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The Dutchness of the Dutch Golden Age

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THE DUTCHNESS OF THE DUTCH GOLDEN AGE

Beggars, iconoclasts, and civic patriots: the political culture of the Dutch revolt. By Peter Arnade. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008. Pp. xiv + 352. ISBN 978-0-8014-7496-5. \$26.95.

Tulipmania: money, honor and knowledge in the Dutch golden age. By Anne Goldgar. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. Pp. xx + 425. ISBN 0-226-30125-9. \$30.00.

The republican alternative: the Netherlands and Switzerland compared. Edited by André Holenstein, Thomas Maissen, and Maarten Prak. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008. Pp. 360. ISBN 978-90-8964-005-5. €34.50.

Catholic communities in Protestant states: Britain and the Netherlands, c. 1570–1720. Edited by Benjamin J. Kaplan, Bob Moore, Henk van Nierop, and Judith Pollmann. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009. Pp. 288. ISBN 9780719079061. £65.00.

Faith on the margins: Catholics and Catholicism in the Dutch golden age. By Charles H. Parker. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008. Pp. xiv + 332. ISBN 978-0-674-02662-9. \$49.95.

Well-being in Amsterdam's golden age. By Derek Phillips. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008. Pp. 264. ISBN 978-90-8555-042-6. \$45.00.

A common art: urban ceremonial in Antwerp and Brussels during and after the Dutch revolt. By Margit Thøfner. Zwolle: Waanders Publishers, 2007. Pp. 376. ISBN 9040082952. €69.95.

The founding of the Dutch Republic: war, finance, and politics in Holland, 1572–1588. By James D. Tracy. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. Pp. xii + 343. ISBN 978-0-19-920911-8. £66.00.

I

In his evocative study *The embarrassment of riches* (1987) Simon Schama advanced paradoxical conclusions about the Dutch golden age of the seventeenth century.¹ On the one hand Schama identified a set of typically ‘Dutch’ values, which created a common ‘moral geography’ in the nascent United Provinces. On the other hand the author noted that this exercise in national self-invention coincided

¹ Simon Schama, *The embarrassment of riches: an interpretation of Dutch culture in the golden age* (London, 1987 and later editions).

with the influx of thousands of immigrants from abroad, who represented a variety of ethnic and religious cultures. Consequently, in Schama's argument the 'Dutchness' of the Dutch golden age remained an elusive concept. It is interesting to observe that similar paradoxes are a recurring problem in the historiography of the Dutch Republic. Scholars from Johan Huizinga to Jonathan Israel have sought to reconcile some intriguingly contradictory stereotypes of the early modern Netherlands: religiously tolerant and yet strictly Calvinist; politically fragmented and still an emerging world power; disrupted by a civil war and still a socially stable society.

An overview of recent publications shows that such ambiguous characteristics continue to fascinate scholars across the globe. But instead of ascribing them to a timeless 'Dutchness', or privileging the United Provinces for paving the way to enlightenment and modernity, these historians have adopted a more transnational and comparative perspective. This has not yet created a comprehensive, new vision of Dutch society during the seventeenth century, but the various studies do reveal some refreshing new facets of this much studied area.

Three main issues can be singled out. First of all, a number of scholars have reassessed the puzzling outcomes of the Dutch revolt. It is a commonplace that the rebellion in the sixteenth-century Low Countries eventually split the Habsburg dominions and created two highly contrasting states in the north and the south. Nationalist scholars in the past tended to view this development as a kind of natural process that 'inevitably' led to the formation of an independent Dutch state. This finalistic reading of events became increasingly unsatisfactory as studies of the 1970s and 1980s showed that the Dutch revolt had essentially been a civil war between Netherlands citizens and that there had hardly existed a dividing line between the northern and southern Low Countries prior to the outbreak of war. Today, most historians agree that the divide of the region in the later sixteenth century was largely unforeseen, the result of accidental military, religious, and economic developments. In *The founding of the Dutch Republic* the eminent historian James D. Tracy takes a new step in this debate. At first sight, this study provides a meticulous reconstruction of the financial underpinning of the rebel war machine from 1572 to 1588. In four chronologically organized sections, Tracy identifies the war strategies of the rebels and the means by which they raised funds. But on closer inspection it becomes clear that this exercise in financial history also serves to explain the emergence of the Dutch Republic in the course of the conflict.

