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‘Liberalism’ and ‘Liberality’: The liberal tradition in the Netherlands

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It could be argued that the Netherlands has always been a ‘liberal’ country. At any rate, the word liberal has always been there. As in France or Britain, the word liberal was already used in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but in the meaning of generous.¹ The word was not used for political purposes, and the accompanying noun was not ‘liberalisme’, but ‘liberaliteit’, liberality. Both words were derived from the French language, but ‘liberaliteit’ can be traced back to Cicero and the Latin word ‘liberalitas’ and ‘liberalisme’ arrived much later, in the nineteenth century. In that sense, the concept ‘liberal’ has two roots, which have remained visible almost to this day: on the one hand the obvious meaning of holding principled liberal political views, on the other ‘generous’—at first mainly in the sense of generous with money, but later also broad-minded, tolerant of diverging opinions, advocating pluralism.² In this chapter I will trace the vicissitudes of the two concepts, in particular the tension between them from the beginning of the nineteenth century until the Second World War.

The regime of the federal Dutch Republic from the sixteenth until the eighteenth century could be characterized as liberal in the sense of moderate, respecting certain rights, and tacitly (but often not openly) tolerating divergent views on political and religious matters. Meanwhile, the word ‘liberal’ was not employed in a political sense, not even at the end of the eighteenth century, when the Batavian Republic was founded in 1795 as a satellite of the French revolutionary republic, in the wake of the French Revolution. Its revolutionary beginnings were celebrated by planting trees of liberty and, inspired by French revolutionary thought, its freedom was to be guaranteed by popular sovereignty. There have been some theoretical discussions among historians whether the political thought of the Batavian Republic was still republican or already proto- or early liberal,³ but the word ‘liberalism’ did not exist, and no recognizable liberal current

emerged. After much turmoil, the Netherlands became part of the French Empire in 1810; when the country regained its independence in 1813, the memory of the revolutionary episode was one of temporary madness or silliness, imported from France.

‘Liberality’ and the emergence of ‘liberalism’

When the word liberalism first appeared in the Dutch language in the 1820s, it was criticized as ‘the new name’ that was given to ‘Jacobinismus’.⁴ The term was used to underline the difference between Dutch moderate traditions and French theoretical and ultra-radical projects. One member of the Dutch lower house said in 1832: ‘We do not want to have anything to do with foreign ideas, we do not want absolutism nor liberalism; liberalism is the unlimited liberty to interfere with another person’s affairs, absolutism is the prohibition to mind one’s own business; we want neither.’⁵ A year later, a colleague of his added: ‘Our fatherland has nothing in common with the propaganda for either liberalism or *légitimisme*. Here, we do not hold on to one theory or another, but to experience’.⁶ A newspaper that would later become one of the mainstays of liberalism, still believed that ‘liberalismus’ equalled lawlessness, moral decay and unbridled licentiousness (‘teugelloosheid’), and ‘an eternal revolt against everything that exists, against all law, order and government’.⁷ Even though the journal said so in response to someone who argued that there also was a ‘good’ liberalism that defended (moderate) ‘true freedom’, the word liberalism was in greater use by its opponents than by its adherents. The opponents based themselves on the widespread rejection of abstract reasoning and radicalism of every kind in Dutch intellectual and political circles. To be Dutch meant to be modest and practical.

Today, as in the examples I have just given, the Dutch word for liberalism is *liberalisme*, which is clearly derived from the French *libéralisme*. The famous Dutch historian Johan Huizinga was obviously wrong when he wrote that the Dutch and European history of the political meaning of the concept ‘liberal’ was determined by British developments.⁸ During the heyday of Dutch liberalism in the second half of the nineteenth century, Britain was the great example, but the concept of liberalism was imported from France and Germany. As well as *liberalisme*, the word *liberalismus* was

also used. It seems to be a Latin loanword, but it was probably borrowed from the German *Liberalismus*. *Liberalisme* and *Liberalismus* could be employed almost interchangeably, to refer to the spirit of the dangerous French Revolution, or to describe political movements or a spirit of enlightened rationalism. Gradually, the word *liberalismus* would disappear, though it was still in use until the second world war, but then mainly as a term used by liberalism's opponents. When *liberalismus* became uncommon, it could be utilized to suggest the distance between the author and the untouchable thing he or she was describing.

The first mention of the word 'liberalismus' in a Dutch newspaper was a reference in 1815 to Spain where some people were 'accused' of 'liberalismus'.⁹ And one of the first defences of a political 'liberal' spirit in the Dutch language was also partly based on the Spanish case, which was made use of to argue that a freedom-loving liberal spirit had emerged in the struggle against Napoleonic despotism.¹⁰ The first book in the Dutch language about liberalism was a translation of the German history of liberalism by Wilhelm Traugott Krug in 1823.¹¹ That book did not have a great impact on the history of Dutch liberalism, but its attempt at positioning liberalism as a middle force between revolution and reaction, or between despotism and anarchy, foreshadowed strategies that would later be used by Dutch liberals. Merely a year later, another newspaper that would later vigorously advocate quite a radical liberalism, defended 'liberaliteit' as a constructive form of politics that was not necessarily confined to opposition, let alone aiming to 'overthrow' the government.¹² A review of Krug even tried to argue that, although 'liberalismus' was indeed a new word, it was, in fact, just another word for 'liberaliteit', that is to say that it meant being broad-minded, generous and tolerant.¹³ Early attempts at defending liberalism as a sensible response of financially and intellectually independent men to the necessary pluralism of (modern) politics – who refrained from inciting the common people – also used the word 'liberaliteit'.¹⁴ In that way they attempted to use the positive connotations of the old word, and their use of it demonstrated that the meaning of liberalism was still undefined, although many liberals would continue to claim that their way of thinking was characterized by all those marvellous qualities.

