In naam van het volmaakte. Conservatisme in Nederland in de negentiende eeuw van Gerit Jan Mulder tot Jan Heemskerk Azn
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Summary

IN THE NAME OF THE SUBLIME

*Dutch Conservatism in the Nineteenth Century*

Traditionally, the Netherlands are regarded as a conservative country. Likewise, the Dutch are known as a proverbially cautious and moderate people. In political terms, this may be translated into a general pursuit of consensus and continuity. However, a conservative party has always been notably absent from Dutch political life. According to a number of Dutch historians a conservative attitude qualified and still qualifies all major political parties, from the social-democratic, christian-democratic to the various liberal ones. These parties cannot be ascribed a specific conservative ideology. As a result a conservative party has been absent from Dutch political life.

Still, from 1848 to 1868, when political parties in the Netherlands first emerged, a militant conservative opposition may be discerned. Its members challenged liberal politics and advocated an informal and elite style of politics. A specific humanist philosophy, based upon the moral sublimity of the individual politician, underlied their conservative political stance. In contemporary historiography the importance of this informal group led by Gerrit Jan Mulder (1802–1880) has been undervalued due to a strong focus on the role of formal political parties and evident bias towards abstract definitions of conservatism.

Among contemporary Dutch political historians a tendency to concentrate on unchanging characteristics of political ideologies such as liberalism, socialism and conservatism, has been predominant. Conservatism has been described as an ideology for the nobility, which had lost its dominant social position during the French Revolution. This ideology was justified by reference to a divine cosmic order and man’s natural imperfection. Dutch historians, like E.H. Kossmann and H.W. von der Dunk, have looked for political groups to fit these unchanging characteristics. At first glance these were found within various orthodox-Protestant groups after 1848, cen-
tred around Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer and Abraham Kuyper, who in 1879 actually succeeded in forming an Anti-Revolutionary Party. This ‘winner’-perspective has quite undeservedly distracted attention from humanist conservatives, who opposed factional division.

This doctoral thesis was written as part of the research programme ‘De Natiestaat. Politiek in Nederland sinds 1815’ (‘The Nation State. Politics in the Netherlands since 1815’), set up by a number of Dutch universities. This project aims at renewing Dutch political history by focusing mainly on political culture, the reach of the political domain and popular political participation. A study of Dutch conservatism shows this alternative conception of political history to its full advantage. An analysis of Dutch conservatism needs a broader approach in order to incorporate non-institutional strands of conservative politics.

Conservatism played an important part in the monarchical restoration in Europe at the beginning of the Nineteenth Century. In 1815 the Netherlands and Belgium were amalgamated into a United Kingdom of the Netherlands. This transition to monarchy gave rise to specific political problems in the Netherlands in which a strong republican tradition prevailed. The Dutch case deviates from surrounding countries. A recent feudal-aristocratic past was lacking. Instead, the former Dutch Republic of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century featured a ruling merchant and regent class, which had managed to retain its power. This ruling class was relatively open to Enlightened ideas concerning human rationality, human freedom and man’s ability to change society.

In recent years, international research has sought to describe the specific ways in which divergent conservative groups in various countries reacted to increasing religious and political liberalization in the Nineteenth Century. This study aims to investigate the conservative answer to these profound changes in Dutch society. This reaction was based on a specific humanist philosophy, as formulated in the beginning of the Nineteenth Century. The ideas and acts of a particular group of humanist conservatives in the Netherlands will illustrate this development. This group was not led by a politician, but by the controversial chemist Mulder. He was a political newcomer and formulated a non-aristocratic and non-religious conservatism. Mulder managed to organize a conservative opposition in reaction to the liberal constitution of 1848. The political ideas of Mulder were based upon a specific world view, which he adopted from the influential Dutch philosopher Philip Willem van Heusde. The most influential book by this
Praeceptor Hollandiae (or teacher of the Dutch people) was De Socratische School (The Socratic School, 1834–1839). It offered a ‘typically Dutch’ philosophy to suit the new kingdom. In 1830 a smaller Dutch kingdom emerged when Belgium became independent. The philosophy of Van Heusde was related to the ‘common sense’-philosophy in Scotland (Thomas Reid) and France (Pierre Royer-Collard), but focused more on the individual character. As creators next to God, morally educated people had to perfect the divine order in society.

This world view inspired Mulder to interpret the liberal constitution of 1848 in a conservative way. This alternative was founded upon the humanist ideal of moral development and gave rise to an Enlightened concept of conservatism, which was neither based on a constitution (as among Dutch liberals), nor was it based on religious notions (as among Dutch Protestants and Catholics) or on traditional Herrschaft (as among aristocratic conservatives in surrounding countries). Instead, the moral sublimity of the individual politician provided the starting point for Mulder’s conservative politics. In his opposition to the liberal and moderate governments after 1848, he applied two different political strategies. Alongside a number of Constitutional Associations, under the name of Koning en Vaderland (King and Fatherland), he also set up a court camarilla.

Mulder became highly influential during the April-Movement of 1853. This protest movement revolved around a nation-wide Protestant petition which had been drawn up in an effort to bar the introduction of a Dutch Catholic episcopate. This protest was attended by a storm of anti-Catholicism and opposition against the liberal government of Johan Rudolf Thorbecke. He had redesigned and instituted the liberal constitution, which made the introduction of a Dutch episcopate possible. As during the no-popery campaign in England in 1852, an extra-parliamentary protest movement brought the liberal government to an end. Mulder, who had initiated this movement and set up the petition, now formed an anti-liberal coalition with moderates and anti-revolutionaries, known as the Constitutional Association of Koning en Vaderland.