Tracy does not ignore current tendencies in historical scholarship but takes the opposite position. Just like Jonathan Israel², he argues that there were, after all, structural differences between the northern and southern provinces which can explain the later divide. More in particular he points out that the centre of political and economic gravity in the pre-revolt Low Countries had always been

² Jonathan I. Israel, *The Dutch Republic: its rise, greatness, and fall, 1477–1806* (2nd edn, Oxford, 1998) e.g. pp. v–vii, 196–220.

south of the great rivers, notably in Flanders and Brabant. The province of Holland could therefore gain a dominant position north of this natural border. The outbreak of the Dutch revolt only reinforced Holland's incipient hegemony in the areas that later constituted the Dutch Republic. 'This book tells the story of a province that gave birth to a nation', is the provocative opening line of Tracy's study (p. 1).

Some historians may find such a bold statement deterministic and 'Hollando-centric'. Yet Tracy is too astute an historian and too familiar with the period to fall into such pitfalls. His post-revisionist argument in fact builds on two earlier works, *A financial revolution in the Habsburg Netherlands* (1985) and *Holland under Habsburg rule* (1990). In these highly acclaimed studies the author has shown how in the first half of the sixteenth century Holland developed into a largely self-governing province within the Habsburg body politic. Its political maturity was principally based on the introduction of a sophisticated system of taxes and voluntary loans. In *The founding of the Dutch Republic* Tracy now examines the practical implications of this 'fiscal revolution' in the decades when the Dutch revolt broke out. By reconstructing the financial base of Holland's war expenses, Tracy hopes he can demonstrate that the perseverance of the rebel armies in their struggle against Habsburg Spain was largely the result of the financial experience of the Holland administration. Tracy does not claim that the rise of the Dutch Republic under Holland's leadership was entirely inevitable. Rather he asserts that the remarkable outcome of the war can better be understood when one realizes that Holland's basic apparatus and confidence had already been born in the preceding decades.

To make this argument convincing, Tracy needs to prove two things. First, that Holland's political elite shared a common war strategy in the revolt, aimed at securing a separate northern territory, commonly known as 'Holland's Garden'. Second, that Holland's expenses were consistent with this assumed grand strategy and based on earlier developed financial arrangements. The latter is easier to prove than the former. Tracy's analyses of Holland's increasing revenues through taxes, loans, and the appropriation of Catholic properties are simply masterful. They are the product of decades of painstaking research in often complex archival material. The financial data provided in this book will therefore be invaluable to economic and political historians alike. Whereas these numbers indeed provide a new explanation for the resilience of the Dutch rebels in their fight against the most powerful monarchy of sixteenth-century Europe, it is more difficult to identify a coherent political programme behind Holland's fiscal sophistication. It is obvious that Holland's war efforts were guided by the interests of its taxpaying elites. But how uniform and fixed were the interests of the rivalling Holland towns? What is more, we may wonder to what extent the wish list of a single province can actually explain the outcome of such a complex and international conflict. Tracy's engaging examination of Holland's strategies clearly exposes important gaps in our knowledge of the other provinces, especially Flanders and Brabant. A comparison between their respective war aims and

finances would better enable us to measure the significance of the framework so carefully laid out by Tracy.

Whereas Tracy focuses on rebellious strategies in Holland, Margit Thøfner examines the mixed fortunes of the revolt in the south. This is still an understudied subject, that Thøfner explores through new, attractive source material. *A common art* provides an in-depth study of urban ceremonial in two key Brabant cities – Antwerp and Brussels – between 1566 and 1633. In the introduction, Thøfner compares processions, civic entries, and urban festivals to a communal self-portrait. Their composition served to visualize the social, religious, and political fabric of the city, albeit in an idealized form. If we approach urban ceremonial as mirrors of society, Thøfner argues, we may also assume that the changes that took place in it reveal how contemporaries negotiated and articulated the upheavals of the civil war. More in particular, *A common art* seeks to assess how rituals of reconciliation and purification took shape in two urban communities that were paralysed by the experience of dissent and military conflict.