Whatever the case may be, in the 1830s the word liberalism still alarmed people, as the author of a small Dutch book entitled *Liberalismus* explained. The author was a pupil of the Leiden professor of constitutional law Johan Rudolf Thorbecke, who would only a couple of years later, in 1848, definitely become the leader of the liberal party. At that time, however, he still rejected this radical defence of liberalism.¹⁵ Around 1848 other members of parliament still argued that liberality (*liberaliteit*) was fine but that it ran the risk of turning into an extreme ‘liberalismus’ or ‘jacobinismus’. Liberal meant being generous and broad-minded, but forcing people to become liberal was despotism.¹⁶

The adjective *liberaal* retained at least part of its original meaning, although the party-political meaning of the word increasingly prevailed during the second half of the century. But even then, the adjective remained less definite and more flexible than the noun. Interestingly, *liberalisme* or *liberalismus* were not used that much by liberals themselves, not even when they later became the dominant party in politics. When Johan Rudolf Thorbecke—Prime Minister and most important nineteenth-century political and intellectual liberal leader—wrote his political testament in 1870, he set out to define the core of his political views. He called his Cabinet a ‘liberal’ Cabinet, in inverted commas. He explained that liberal did not signify the name of a political party; rather, it was the mark of a politics that stimulated the development of creative force in society, and a politics that concerned the law and only the law. He did not mention liberalism, nor a liberal party – which did not exist in a formal sense at that time.¹⁷ There was liberal politics and there were liberals, but the ‘ism’ ‘liberalism’ sounded perhaps too much like an ideological system to become instantly popular in the Netherlands. Thorbecke and other liberals used the word ‘liberalism’, but not abundantly, and probably only after a while. At the end of his life, Thorbecke was still using ‘liberaal’ in a very broad sense too, when he described a contemporary as ‘a liberal man’, ‘in the true, lofty sense of the word’, which meant that he was politically and religiously tolerant.¹⁸

Liberal breakthrough and dominance

Between the 1830s and the 1870s, liberalism became the dominant force in Dutch politics. It took off with the revision of the constitution in 1848. This was the moment Thorbecke

really entered the political scene. The former professor of constitutional law now became a politician for the remainder of his life (after an earlier abortive attempt at changing the constitution in 1844). He led the process of constitutional revision in 1848 and became the leader of a new Cabinet shortly after that, in 1849. The revision of 1848 defined the nature of Dutch liberalism unquestionably as in essence constitutionalism. This was not exactly a new idea, as it had already been called ‘constitutionalism’ previously, but until then, liberalism could also be defined as almost anything ranging from conservative humanism to revolutionary Jacobinism: ‘for sure no word exists, that at present is understood in more diverse ways, and that leads to more diverse feelings and judgments, than Liberalism’ (1828).¹⁹ According to a publication from the 1830s, ‘the words liberal and liberal institutions are used and understood in so many different ways, that it would be impossible to give a fair description of liberalism’.²⁰ The words could be used in a pejorative sense or even as terms of abuse, and also to describe not only political, but also diverse, and sometimes unrelated, forms of economic, religious and cultural liberalism. The political events of 1848 would decide the debate about the concept for a long time. As with their German counterparts, the Dutch liberals were also called the ‘constitutional party’.²¹ They appeared to be the true advocates of ministerial responsibility in particular. That was the issue for which the constitutional revision of 1848 has remained famous in the Netherlands. ‘The King is inviolable; the ministers are responsible’, is the formula that was introduced into the constitution. Moreover, direct elections for the lower house of parliament, and elements of the rule of law such as freedom of assembly and association, were introduced, and further steps were taken in separating state and church.

The liberals were very successful in picturing themselves as champions of the constitution, and their more conservative opponents as reactionaries. Curiously, though, there was hardly any debate about ministerial responsibility as such. Almost all parliamentarians agreed that ministerial responsibility should be introduced; they only differed in their views about what this meant in practice.²² This shows that no real conservative party existed in the Netherlands; on top of that, the most conservative elements left parliament when the new constitution was introduced. Parliament now consisted of almost only liberal members of one shade or another. Often only the adherents of Thorbecke were called liberals, while most other members rejected the

descriptor ‘conservatives’, and a number of them even contested the monopolization of the liberal label by Thorbecke. To a large extent the discussion about liberalism became one between liberals of different stripes. This was partly the heritage of the Dutch past. There existed a kind of patronizing, complacent and rather conservative ‘liberaliteit’, which in other countries would probably have shaded into a form of aristocratic conservatism.²³ In the Netherlands no clear aristocratic identity existed, and a variant of moderate economic and constitutional liberalism was quite popular among the bourgeois, intellectual and commercial elites.

Meanwhile the real debate of 1848 revolved around the other important change, the introduction of direct instead of indirect elections of the members of the Second Chamber, the Dutch House of Commons. The opponents of this change feared that it would bring demagogues into the parliament – it turned out, however, that Dutch politics remained rather quiet. Moreover, they argued that this democratization of the lower house would disturb the balance between the monarchical, aristocratic and democratic elements of the constitution. They looked to England, not as an example of ‘liberalism’, but as an example of the mixed constitution, which had preserved a pristine balance in politics and society. England was the cradle, the home, of ‘well-ordered liberty’.²⁴ What makes this particularly interesting is that the idea of a balance was also a component of liberal discourse, though in another sense.

Thorbecke wrote that liberalism meant keeping within bounds (*maat*) and that its adversaries did not know how to do that.²⁵ One could even argue that Thorbecke gave his own version of the mixed constitution. He was in favour of a strong, self-confident Cabinet and constitutional monarchy, as well as a strong parliament that should be directly elected by the constituency. He did not favour aristocracy in the ordinary meaning of the word, but he did famously talk about the ‘aristocracy of the intellect’. Perhaps, after all, the constitutional liberalism of the middle of the nineteenth century was—in the Netherlands and elsewhere—a form of translating the older idea of the mixed constitution into written or positive law. Or, arguably, liberalism was the bridge from the early nineteenth-century mixed constitution to the separation of powers and to twentieth-century liberal democracy. In this volume, Michael Freedon quotes a letter

from John Stuart Mill to Alexis Tocqueville, which shows that Mill thought liberalism could be used as a way to find a balance between aristocracy and democracy.