In contrast to the existing liberal, moderate, Protestant and Catholic associations, Koning en Vaderland had an informal and elite character. The liberal associations in particular subjected politics to public approval. Koning en Vaderland should be regarded as an anti-liberal coalition under conservative colours. First and foremost, it tried to prevent the election of liberals into Parliament. Like the Prussian König und Vaterland in 1848,
the Dutch *Koning and Vaderland* aimed to control elections in 1853 in order to minimize public interference. These conservatives did not intend to constitute a party and even considered party politics as a threat to the general moral standard. The anti-liberal coalition did not last long after the resignation of Thorbecke. As a result, *Koning en Vaderland* fell apart. Orthodox-Protestants could not agree with the non-religious politics of Mulder and moderates felt an aversion to his militant style of conservative opposition. This opposition was not organized in Parliament. In 1853 a small number of MP's were elected as candidates of *Koning en Vaderland*. Because of the emphasis on the moral sublimity of the individual politician, these conservatives did not operate as a faction. Conservative opposition was initiated outside Parliament, in a court camarilla at the Royal Palace 'Het Loo', where the Dutch king resided.

The humanist conservatives led by Mulder were closely allied to King William III and managed to organize an informal opposition. Personal networks, secret meetings and the appointment of conservative ministers proved essential to mounting an opposition. Public opposition in conservative journals contributed to a successful campaign. The demise of the moderate government of Floris Adriaan van Hall in 1856 finally brought a number of conservatives to power. Justinus van der Brugghen led a government which included the conservative ministers Gerrit Simons, Agnites Vrolik, Hendrik baron Forstner van Dambenooy, jonkheer Daniel Gevers van Endegeest and Anthony ridder van Rappard, who were all members of the court camarilla. They tried to put into practice a conservative interpretation of the liberal constitution. In their view government emanated from the king and not from Parliament. This resulted in a constitutional struggle which was eventually won by Parliament, when Minister of Home Affairs Simons was forced to resign at the end of 1856. For Mulder this proved reason enough to leave politics and pursue his academic career at the University of Utrecht. This also meant the end of the national association of *Koning en Vaderland* and the court camarilla.

The humanist conservatism of Mulder demands our attention because of its influence on the development of Dutch politics after 1848. It was the basis of a fundamental but Enlightened conservative opposition in the Netherlands. Moreover, it is interesting because of its specific ideological content. Many European conservative philosophers, like François-René de Chateaubriand and Joseph-Marie de Maistre in France and Carl Ludwig von Haller and Adam Müller in Prussia, were influenced by Edmund Bur-
ke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). In reaction to the French Revolution Burke emphasized the impossibility to change the existing order in society and stressed the need for human modesty. Conservatives applied this philosophy to refute Enlightened ideas about human reason and freedom and man's ability to change society. Burke's call for modesty was based on his earlier philosophical work, as set out in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757).

Confronted with the 'terrible power' of the sublime, the 'delightful horror' of an irrational and violent aesthetic experience, man had to admit to his insignificance, according to Burke. Dutch conservatives like Mulder showed a different philosophy of life. They appreciated the experience of the Sublime as a means of moral exaltation. Mulder emphasized the limits to human reason and freedom, but also maintained a strong belief in man's capacity to change society. His conservatism was based on the possibility of moral and intellectual perfection. Individual exaltation was the basis for man – as creator next to God – to perfect the existing order in society. This humanist world view does not fit the supposedly unchanging characteristics of conservatism: a divine cosmic order and man's natural imperfection.

After his departure in the late 1850s Mulder was succeeded by conservatives who did not adhere an informal style of politics and were willing to assume a public role. Publicists like George Willem Vreede, Jeronimo de Bosch Kemper and Eduard Douwes Dekker (i.e. the writer Multatuli) tried – each in their own way – to mobilize conservative voters and increase the popular appeal of politics. In doing so, they continued to stress the moral superiority of the individual politician. The influential politician Jan Heemskerk Azn., Minister of Home Affairs in the government of Van Zuylen-Heemskerk between 1866 and 1868, embarked upon a constitutional struggle with Parliament once again. In close co-operation with the journalist Izaac Jacob Lion, chief editor of the newspaper *Dagblad van Zuid-Holland en 's-Gravenhage*, he wrote a conservative party programme and established a national conservative 'faction': the short-lived national *Algemeene Kiesvereeniging*.

Heemskerk followed the example of Benjamin Disraeli, the leader of the conservatives in Great Britain. Disraeli successfully adjusted the conservative party to the liberalization of politics, in which parliamentary debate and public dispute became more important, and to mobilize anti-liberal voters. Heemskerk could not accomplish this in the Netherlands. Orthodox-Protestant and Catholic voters did not support his conservative alternative
and conservative MP's could not agree with his more liberal style. Despite their efforts at accommodating to the liberal style of politics, the conservatives in the 1860s proved incapable of making a successful transition. Their strong claims to moral superiority could not be harmonized with the need to subject politics to public approval. Voters rejected the new conservative style of politics. In the 1870s, when the first attempts to establish political parties in the Netherlands were made, the humanist conservatives lost their place in the Dutch political arena.

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