Thøfner traces this process in three consecutive parts, starting with a discussion of the turbulent 1560s. She points out that public ceremonial often became a focal-point of religious and political dissent precisely because of its communal and integrating purpose. It is telling, for example, that the iconoclasm in Antwerp in 1566 followed in the wake of the city's Marian procession. When Brussels and Antwerp turned into Calvinist republics in the late 1570s, the anatomy of urban rituals had to be adapted. The entry of the duke of Anjou as new sovereign in 1582 presented a particularly challenging task. The careful improvisations of the rebels eventually proved short-lived, as Habsburg authority returned in 1585.

The largest part of *A common art* is devoted to this period of restoration and reconciliation. Under the re-established Habsburg regime urban processions became a powerful tool for forging new connections between Tridentine Catholicism, Habsburg authority, and local civic identity. This 'confessionalizing' enterprise is well known, but its spectacular success in the southern Netherlands continues to puzzle historians. Just like the rise of a republican state in the north, the transformation of the southern provinces from hotbeds of evangelical dissent into models of militant Catholicism was seemingly unexpected. It has often been assumed that the resurgence of Catholicism in the south was simply imposed from above by a triumphant Habsburg state. Yet recent studies of Tridentine renewal elsewhere in Europe have effectively contested the merits of such top-down models. Thøfner builds on this by stressing the agency of common citizens in the process of Catholic rejuvenation. She notes how in Antwerp after 1585 local lay men and women took the initiative for a revitalization of Catholic display. Interestingly, evidence suggests that many of them had spent previous years in exile in Catholic asylum centres such as Cologne and Douai. Encouraged by freshly arrived Jesuits, these returning refugees galvanized a new type of politicized Catholic piety 'from below'.

Attempts to fashion a new connection between Catholic identity and Habsburg authority were intensified after the arrival of the archdukes Albert and Isabella in 1598. Thøfner points out that the new sovereigns were eager to use traditional urban ceremonial to emphasize a historic link with the pre-revolt Habsburg past. Yet processions and civic entries could simultaneously serve to erase painful memories of the rebellious intermezzo. The new Tridentine Catholic spirit effectively wiped out the evangelical legacy of Antwerp and Brussels and modified older medieval traditions in the process. The cult of the Blessed Sacrament of the Miracles in Brussels is a particularly telling example. Originally a religious festival that commemorated the expulsion of the Jews from the city in 1369, the anti-Semitic tale was rephrased to celebrate a more recent example of divine punishment: the removal of Protestant heretics from the purged city after 1585.

Thanks to its long-term perspective and the incorporation of different types of sources, *A common art* provides a sound case study of changing public ceremonial as a response to political and religious crises. Early modern processions and festivals have often been studied as instruments of the state that served to express social harmony and strengthen royal authority. Thøfner shows the limited value of such traditional paradigms. She stresses the need to view urban festivals not only from the perspective of the organizers, but to approach them as communal events which involved an active contribution from common citizens.

Similar ideas can be found in *Beggars, iconoclasts and civic patriots* by Peter Arnade. It offers a broader overview of ritual, symbolism, and propaganda during the conflict in the Low Countries. Arnade examines what he calls the revolt's political idioms, grammars, and rites, and the ways these were communicated to an urban public. In three main parts, the author skilfully discusses the emergence of dissent and opposition in the course of the sixteenth century, the nature of iconoclasm in 1566, and finally the formation of rebel imagery in the 1570s and 1580s.

Arnade's study may not contain much new material, but its comprehensive angle and original reading of sources make for an engaging synthesis. An expert of ceremonial life in the fifteenth-century Burgundian Netherlands, Arnade is particularly well equipped to trace the medieval origins of rituals in a conflict that has often been labelled as 'modern'. Both rebels and loyalists consciously borrowed from earlier festive rituals and drew on established cultural symbols to articulate their view. Rites of inversion, for example, played a prominent role in the 1560s when noble opposition exploited beggar symbolism. Medieval methods of purification were later echoed in the duke of Alba's strategy to remove symbols of heresy and rebellion from Dutch towns. Arnade convincingly shows how such past precedents offered different parties in the conflict the vocabulary to express themselves.