Constitutional liberalism was not an attempt to restore the old mixed constitution, though. The idea of the mixed constitution had been used in the Netherlands and elsewhere as a balance that would keep things as they were, as a negative check on the elements of the constitution. Liberals wanted to use a balanced form of politics in a positive way, to change society and to stimulate the development of a free society. They were appalled that so many Dutch intellectuals thought that the average should be praised as the golden mean in society, rather than being rejected as a dull mediocrity. They wanted to open windows, take risks, change politics and cultural habits. This was indeed radical, and Thorbecke claimed that being ‘moderately liberal’ was just as undesirable as being moderately honest or moderately just.²⁶

Moreover, in particular in the Dutch case, this new balanced politics was defined in constitutional, that is to say legal, terms. Thorbecke’s liberalism resembled European doctrinaire liberalism, in particular its French and German variants.²⁷ He was partly educated in Germany and was intrigued by German liberalism, and later also by what happened in France. Commentators from other countries recognized the international family resemblance of the doctrinaires: the famous historian Leopold von Ranke called Thorbecke ‘strenger Doktrinär’, and others saw in him ‘le Royer-Collard de la Hollande’ (Royer-Collard being the leader of the French doctrinaires during the Restoration).²⁸ Just like his foreign counterparts, Thorbecke was opposed to democracy, revolution and popular sovereignty, and defended a systematic, constitutional and rather detached politics. The doctrinaire brand of liberalism was first and foremost preoccupied with changing the state; if the rule of law and the constitution functioned as they should, society would develop and grow in a natural way – Thorbecke and other romantic liberals resorted to many organic metaphors. This continental form of liberalism devoted most of its energy to the legal organization of the state. Its goal was a free society, but liberals believed that a free society could only prosper when supported and guaranteed by the appropriate rules. In fact, the state was, or ought to be, nothing more than a juridical community, Thorbecke wrote.²⁹ For his Calvinist or less doctrinaire opponents, though,

his brand of liberalism destroyed freedom, because it was overly centralist, overly homogenizing and overly directive, and ‘un-Dutch’.³⁰

François Guizot and his brand of doctrinarism were toppled by the revolution of 1848, and German liberalism was also severely damaged by the outcome of that revolutionary year. In contrast to developments in France and Germany, 1848 saw the beginning of the victory of Dutch doctrinaire liberalism. It was less conservative than the French doctrinarism that was used to contain the revolution, whereas its opponent was a Dutch conservatism that dared not speak its name. Thorbecke had set out with rather conservative views, but his constitutional approach served as a means to break into the closed shop of the Dutch elite, and his opponents thought that he was a radical or, even worse, a republican. His rigid and seemingly legalistic form of liberal politics proved to be a weapon of emancipation for middle-class newcomers on the socio-cultural and political scene in the Netherlands. In order to be acceptable as a party of government liberals had to demonstrate that they were no radicals, let alone revolutionaries. This conformed to their natural tendency to keep aloof from popular politics, and stick to the parliament.

Perhaps the 1860s were the real pinnacle of liberal power and influence in the Netherlands. It was certainly the decade that the word liberalism was the most used in the Dutch parliament, relatively speaking (i.e. in proportion to the number of pages of the Dutch Hansard).³¹ This was partly caused by extensive debates about the meaning of the concept. Were only adherents of Thorbecke authorized to use the label, or had, on the other hand, the term become so vague that it now included almost everyone? And was liberalism a rising force, or already on the decline? For Thorbeckean liberals Britain was yet again the great example, but now due to its liberalism: the liberalism of Cobden, Bright, and later Gladstone. John Stuart Mill was the most admired intellectual hero, in particular because of his *On Liberty*, which seemed to be their guidebook or ‘vademecum’.³² It is difficult to tell whether a real cultural transfer was taking place. Dutch intellectuals read British, French and German texts, and in their constitutional debates in parliament MPs constantly quoted foreign experts, but it is not easy to distinguish between real transfer and the use of foreign examples as a way of boosting the fortune of one’s own movement in the Netherlands. For instance, both Dutch Liberals

and orthodox Protestants claimed Gladstone as their example, because he was such a successful and well-known political leader. It is clear, though, that liberalism was to a large extent an international movement.

‘Vrijzinnigheid’ and liberalism in the late nineteenth century

Liberalism was now such a strong brand, that even principled opponents tried to appropriate it. The emerging orthodox Protestant party operated under the banner of ‘Christian liberalism’ for a short while, before they started to use the expression Christian democracy.³³ The party used that label in order to argue that politics should free religion from all constitutional impediments, and to promote the strength of the neo-Calvinists in civil society. The orthodox attempt to capture the word ‘liberal’ did not last very long, partly because the label was now quickly losing its attraction for newcomers, but probably also because Christian liberalism had already existed with a different meaning.

The Dutch language contains a synonym of ‘liberal’ that is close to the German word ‘freisinnig’, *vrijzinnig*. This word could denote ‘liberal’ in its political or social senses, but during the nineteenth century its predominant meaning became liberal in a religious sense, as opposed to orthodox. Most liberals were Protestants, but liberal Protestants. This could sometimes mean that they were dissenters: Thorbecke was a Lutheran, whereas the main Protestant church was Calvinist. But usually they belonged to the national church which, while not formally a state church, was the dominant church, thus enjoying some privileges. Their form of liberal Protestantism was rather dry, intellectual and elitist, not at all evangelical. Just like political liberalism, liberal Protestantism attained dominance in the third quarter of the nineteenth century, and then lost this position again to the emerging orthodox Protestant group, who attracted more lower-class Protestants. But the religious and cultural connotation of the word *vrijzinnig* remained, and because it had seldom been used for political purposes it was still available at the end of the century for liberals who wished to find new paths in politics without really abandoning liberal premises.

