and were inextricably linked.

Handwritten letters had important advantages for reaching an urban public. Letters were traditionally public property, and correspondence was a widespread phenomenon. Both sides stretched this existing culture of letter-writing in order to reach a broader audience. Letter writers could easily circumvent censorship, but the main feature of handwritten letters was that they could easily be adapted to local conditions. The importance of this local component is shown by the cooperation between the rebels and the exiles, who directed their own letters to their contacts in the city but also drew attention to the letters from the rebel leaders. Even more clearly than other media, these propaganda letters pointed to the Amsterdam citizens as the party that should decide the fate of Amsterdam. By ensuring that the letters actually reached the city population, the rebels showed that this argument was not just a rhetorical trick. The Catholic authorities also used letters to reach a local audience, an indication that they were unable and unwilling to ignore the opinion of the populace.

The use of petitions, letters, rumors and songs shows that the ingenuity of the protest movement in mobilizing people went far beyond the use of the printing press. This dissertation confirms that printed publications, though important in the propaganda campaign of the rebels, played a less significant role in Amsterdam. Other media were more suitable for reaching a local public. Further research is needed to establish whether printing in this period was mainly distributed for ‘free’ or sold. But the situation in Amsterdam seems to underline that pamphlets were intended primarily for an audience that was already receptive to their messages to some extent and thus willing to buy them. While printed publications were also distributed on the initiative of the rebels leaders, in many cases printers and merchants simply wanted or needed to break even. The chance was small that the inhabitants of loyal areas would want to buy these publications so the printers would have focused primarily on their ‘own’ audience.
Yet printed publications found their way to the urban population through sympathizers along with news of the existence of the protest movement. These publications reinforced the notion of a broad, consistent propaganda campaign and endorsed the messages in other media. Pamphlets, in turn, depended on other forms of communication such as letters and rumors for further distribution. The distribution of printed publications was part of the development whereby a wider audience was drawn into the conflicts. Existing media such as petitions, letters and posters were distributed in printed form, but increasingly, pamphlets were published whose content was fictitious. These fictional pamphlets were also often cast in the form of an existing medium: petitions, letters or legislation. The rebels thus chose forms of communication that they were familiar with themselves and were also recognizable to a larger public. The choice of these media shows that the pamphlet genre was still in its infancy. At a later stage, specific genres emerged that would remain typical for pamphlet literature, like ‘praatjespamfletten’.

Rumors and oral communication traditionally played an indispensable role in the further dissemination of other media and communications. In tumultuous times, however, rumors also had - intentionally and unintentionally - a strong propaganda function. The need for oral news and rumors was so big in these uncertain times that they proofed unstoppable. The city government could do little to prevent the free circulation of information and news, and during the period of war, the burgomasters seemed to have given up on their efforts to block the news, which had important implications for the public debate. The parties or their sympathizers spread false or true rumors to inspire (unjustified) hope or just stir up fear. But even if they were not spread consciously, rumors could inflame conflicts because they strengthened and shaped ideas that already in play. Rumors could nourish the already existing discussions and opposing views amongst the populace, thus contributing to the emergence of a critical and lively debate. A number of themes that were already being debated heatedly, like the discourse on unity and the unpopularity of *Moorddam*, became even further polarized.

As a result of the constant exposure of the urban population to the arguments, justifications and explanations of the warring parties, a critical and well-informed public could come into being. People were constantly exposed to political reasoning in public media, from the rebels’ justifications for taking up arms to the burgomasters giving public account of their position regarding Alba’s hated financial policy. Both parties spread their information and propaganda to achieve a certain goal: to mobilize people, to convince them of the party’s standpoints or to persuade them that the party’s opponents were wrong, to stir up unrest or to warn the population. The recipient of this propaganda contributed to the subjectivity of the circulating media, often unconsciously; he shaped the news to fit his worldview. Although the circulating information was not independent, the multitude of opinions made the Amsterdam public
familiar with opposing political arguments. Because both parties involved the urban population actively in the political and religious discussions, an awareness was created amongst the Amsterdam citizens that their opinions or positions could be decisive.