In connection with this, the author explores the appropriation of more recent literary models. For instance the writings of Bartholomé de las Casas about Spanish brutality in the Americas were skilfully adapted in rebel propaganda. These examples complemented well-known anti-Semitic and anti-Moorish narratives that served to demonize the 'Hispanic' enemy. Arnade affirms the

impression of recent scholars who have shown how Dutch rebel identity took shape by 'othering' the opponent. William of Orange in particular tried to convince his contemporaries that the conflict in the Low Countries should not be seen as a religious civil war, but as a common struggle of the Dutch against an alien, Spanish oppressor. Hence equating the Habsburg government with foreignness was an important aim of his media strategy. In this way, a narrative of Dutch patriotism slowly emerged in rebel pamphlets, prints, and songs. This embryonic national consciousness was fostered by the exile of thousands of Dutch Protestants, an experience that made it easier to conceptualize the idea of a common fatherland.

Despite some repetition and a bias towards the cities in the south, Arnade's study is a welcome introduction to a rich but sometimes abstruse world of sixteenth-century symbolism. Just like Margit Thøfner's case study, *Beggars, iconoclasts and civic patriots* reminds us of the strong potential of print and propaganda in this highly urbanized and relatively literate corner of early modern Europe. Both books have the further merit of raising a number of new questions about the reception of this rich media supply. We still know relatively little about the ways in which onlookers and readers in the Low Countries understood, adapted and appropriated the messages that were conveyed in pamphlets, songs and drama. Thøfner takes some admirable first steps, but the impact of media on shaping contrasting identities in the north and the south deserves further study.

II

A second topic that has long preoccupied historians of the United Provinces is the ambiguous religious climate of the newborn state. Officially the Dutch Republic presented itself as a Protestant, Reformed state. Yet no one in the northern Netherlands was forced to attend the meetings of the public Calvinist church; indeed, the Union of Utrecht of 1579 guaranteed freedom of conscience to all. How this vaguely described religious settlement was to be understood in practice remained an open question. Religious toleration was a continual process of negotiating diversity, never a fixed condition.

Catholics in particular found themselves a difficult position. They are the topic of two important new studies. With *Faith on the margins* by Charles H. Parker we now have a long-awaited monograph on Catholicism in the Dutch golden age. Modern textbooks still tend to portray the United Provinces as a profoundly Calvinist society. Yet by 1650 Catholics made up about 30 per cent of the total population. This strong Catholic presence has long been overlooked in the historiography. Paradoxically, Catholic mythmaking played a role in this as well, since Catholic scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were eager to paint the experiences of this 'persecuted, underground' Catholic church in the darkest possible colours. Parker seeks to redress the balance by looking beyond the narratives of victimization and to assess how Catholic men and women came to terms with life in an officially Protestant state.

There is much to enjoy about his accessible account. First of all, it presents an up-to-date history of the so-called *Missio Hollandica*, the missionary framework that had to co-ordinate the education of priests, pastoral care, and the relief of the poor in the Dutch provinces. Parker discusses these topics lucidly in thematically organized chapters. In this way his analysis also contributes to current debates about Catholic reform in early modern Europe. Parker aims to describe the Dutch experience against the background of international Tridentine renewal. He therefore rejects the long-held notion of a distinctive Dutch Catholic piety, which is said to have been more introspective, austere, and critical towards exuberant forms of Marian devotion. Instead, he argues that Catholic life and its resurgence in the United Provinces stood squarely within the Baroque piety of post-Tridentine Catholicism.