By the end of the nineteenth century all new parties – orthodox Protestants, Catholics, Socialists – claimed to fight for freedom in one way or another, but liberalism

was declining as a political force. In the 1860s liberalism as a political movement had first begun to show signs of discord. The agenda of constitutional liberalism was almost completed, and the question arose what to do next. The Thorbeckean liberals had now become the political and social establishment, and they showed some signs of the same conservative complacency that Thorbecke had fought when he started out as a politician.³⁴ On the other hand, a new generation of ‘young liberals’ was no longer satisfied with mere constitutional liberalism. They wanted to use liberal power to bring about a liberal society, and their main strategy was reforming the school system in order to spread liberal values through the national system of primary schools. After the death of Thorbecke, young liberal Jan Kappeyne van de Coppello became their new leader, but only for a short period of time. In 1879 he introduced a new education bill which served as a rallying point for liberals of different persuasion, but also for their religious opponents, both Catholics and orthodox Protestants, who exploited the bill to mobilize religious opposition against liberalism. The nature of primary education was the main issue of political polarization in that period. For some years Dutch liberalism seemed predominantly to become a party of anticlericalism, as was happening in some countries with a dominant Catholic party. However, that proved to be merely a passing episode. Its main political effect was that it helped their religious opponents to form a coalition of Catholics and orthodox Protestants.

In the 1890s, however, liberalism regained some of its energy, first by concentrating on broadening the suffrage and then on social legislation. Whereas the young liberals had concentrated on education, the new social liberals thought these relatively new issues were the most pressing political questions. At first this new brand of liberals remained within the old, rather loose, liberal party, which only established its first formal national organization, the Liberal Union, in 1885. By the 1890s the party had broken up over the issue of general suffrage. This resulted in a couple of separate parties, whose names also illustrate some of the linguistic problems liberalism had to face.

The conservative liberals were now using the rather pleonastic name of Free Liberals, as if liberalism itself had lost much of its original meaning, which was not altogether untrue. The progressive liberals thought the word ‘liberalism’ had been contaminated by laissez-faire economics and conservatism.³⁵ In the days of Thorbecke

laissez-faire had been a less important ingredient of liberalism than constitutionalism. It had been important nonetheless, as a progressive weapon against the paternalist and interfering economic politics of the King, and around 1850 Thorbecke's first Cabinet had been the occasion for a considerable amount of discussion about a free economy.³⁶ Meanwhile, however, laissez-faire had become another word for an unfeeling kind of conservative liberalism. That was one of the reasons progressives no longer favoured the term 'liberal', and instead chose the combination *vrijzinnig-democratisch*. In 1901 a *vrijzinnig-democratische* party was founded. There is a debate among historians whether they should still be counted as members of the liberal family. At the time, conservative liberals argued that they had forsaken their membership of the liberal family, and had joined the family of social democrats instead.³⁷ The historian of the Free Liberals also wants to exclude them from the liberal universe, partly because they themselves had freely chosen a different name.³⁸ Moreover, the historian of the *Vrijzinnig-Democraten* argues that they formed part of a separate, internationally recognizable group of democratic parties.³⁹ That is probably true, as the Dutch *vrijzinnig-democraten* were certainly looking abroad for inspiration to German *Kathedersozialisten* or British new liberals.

However, the *vrijzinnig-democraten* were so close to liberalism, and in particular to its culture and social circles, that it would be an unwarranted reduction of liberalism to exclude them, not least because they exhibited a clear family resemblance to British new liberalism. The change from classic liberalism to 'vrijzinnig-democratisch' in the Netherlands clearly resembled the change from classic to new liberalism in Britain.⁴⁰ That Dutch new liberals were not so keen on claiming the name 'liberal' as were their British counterparts⁴¹ has also to do with the nature of Dutch classical liberalism. This doctrinaire, professorial type of liberalism had consciously kept the common people at bay, or more precisely: they did not like rhetorical display, nor mass meetings or most of the popular aspects of politics. Thorbecke had looked down on politicians such as Gladstone or Palmerston, who according to him came close to opportunistically pandering to the common people instead of keeping a strict legal, constitutional line.⁴²

Even though they were also rather intellectual and sometimes even elitist, the democratic Dutch new liberals wanted to underline the distance that separated them from

such attitudes, so they chose another name. In general, however, twentieth-century liberalism tried to steer a middle course between conservatism on the one hand and social-democracy on the other, and there was always the risk of drifting off in one of those directions. At first, the new liberalism occasionally seemed to want to join forces with social-democracy, but its proponents always underlined the differences. In addition, it was often rather hard to perceive the Free Liberals still as a liberal, instead of a purely conservative, party. They may have claimed the name liberal, but that was also because no one in the Netherlands dared to claim the label ‘conservative’. In contrast to the British use of the word, the Dutch term ‘liberal’ was already beginning to sound rather conservative around 1900, and it was very difficult to imagine an alliance between social-democrats and ‘liberals’ – such an alliance would only happen at the very end of the twentieth century. If one wanted to keep the door open to social-democrats, one had to offer another word. In the interwar years the *Vrijzinnig-Democraten* were the most dedicated champions of the rule of law, a classic liberal theme, and their record in this respect was certainly better than that of the liberal party, which was in that period more of a party of law and order. Many of their adherents also belonged to *vrijzinnig* (liberal) Protestantism.

The Dutch new liberals advocated general male and female suffrage, some social legislation, and comprehensive education of the people, also in a moral sense. They were more moralistic than previous generations of liberals and believed that the state should, to a certain extent, act as the keeper or guardian of every citizen. As in Britain, the main difference between classic and new liberalism lay in their conception of citizenship and freedom. Thorbecke’s adherents had assumed that only independent men could become citizens bearing full political rights. Citizenship presupposed (material and intellectual) freedom and independence. The new liberals reversed the sequence: because everybody had the right to become a citizen, it was crucial to support and educate the people in order to realize their freedom. Initially they had hoped that voluntary societies would take care of the necessary support and education, but they quickly recognized that only the state had the wherewithal for the required effort. They now even quoted Rousseau: ‘il n’y a que la force de l’état qui fasse la liberté de ses membres’ (the strength of the State can alone secure the liberty of its members).⁴³

Decline

The new party was officially founded in 1901, and it would cooperate during the national elections with the other liberal forces under the name of ‘vrijzinnige concentratie’. All liberals considered themselves to be ‘vrijzinnig’, but not all ‘vrijzinnigen’ wanted to be called liberals. Eventually, three ‘vrijzinnige’ parties existed: the old Liberal Union, which tried to keep all liberal forces united, the conservative Free Liberals and the *Vrijzinnig-Democraten* (or Lib Dems). This was a sign not of liberal strength, but of dwindling forces. At the beginning of the twentieth century it had become difficult to explain what liberalism was, and the liberal parties also began to lose elections. Already around 1900 bourgeois liberalism appeared a spent force to many people. A conservative liberal was writing in his diary that ‘liberalism was taken to its grave’, and that ‘for the moment, liberalism has lost everything in the Netherlands’.⁴⁴ ‘The liberals are crushed between the extremes’, one of his political friends observed.⁴⁵

This was voiced after the liberal parties had lost the national elections of 1901. During World War I, a liberal government and a last liberal prime minister were still in power, but in fact he led a minority government. When this ended in 1918, the liberals suffered a crushing defeat at the elections – the first elections with male general suffrage; full general suffrage would be introduced one year later. A liberal newspaper predicted the ‘end of the liberal era’ for the foreseeable future.⁴⁶ This was no sudden strange death of Dutch liberalism, but rather a crucial episode in the course of a prolonged agony. Ultimately, liberalism would rise again from the grave, but that revival was to take a very long time. The prediction proved to be quite accurate: throughout the entire twentieth century the Netherlands was no longer to have a liberal Prime Minister.

An increasing amount of people, including many liberals, even wanted to avoid the term ‘liberal’. When a number of small parties, more or less liberal in their orientation, merged in 1921, some partners were ‘repelled’ by the word liberal which conjured up images of neglect of social questions. They agreed to use the non-committal name ‘Freedom League’ (Vrijheidsbond) instead.⁴⁷ Some politicians and voters still wanted to hold on to the old label, and the Freedom League was also called ‘Liberal State Party’

(Liberale Staatspartij), but for most people the label had lost its attraction, and the liberal current in the strict sense of the word would be almost dead by the end of the interwar years. In the meantime, it had become very difficult to make out what the term liberal meant in political terms. At the end of the 1930s the Liberal State Party/Freedom League had dwindled to a mere four seats— alongside six *vrijzinnig-democratische* seats—in a parliament consisting of a hundred members, and all its original issues had disappeared. Constitutionalism was no longer a forte of the liberals as opposed to the *vrijzinnig-democraten*. They had even abandoned laissez-faire and free trade in the face of the 1930s' economic crisis, and they were no longer the principal opponents of the confessional or denominational parties. One of their leaders was arguing that liberalism needed a thoroughly religious basis, and he curiously believed that Voltaire supported him in this respect.⁴⁸

The word 'liberal' now sounded as an echo of a nineteenth century that had been too materialistic, too rationalist and too individualist, or so the public opinion of the 1930s assumed. From the religious parties to the social-democrats almost everyone agreed that society needed a more socially-oriented and moral form of politics. It was in that intellectual and political climate that Johan Huizinga tried to rehabilitate the word 'liberal', and reverse the history of the decline and fall of liberal values. This was part of an attempt to restore confidence in western culture in the face of the crisis of fascism and the threat of Nazi Germany. Huizinga wanted to save the concepts of democracy and humanism as well, but for present purposes his comments on the word 'liberal' are particularly relevant. Already around 1900, he maintained, the words 'liberal' and 'liberalism' were so seriously contaminated by their association with the bourgeoisie that many people were no longer prepared to use them. Paradoxically, this seemed to offer the opportunity to liberate the word from its narrow party-political meaning, and restore its old meaning of befitting a free-born person, mild, generous and civilized, which Huizinga excavated from the Latin and from early modern texts in an essay he wrote during the German occupation in the Second World War.⁴⁹ The old and rather conservative historian disliked politics, and when he wrote about Dutch national character he referred to the social concept of 'burger', a Dutch word which could mean the burgher of an early modern town, the citizen of a modern state, or bourgeois and petty-bourgeois in the sense

of belonging to the middle classes.⁵⁰ But when Huizinga described the values connected with ‘burgerlijke’ culture, he employed words that could have been used in connection with liberal in its non-political sense: moderate, non-militaristic, commercial. Wasn’t he arguing that the Netherlands had always been and should remain a ‘liberal’ country? He was echoing that other European intellectual, Thomas Mann, who had written in his very political tract *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen*, that if he were liberal, it could only be in the sense of national and ‘unpolitical’ *Liberalität*.⁵¹

Huizinga’s pupil, the Marxist historian Jan Romein, seemed to draw a comparable conclusion during the first year of the German occupation. According to him, the Dutch tradition of freedom and tolerance had not only inspired Dutch liberals, but had further instilled a liberal spirit into all great Dutch politicians, be they socialist, Calvinist or Catholic.⁵² He used the word liberalism, but in effect he was referring to what was still called ‘liberaliteit’ in the early nineteenth century. Then, as in the 1940s, liberaliteit was considered to be a feature of Dutch national identity. History seemed to have come full circle. Before liberalism there was already ‘liberaliteit’, and now liberalism was endowed with that meaning. Dutch political liberalism was at the lowest point in its history, yet a Marxist historian was suggesting that all major Dutch politicians had been imbued by a sense of liberalism!