This international perspective makes for some thought-provoking conclusions. Parker points out that the disappearance of Catholic ecclesiastical structures after the revolt in a sense facilitated the implementation of Tridentine reform in the northern Netherlands. Catholic believers may have been deprived of diocesan organization, parish churches, and a regular supply of priests, but the improvised missionary model, which had to replace the former Catholic infrastructure, also made it possible to start the spiritual reform programme from scratch. Parker argues that ecclesiastical authorities were less hampered by the established privileges, conflicting local interests, and internal rivalry that frustrated the implementation of Trent elsewhere in Europe. This hypothesis of successful Catholic renewal in a hostile political environment leads to a second observation. Because of a chronic shortage of priests in Dutch missionary territory, there was an exceptional degree of lay agency in the process of Catholic survival. Spiritual virgins in particular, commonly known as *kloppjes*, played a vital role by engaging in religious teaching, visiting the sick, and providing housing to travelling priests. Despite Rome's strong reservations, these women were largely responsible for the resilience of Catholicism during the early years of the revolt.

The Dutch example thus provides an interesting case of post-Tridentine reform 'from below', without the support of a confessionalizing state and a proper diocesan structure. That is not to say that the Catholic enterprise in the United Provinces was a single success story. Throughout the seventeenth century the strength of the mission was weakened by rivalries between Jesuits and secular priests, who held contradictory views about their mutual status, privileges, and responsibilities. Parker further shows that Catholic believers themselves did not regard the freedom of conscience, guaranteed by the Union of Utrecht, as an acceptable compromise. In their eyes, the arrangement fell short of meeting their most elementary spiritual needs: receiving the sacraments and engaging in public worship. Whereas Parker stays away from older notions of a rigorous oppression of Catholics in the Dutch Republic, he nevertheless believes that the very idea of persecution had a formative impact. The perception of themselves as a persecuted minority enabled many Catholic men and women to identify with central narratives in biblical and Christian history. Catholic communities in the

Netherlands thus developed a collective self-awareness as an embattled minority of true believers, an image that was also exploited in booklets and pamphlets and in the reports of ecclesiastical authorities.

In *Faith on the margins* we encounter a Catholic community that constituted an integral yet distinctive part of seventeenth-century Dutch society. Parker stresses that Catholics largely lived in their own world. He finds ample support for this view in letters from priests and missionary reports. However illustrative these sources may be, they also point to a possible weakness in Parker's study of religious coexistence in the United Provinces. *Faith on the margins* emphasizes the agency of the laity in Dutch missionary territory, yet the experiences of common Catholic men and women are difficult to gauge from the ecclesiastical sources on which the study is largely based. Parker is well aware of the limits of this material and his book does not pretend to provide answers to all questions. Rather than a definitive study, *Faith on the margins* offers a much needed reorientation in Catholic scholarship and its directions will undoubtedly inspire future research.

A transnational perspective on Catholic culture in the Dutch golden age can be found in *Catholic communities in Protestant states*, a collection of essays to which Parker has contributed as well. It intends to compare the experience of Catholic minorities in two officially Protestant territories: Britain and the Netherlands from 1570 to 1720. The legal position of Catholics in both states was somewhat dissimilar, but there were many parallel problems that Catholic men and women faced. Fifteen authors probe these different responses and survival strategies in seven thematically organized sections. This includes topics such as lay participation, women agency, sacred space, and the visual arts. The balanced organization of the collection and its well-defined scope have resulted in a fine exercise in comparative history.

One of central questions concerns the nature of religious coexistence in England and the United Provinces. The extent to which religious differences guided the daily life of common citizens is not so easy to grasp. Did Catholics and Protestants for example live in the same neighbourhoods? Did they attend each other's funerals, do business with each other, and share the same friends? In any case, the existence of different faiths forced Catholic minorities in both countries to find practical solutions to their daily confrontations with 'heretics'. As Willem Frijhoff points out in the introduction, scholars of the Dutch Republic have come up with a range of different interpretations of how precisely religious coexistence worked in practice. From this debate two contradictory models have emerged. A first group of historians has argued that the United Provinces should be viewed as an essentially segmented society, in which different believers largely lived within the margins of their own denomination. According to this line of argument, it was through a form of confessional segregation – sometimes called 'pillarization' – that divisions in seventeenth-century Dutch society did not lead to open violence. This view, in fact a local variant of the confessionalization paradigm, partly persists in Charles Parker's work.