Epilogue

Romein wrote under the spell of the German occupation, and he used the concept of liberalism as a way to unite all Dutch currents as well as a weapon against Nazi ideology. He would not have been able to do so, had liberalism still been a powerful political label. But if the Netherlands were a liberal country, this remained rather well hidden in politics. During a large part of the twentieth century, Dutch politics were dominated by religious parties and social-democrats. A narrow definition of liberal and liberalism prevailed in politics. For instance, no one has ever called liberal democracy ‘liberal’ in the Netherlands. The Dutch expression was ‘parliamentary democracy’; liberal would have sounded too much like a narrow party label. In the early postwar years the former *vrijzinnig-democraten* first joined the new formed Dutch Labour Party (which also united

social-democrats and progressive Protestants), but their leader and a substantial following later decided to quit the party and found a new liberal party, together with the rump of the liberals. The new party was called ‘People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy’ (VVD, 1948), but it remained rather small. In the 1960s a new left-liberal party was founded and chose the name Democrats ’66. D66 has sometimes employed the label social-liberal, and in certain respects it resembles the *vrijzinnig-democraten*.

Over the past decades, the liberal parties have been the most constant factor in the Dutch coalition governments, and since 2010 the VVD has been the strongest party. At the time of writing, the Netherlands has a liberal prime minister again, the first since the First World War: Mark Rutte, a member of the rather neoliberal VVD, but possessing a democratic attitude akin to the Democrats. However, initially, Rutte ruled with the support of the Party for Freedom which, notwithstanding its name, is the party of the right-wing populist Geert Wilders. Wilders launched his political party as a member of parliament for the VVD, but his party has developed into the very opposite of liberalism as well as liberality.

Wilders’ party is, however, to a certain extent reminiscent of the ‘Jacobinism’ nineteenth-century commentators were so afraid of: aggressively favouring unity over diversity, fiercely anticlerical and antireligious (against Islam), and expecting the state to enforce ‘national’ morals. This is only a minority movement, but it is clear that the times when all important political currents were instilled by a liberal spirit are over. That is a strange conclusion at a time when more Dutch political parties than ever claim a part of the liberal heritage and the Netherlands have a liberal Prime Minister. Perhaps Dutch citizens are so convinced that freedom is a precious gift, that even its opponents now have to dress up as its defenders.

¹ According to the examples provided by the *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal*, the Dutch counterpart of the OED.

² Jörn Leonhard, *Liberalismus. Zur historischen Semantik eines europäischen Deutungsmusters* (München: Oldenbourg 2001) p. 87 and passim for ‘liberalitas’ and its modern European equivalents.

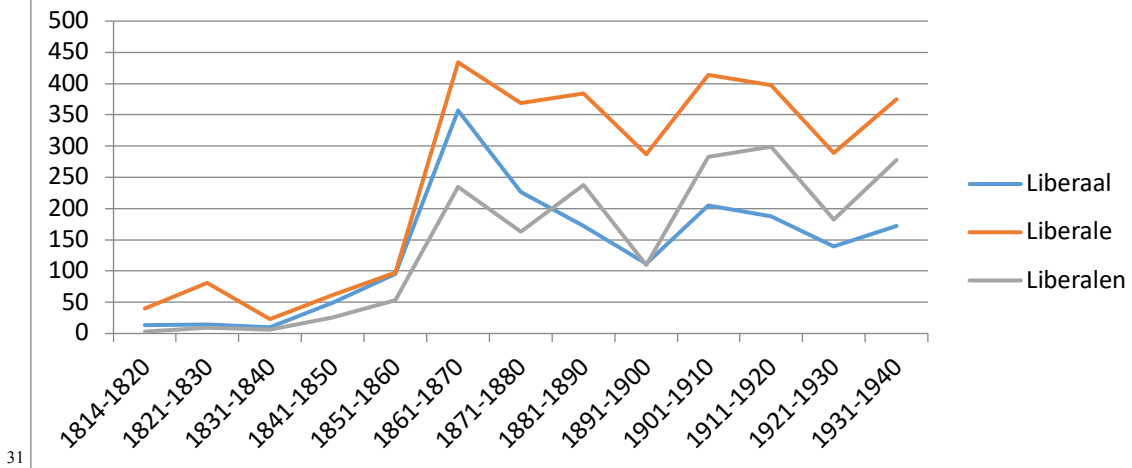
³ See the contributions by Velema (classic republicanism) and Van Sas (early liberalism) in Frans Grijzenhout, Niek van Sas & Wyger Velema (eds.), *Het Bataafse experiment. Politiek en cultuur rond 1800* (Nijmegen: Van Tilt, 2013) pp. 63 and 81.

⁴ Cp. the conservative and orthodox Protestant Willem Bilderdijk, *De bezwaren tegen den geest der eeuw van mr I. da Costa toegeelicht* (Leiden: Herdingh, 1823) p. 47.

⁵ D.F. van Alphen, *Handelingen Tweede Kamer 27 december 1832*, p. 111. The Dutch parliamentary reports are available on <http://wip.politicalmashup.nl/> and <http://www.statengeneraaldigitaal.nl/>.

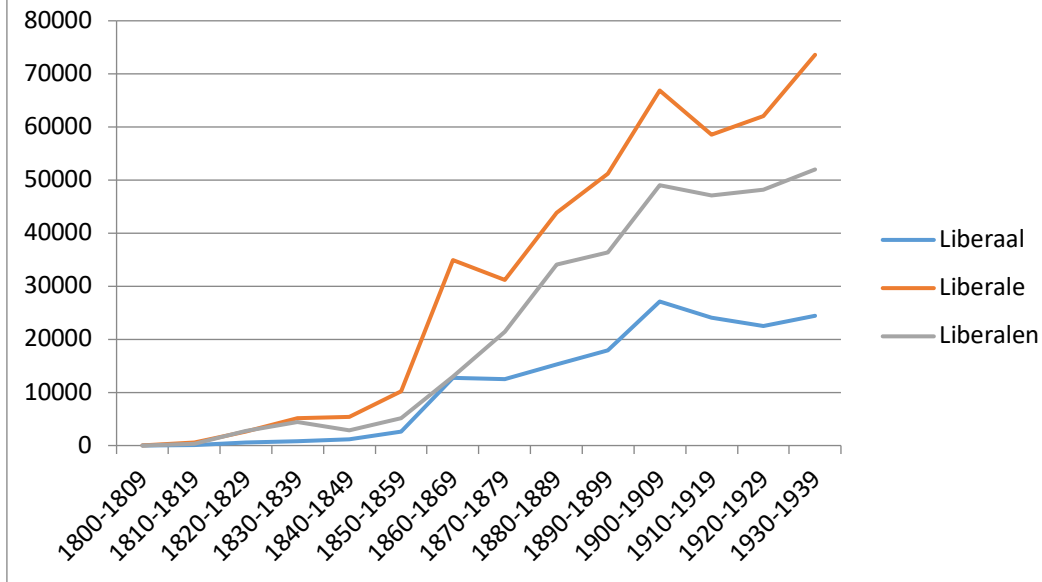
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- ⁶ F. Fret, *Handelingen Tweede Kamer*, 12 June 1833, p. 261.
- ⁷ ‘Vrijheidsdrift en vrijheidsgeest’ and ‘Aanmerkingen van de redactie’, *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 7 June 1832.
- ⁸ Johan Huizinga, ‘The Spirit of the Netherlands’ (1935), in Id., *Dutch Civilisation in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Collins, 1968).
- ⁹ *Nederlandsche Staatscourant* 2 November 1815 (I have used the digitized newspapers available on <http://www.delpher.nl/>). Huizinga already mentioned the ‘curious’ Spanish connection in passing (J. Huizinga, *Geschonden wereld. Een beschouwing over de kansen van herstel van onze beschaving* (Haarlem: Tjeenk Willink, 1945) p. 238), but he did not really know the Spanish (and Latin American) background. See now the work of Javier Fernández-Sebastián, for instance his contribution to this book. The Netherlands were not directly influenced by Spanish ‘liberalism’, but newspapers contain scattered references to Spain.
- ¹⁰ *Arnhemsche Courant*, 30 March 1824.
- ¹¹ W.T. Krug, *Geschiedkundig tafereel van het liberalismus van ouden en lateren tijd* (Amsterdam: Diederichs, 1823).
- ¹² ‘Liberaliteit’, *Arnhemsche Courant*, 29 June 1824.
- ¹³ ‘Liberaliteit en liberalismus’, *De Weegschaal* (1823), pp. 261-263, 268. Cf. Pauline J.E. Bieringa, ‘Vrijheid in het Nederlandse politieke debat, 1814-1840’, in E.O.G. Haitsma Mulier and W.R.E. Velema, (eds.), *Vrijheid. Een geschiedenis van de vijftiende tot de twintigste eeuw* (Amsterdam University Press, 1999), p. 308.
- ¹⁴ Anonymus [= Antoni May van Vollenhoven], ‘Patriotismus – Liberaliteit’, *Vaderlandsche Letteroefeningen* (1820) II, pp. 518-523.
- ¹⁵ J.R. Thorbecke, *De briefwisseling*, ed. G.J. Hooykaas III (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1988), pp. 110 and 116 (letters from 1837). Cf. Th. M. Roest van Limburg, *Liberalismus* (Leiden: Van den Heuvel, 1837). Roest was also a political journalist at the *Arnhemsche Courant*.
- ¹⁶ *Handelingen Tweede Kamer* 1847-1848, 23 August 1848, p. 783; *Ibid.*, 1849-1850, 14 June 1850, p. 7-8.
- ¹⁷ J.R. Thorbecke, ‘Narede’, in Id., *Politieke redevoeringen VI* (Deventer: Ter Gunne 1870).
- ¹⁸ J.R. Thorbecke, *Historische Schetsen* (1860; The Hague: Nijhoff, 1872), p. 36.
- ¹⁹ C. van Zuylen van Nyevelt, *Liberalismus* (Amsterdam: De Ouden, 1828), p. 1.
- ²⁰ Roest van Limburg, *Liberalismus, op. cit.*, p. 5.
- ²¹ Cf. Henk te Velde, ‘The Organization of Liberty. Dutch Liberalism as a Case of the History of European Constitutional Liberalism’, *European Journal of Political Theory* 7 (2008), pp. 65-79.
- ²² Diederick Slijkerman, *Het geheim van de ministeriële verantwoordelijkheid. De verhouding tussen koning, kabinet, Kamer en kiezer, 1848-1905* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2011).
- ²³ Cf. Jeroen van Zanten, *Schielijk, winzucht en bedaard. Politieke discussie en oppositievorming 1813-1840* (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 2004) pp. 127-132.
- ²⁴ Cf. the Conservative G.W. Vreede, *De regtstreeksche verkiezingen tot de nationale vertegenwoordiging bestreden* (Amsterdam 1848) 27. Cf. Henk te Velde, ‘Mixed Government and Democracy in 19th-century Political Discourse: Great Britain, France and the Netherlands’, in: Jussi Kurunmäki, Jeppe Nevers and Henk te Velde (eds.), *Democracy in Modern Europe. A Conceptual History* (in print, Berghahn).
- ²⁵ Thorbecke, *Briefwisseling VI* (Den Haag: Instituut voor Nederlandse geschiedenis, 1998) p. 552.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 553.
- ²⁷ Cf. Aurelian Craiutu, *Liberalism under Siege: The Political Thought of the French Doctrinaires* (Lanham etc.: Lexington Books, 2003); Luis Díez del Corral, *Doktrinärer Liberalismus. Guizot und sein Kreis* (Neuwied am Rhein: Luchterhand, 1964); Henk te Velde, ‘Onderwijzers in politiek. Thorbecke, Guizot en het Europese doctrinaire liberalisme’, *BMGN* 113 (1998), pp. 322-343.
- ²⁸ Jan Drentje, *Thorbecke. Een filosoof in de politiek* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2004) pp. 335, 423.
- ²⁹ E.g. Thorbecke, *Briefwisseling VII* (The Hague: Instituut voor Nederlandse Geschiedenis, 2002) p. 474 (c. 1870); Id, ‘Narede’, *op. cit.*
- ³⁰ See e.g. the Calvinist leader G. Groen van Prinsterer, *Handelingen Tweede Kamer* 12 May 1851, p. 726-6; and the liberal conservative W. Wintgens, *Handelingen Tweede Kamer* 27 March 1865, p. 744 (‘extremely systemizing spirit’).