Against the notion of parallel confessional communities an alternative model has been proposed by Willem Frijhoff. It highlights the frequent blurring of social boundaries and detects a practice of co-operation in local neighbourhoods and guilds. Studies that have taken this 'bottom-up' approach to religious accommodation argue that segregation was not an option in the mixed urban centres of the Dutch Republic. Most citizens seem to have accepted religious diversity as a fact of life, and considered a certain degree of 'toleration' as inevitable. In his essay, Benjamin Kaplan departs from this dichotomy by examining levels of mixed marriages between Catholics, Calvinists, and Lutherans. While data for the Dutch Republic are patchy and sometimes difficult to interpret, the sources available suggest that intermarrying became increasingly rare towards the end of the seventeenth century. Kaplan tentatively offers a number of explanations for this development and emphasizes that a shift towards endogamy does not mean that Dutch society as a whole became segregated. As William Sheils affirms in his essay on patterns of interaction in early modern England, integration and segregation were not mutually exclusive.

Alexandra Walsham and Judith Pollmann consider the construction of Catholic identities in both countries by exploring the use of sacred space and material objects in popular devotion. The latter are also discussed in a wide-ranging essay by Richard Williams which effectively redresses the often-caricatured view of English Catholic art. Their contributions reveal how Trent was negotiated by lay people who had to translate formal guidelines to their lived experience. The results were often ambiguous. English and Dutch Catholics may have lacked the 'confessional supply' and support of the state; these circumstances simultaneously gave them unique opportunities to shape devotional practices in accordance with their own religious demands and priorities. Similar conclusions are drawn in the essays that address the position of Catholic majorities in officially Protestant territories, notably Ireland and the Dutch Generality lands. In her article on the Irish experience, Ute Lotz-Heumann identifies a number of Catholic survival strategies that were surprisingly similar to practices in the Dutch Republic. Looking beyond the notion of an oppressed religious culture, she reconstructs how Catholics and the Protestant government developed a certain *modus vivendi*.

One of the obvious topics for comparison that is not extensively studied here is political loyalty. Whereas a good deal of research has been carried out on Catholic attitudes towards the Protestant English state, the response to the loss of power and prestige among Dutch Catholics remains largely unexplored. There may not have been a Gunpowder plot in the United Provinces, but rumours of secret Catholic conspiracies – guided by ominous Jesuits – played a powerful role in the public imagination in Holland as well. Considering the militant agenda of their English co-believers and the larger numbers of Catholics in the United Provinces, it is puzzling why Dutch Catholics remained largely passive throughout the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Was it because they were, after all, better off than their fellow brothers and sisters across

the Channel? Or did Catholics perhaps retain informal political influence in the Dutch body politic which compensated for the loss of formal power and offices?

III

Catholic worries and, indeed, worries about Catholics are noticeably absent in *Well-being in Amsterdam's golden age* by Derek Phillips. It addresses a third recurring topic in golden age studies: the social infrastructure of Dutch society. More in particular Phillips seeks to map the living conditions in Amsterdam in the second half of the seventeenth century. The elusive concept of 'well-being' is elaborated in a sociological way, which means that Phillips investigates the implications of social inequality to the lives of different groups in the city. He distinguishes between three sources of inequality: civic status, economic standing, and gender. Phillips wants to know what relevance these factors had for, among other things, levels of literacy, life expectancy, and housing circumstances. Since his exercise is based on data taken from secondary literature, the outcomes may not be particularly new to those familiar with the period.

A sociological approach to an early modern community has some clear benefits but also a few shortcomings. As for the first category, *Well-being in Amsterdam's golden age* offers a comprehensive and useful overview of the social conditions in a seventeenth-century metropolis. Since there are few modern studies about early modern Amsterdam available in English, this study will be a welcome starting-point for anyone interested in the social fabric of the third biggest city of northern Europe. Phillips provides clear-cut data about marriage patterns, income rates, childbirth, orphanages, and the physical geography of the city. Special attention is paid to migration patterns, which dramatically transformed Amsterdam's outlook. Between 1570 and 1670 the city's population increased from about 30,000 to almost 200,000. Phillip's assessments of these developments are to the point and substantiated by statistical material, which is on the whole very up-to-date.

Well-being in Amsterdam's golden age also has a broader agenda. 'I hope', Phillips writes in his introductory chapter, 'to remind readers of the extraordinary sameness of human beings throughout the ages' (p. 23). To achieve this, he looks for criteria that are said to have 'intrinsic value' to all people in every society. For instance, Phillips argues that 'autonomy is a dimension of well-being that everyone cares about' (p. 23). These wide-ranging claims are not unproblematic. For did the world in which seventeenth-century individuals lived actually allow them to formulate such values? Unfortunately, Phillips makes little attempt to consider how his twentieth-century categories of well-being were perceived by the people he is studying. As a result, his study misses or dismisses the very different understanding of concepts such as 'autonomy' among early modern men and women. Surprisingly, Phillips has also little to say about religious experiences – an obvious dimension of 'well-being' in a seventeenth-century

community – or about social mobility in a city that was confronted with massive immigration.

Perhaps readers had better use Phillips's data in conjunction with the excellent interdisciplinary study of Anne Goldgar. Like Simon Schama two decades ago, she is particularly interested in the moral geography of the Dutch golden age. Whereas Schama sought to sketch a broad canvas of Dutch mentalities during the economic heyday, Goldgar opts for a micro historical approach, focusing on the notorious tulip folly of the 1630s. Her brilliantly written *Tulipmania* has two basic aims. First of all, it seeks to deconstruct the many legends that have surrounded the trade in tulips since the seventeenth century. By carefully revisiting well-known sources as well as exploring new archive material, Goldgar paints a convincing picture of the (limited) financial impact of the trade and of the social world of tulip fanciers. The economic depression that 'tulipmania' allegedly generated in 1637 turns out to be a plain myth.

Goldgar blends her revisionist narrative with explorations about the interaction between commerce, science, and art in early modern society. These connections pave the ground for her second aim. Goldgar argues that, while 'tulipmania' may not have been the financial crisis once believed, it concealed a crisis of a different kind. The interest in tulips in fact brought to the surface a more profound, cultural unease in Dutch society. 'In tulipmania', she writes, 'Dutch burghers confronted a series of issues that in any case gripped their culture: novelty, the exotic, capitalism, immigration, the growth of urban societies' (p. 7). In the contemporary fascination for tulips we could thus observe the anxieties of a society in continuous transition. More specifically, Goldgar points out that because of their novelty and importance in a culture of collecting, the seemingly worthless bulbs inevitably raised questions about knowledge, value, and taste. What is more, the trade in tulips highly depended on trust. The bulbs were usually sold unseen as they spent most of the time under the ground. The final result would only become visible in the next spring, when the financial transaction had already taken place. As stories went on about the disturbingly high prices that people paid for such uncertain products, the tulip trade became the ominous metaphor for those who felt uncomfortable with the many economic and social changes in Holland society at large. To many moralists, 'tulipmania' was the ultimate symbol of a world turned upside down. When the trade temporarily collapsed in the late 1630s, they exploited their worries and fostered the creation of a popular myth about the role of tulips in causing economic and moral decline.

Goldgar's sketch of a changing society that had to reinvent itself, also explains why the Dutch regularly looked for inspiration across the borders. The way in which other republican states provided the United Provinces with a role model, and vice versa, is explored in *The republican alternative*. This collection of essays compares the United Provinces with the much older Swiss Confederation. In six thematic parts, it considers how two republican societies dealt with the shared problems of political legitimacy, social stability, and religious disunity. Given their

similar concerns, it is remarkable that comparisons between Switzerland and the Netherlands have hardly been made so far. Like *Catholic communities in Protestant states*, this comparative volume takes an admirable first step, and like all pioneering work it leaves some inevitable gaps as well.