**Use of the terms Liberaal/Liberale/Liberalen
in the Dutch Lower House, according to
<http://www.statengeneraaldigitaal.nl>**



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**Use of the terms
Liberaal/Liberale/Liberalen in Dutch
newspapers 1800-1939, according to
<https://www.delpher.nl/>**



³² Remieg Aerts, *De letterheren. Liberale cultuur in de negentiende eeuw: het tijdschrift De Gids* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1997) pp. 363 and 465.

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- ³³ Letters and a memo by the future orthodox Protestant leader Abraham Kuyper to the old leader Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer and his reply, in G. Groen van Prinsterer, *Briefwisseling VI* (The Hague: Instituut voor Nederlandse Geschiedenis, 1992) pp. 507 and 736-737 (1874).
- ³⁴ Cf. Henk te Velde, 'Liberalism and bourgeois culture in the Netherlands, from the 1840s to the 1880s', in Simon Groenveld and Michael Wintle (eds.), *Under the Sign of Liberalism. Varieties of Liberalism in Past and Present* (Zutphen: Walburgers, 1997).
- ³⁵ Gerrit Taal, *Liberalen en radicalen in Nederland, 1872-1901* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1980), p. 456.
- ³⁶ Cf. <http://kbkranten.politicalmashup.nl/#q/laissez faire>.
- ³⁷ S. van Houten, *Liberaal of vrijzinnig/sociaal-democraat* (The Hague: Belinfante, 1899).
- ³⁸ Patrick van Schie, *Vrijheidsstreven in verdrukking. Liberale partijpolitiek in Nederland 1901-1940* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2005).
- ³⁹ Meine Henk Klijnsma, *Om de democratie. De geschiedenis van de Vrijzinnig-Democratische Bond, 1901-1946* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2008).
- ⁴⁰ S. Stuurman, 'Samuel van Houten and Dutch liberalism, 1860-1890', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 50 (1989), pp. 135-152; Id., 'John Bright and Samuel van Houten: radical liberalism and the working classes in Britain and the Netherlands 1860-1880', *History of European Ideas* 11 (1990), pp. 593-604; Id., 'Nineteenth-century liberalism and the politics of reform in Britain and the Netherlands', *Anuario del Departamento de Historia* 11 (Madrid, 1990), pp. 153-170; and his comprehensive account in Dutch: Siep Stuurman, *Wacht op onze daden. Het liberalisme en de vernieuwing van de Nederlandse staat* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 1992).
- ⁴¹ See also Stefan Dudink, *Deugdzaam liberalisme. Sociaal-liberalisme in Nederland 1870-1901* (Amsterdam: Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis, 1997), p. 272.
- ⁴² Drentje, *Thorbecke, op. cit.*, p. 498.
- ⁴³ Quoted by the prominent member of the Vrijzinnig-Democraten and future minister M.W.F Treub (1896), who is quoted in Stuurman, *Wacht op onze daden, op. cit.*, p. 314.
- ⁴⁴ W.H. de Beaufort, *Dagboeken en aantekeningen 1874-1918*, Hans de Valk and Marijke van Faassen eds. (2 vols. The Hague: Instituut voor Nederlandse Geschiedenis, 1992) I, p. 134 (1901) and p. 213 (1903).
- ⁴⁵ B. Reiger (1901), quoted by Van Schie, *Vrijheidsstreven, op. cit.*, p. 55.
- ⁴⁶ The liberal daily *Algemeen Handelsblad*, quoted in *Het Volk* 11 July 1918.
- ⁴⁷ Van Schie, *Vrijheidsstreven, op. cit.*, p. 244.
- ⁴⁸ O.C.A. van Lidt de Jeude, *Londense dagboeken januari 1940 – mei 1945* (The Hague: Instituut voor Nederlandse Geschiedenis, 2001) I, pp. 364-365.
- ⁴⁹ Huizinga, *Geschonden wereld, op. cit.*, pp. 237-239.
- ⁵⁰ Huizinga, 'The Spirit of the Netherlands', *op. cit.*
- ⁵¹ Quoted in Leonhard, *Liberalismus*, p. 552.
- ⁵² Jan Romein, 'Oorsprong, voortgang en toekomst van de Nederlandse geest' (1940), in Id., *In opdracht van de tijd. Tien voordrachten over historische thema's* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1946) pp. 163-167. Cf. Henk te Velde, 'How high did the Dutch fly? Remarks on stereotypes of burger mentality', in Annemieke Galema, Barbara Henkes and Henk te Velde (eds.), *Images of the Nation. Different Meanings of Dutchness 1870-1940* (Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi, 1993), pp. 74-75.