Despite its clear focus, the scope and quality of the individual contributions vary. Some essays, including those by Andreas Würgler, Maarten Prak, Francisca Loetz, and Willem Frijhoff, give up-to-date overviews of either of the two states, but do not really engage in a comparative analysis. In the section devoted to republican ideas, the patterns of interaction become more obvious. Thomas Maissen considers how far the Dutch Republic served as a model to Swiss thinkers who tried to reinvent the constitutional framework of their confederation in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Martin van Gelderen on his part addresses the role of the Swiss example in Dutch political thought during the revolt, a topic that has also received recent attention from Laura Cruz.³ Finally, Olaf Mörke compares the republican symbolic imagery in both countries. He notes a shared preoccupation with values that expressed stability and restoration after conflict. In the Swiss case, however, legal history featured more prominently in this discourse of consensus.

In the following section, Michael North examines the notion of republican art. He demystifies the common thesis that the Reformation was largely responsible for a decline in Swiss art production in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This widely used explanation is unconvincing if we consider that in the 'Calvinist' Netherlands the art market boomed in the same period. Instead of attributing developments in art production to the Reformation, North highlights the role of affluent mercantile communities that could compensate for the loss of royal and church patronage in republican societies. Especially fit for a comparative analysis would have been the equally contrasting economic developments in the two states. Béla Kapossy touches on this subject in a stimulating study of the image of Holland in eighteenth-century Swiss Reform discourse, yet the overall theme of economic exchange is not examined by the contributors.

An intriguing contrast between the Swiss Confederation and the Dutch Republic is the different response of the republican authorities to the problem of religious disunity. Whereas the Dutch experimented with policies that created a mixed society within an officially Protestant state, their Swiss colleagues enforced confessional uniformity in the respective cantons. In his concluding remarks, Daniel Schläppi suggests that the belated implementation of the Reformation in the Netherlands may have been responsible for this anomaly. This explanation may have some truth in it, but it could also be argued that the contrast has something to do with traditional *images* of the two republican states, which have been the result of the different historiographical preoccupations of scholars in the

³ Compare Laura Cruz, 'Turning Dutch: historical myths in early modern Netherlands', *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 39 (2008) pp. 3–22.

field. Models of 'confessionalization' (Switzerland) as opposed to 'toleration' (Netherlands) have framed contrasting and (over)simplified narratives.

As the editors point out, political scholars in the past used to feel uncomfortable with the composite nature of the early modern republican states. While the great monarchies of seventeenth-century Europe were reforming their realms by centralizing legislation and institutions, their republican counterparts seemed to have missed the road towards modern state formation. *The republican alternative* effectively challenges the merits of this grand narrative and several authors note that both Switzerland and the United Provinces were surprisingly stable communities throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Despite religious divisions and political inefficiencies, the Swiss cantons and Dutch provinces largely managed to contain internal conflicts. It appears that the complexity of their respective administrations was in some respects a blessing in disguise. Jonathan Israel and J. L. Price have demonstrated earlier how the decentralized system of the United Provinces was a source of fundamental social stability, as it was better able to accommodate dissident voices than the monarchical alternative.⁴

However different in scope and subject matter, the books discussed above all mark a shift in the historiography of the Dutch golden age. Apart from the rather predictable conclusion that scholarship has become more interdisciplinary, they represent the transnational and comparative angle from which the United Provinces are currently studied, and show us the rich rewards that such a perspective can bring. This international orientation will not only make Dutch history better accessible to a wider academic audience. It may also help to clear up some persistent myths and overcome the insular essentialism that has often coloured our understanding of Dutch society in the seventeenth century. For a long time, the historiography of the early modern Netherlands has been framed by the comfortingly clear concept of a 'golden age'. Since the Dutch case did not seem to fit into the larger European pattern, scholars were keen to privilege the economic, religious, and artistic developments in this corner of Europe as unique and distinctly Dutch. The golden age paradigm may not yet have lost its popularity; there clearly is a tendency to view topics such as the Dutch revolt, the practice of religious toleration, and the social structures of Dutch society as local variations to more general, European patterns. Even if this renders the Dutch golden age less Dutch, it has not made its history less intriguing.

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⁴ Israel, *The Dutch Republic*; J. L. Price, *Holland and the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth-century: the politics of particularism* (Oxford, 1994).