# Eigenwijs vaderland : populair nationalisme in negentiende-eeuws Amsterdam

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# Summary

Anne Petterson, *The Fatherland seen from below. Popular nationalism in nineteenth-century Amsterdam*.

Starting with Eugen Weber's classic *Peasants into Frenchmen*, published in 1976, modern nationalism has long been studied as a top-down project aimed at disciplining the inhabitants of nation states. The development of a national consciousness was considered – by both historians and upper class contemporaries – as an ideological or a cultural process stimulated by the upper level of society. It remains debatable, however, if 'ordinary' people passively adopted these elitist nation-building agendas. This book focuses on the workings of popular national agency in late nineteenth-century Amsterdam and the question in what ways and to what extent 'ordinary' citizens constructed and experienced 'the Netherlands' through their urban surroundings. It steers away from a top-down perspective and considers the lower and middle social classes as actual *actors* in the process of democratising the nation. By introducing a national history from below, the ways in which the nation was negotiated come to a fore.

In 1813, after having been a republic of independent provinces for centuries, the United Kingdom of the Netherlands was established. This moment marked the start of a growing geographical and administrative

unification. New central laws were promulgated; railway networks developed; and gradually every clock in the country indicated the same time. The nineteenth century also saw the creation of the present day political order. During the first half of the century power shifted from the King to Parliament; in the 1880's the first political parties were founded, and the public demand for universal suffrage (which would be granted for men in 1917 and women in 1919) increased. Simultaneously, a renewed national culture was designed. The foundation of the nation was legitimised by means of a patriotic discourse, which found its expression in for example literature, historiography, and historical paintings. Patriotic values were further disseminated through education – courses like Dutch history took a central place in the school curriculum –, public statues and elaborate nationalist commemorations.

The development of modern national identities, starting in the late eighteenth century, has often been described as a one-way process. In both the Netherlands and abroad the elitist creation of national narratives and 'invented traditions' – that were subsequently disseminated amongst the people – has been the main focus of research. Yet in his much acclaimed enquiry into the subject of modern (European) nationalism, Eric Hobsbawm defined the nation state as a dual phenomenon, 'constructed essentially from above, but which cannot be understood unless also analysed from below, that is in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people, which are not necessarily national and still less nationalist.'[1] It is precisely this dualism which recent research on the subject takes as its core. Here, nationalism is no longer perceived as a privilege of the elites, but just as well identified as a project embraced by people from the lower and middle social classes.

For a long time, the nationalist ideas and activities of ordinary citizens in this period could count on little attention by historians. The lack of sources to reconstruct this history 'from below' has been an important

1 Hobsbawm, *Nations and nationalism since 1780*,10.

reason for this. Where for example sociologists with an interest in popular nationalism have been creating their own source material through surveys, interviews and participant observation, historians are immediately confronted with a source problem. How to reconstruct the national activities of the – often faceless – majority of non-elite people? In order to get a grip on popular conceptions of the nation this book focuses on the daily environment of the locality. As a capital city, nineteenth-century Amsterdam played an exceptional part in the process of Dutch nation building. Especially in an urban setting ordinary people were continuously confronted with a nationalist discourse. At the same time the concrete and physical surroundings offered people a stage on which they actively enacted their own interpretations of the nation. As such the city of Amsterdam was turned into a national landscape produced and explored by and – more *or* less consciously – responded to by its inhabitants.

The central argument is structured around five case studies. The first chapter explores a well-known aspect of national building: the erection of public statues in the urban landscape. A real *statuomanie* or *Denkmalswut*, like in nineteenth-century France or Germany, was absent from the Netherlands: Amsterdam counted only three statues, two busts and one 'national' monument. The initiative to erect a public monument came from private parties, sometimes assisted by the municipal council. The funding through money collections turned the project into a real national venture: donations arrived from all parts of the country, and even from abroad. The representation of national heroes in stone or bronze was one of the most visible ways to convey a national story to a larger audience. Yet the initiators appeared to be mainly interested in creating a national discourse of their own, and not so much in transmitting the idea behind the statue to a larger audience. Moreover, that audience itself was distracted by other urban developments. The people who passed the statues on a daily basis showed little interest in the ideas and intentions of the initiators. Instead they used the monuments as street furniture (the pedestal serving as public bench), locations to run one's

business or romantic meeting points. The monuments were practical beacons in the urban landscape, rather than a tool for nation building.

The perception of nation building as a civilising strategy is tightly interwoven with the socio-political emancipation of the lower classes. The latter constantly adapted, influenced or contested elitist initiatives. In the next chapters, attention shifts towards the agency of ordinary people and their nationalist performances. Chapter 2 focuses on the variety of contexts in which citizens performed the national anthem. Crucial to the success of the anthem as a national symbol was the opportunity for active involvement. To sing in public – indoors or on the streets – was a very common activity to the nineteenth-century citizen. The official anthem *Wien Neêrlands bloed* and the very popular *Wilhelmus* (which would become the official anthem in 1932) were performed first of all during official ceremonies. During these ceremonies the national songs were deliberately linked to national themes, like the monarchy, national heroes, or war victories overseas. Citizens also performed the anthem in more spontaneous settings, for example in conclusion of their political or religious meetings or in serenading famous visitors of the city. In these cases the national repertoire – known by every member of the public – was used to mark a feeling of togetherness. As such citizens also used the anthem as a political tool: during the 1880's and 1890's, nationalist repertoires frequently clashed with the songs of the early socialists in Amsterdam.

Chapter 3 centres around one of the most popular aspects of Dutch national identity: the Dutch monarchy. Popular 'orangism' was based on a mythical connection between the Netherlands and the House of Orange; a historical bond which could be addressed time and again. In the context of Amsterdam citizens displayed a huge local autonomy in expressing their love for the royal family. As an example here serves the Willemsstraat, a street named after king William I and based in a largely working class area. The history of the Willemsstraat shows the importance of street-based social structures, local leaders, and neighbourhood competition and conflict in creating nationalist repertoires from below.

The rows against the socialists in 1887 (*Oranjefurie*), for example, did not only indicate the widespread love for king William III, but also proved to be very much driven by local and individual pride. The popular repertoires were clearly linked to the urban space: the public visibility contributed to the popular dissemination and appropriation of a nationalist discourse. Street decorations, public games and spontaneous processions were based on older repertoires, but to a large extent organised by citizens themselves. The local authorities and official festive committees tapped into this success by adapting and transferring these neighbourhood-based initiatives to the city level.

Festivities in honour of the House of Orange increased in scale at the turn of the century. The dynamic of the masses is further explored in chapter 4. The Boer Wars in South Africa (1880-1881; 1899-1902) generated a strong support in the Netherlands. The Boers, being descendants of the former Dutch colonists of South Africa, were generally framed as 'kinsmen' (*stamverwanten*). The people of Amsterdam expressed their support for the Boers through, for example, large-scale money collections. These local activities generated a strong community feeling, and as such the popular enthusiasm transcended the much-researched discussions in brochures and newspapers. Moreover, the emancipation of the masses was closely linked to the increasing political organisation of the public domain. Not only did various political parties use the Transvaal nationalism to further their particular beliefs, the Transvaal mass meetings (notably the one in 1881) also enabled individual citizens to express political opinions of their own. During the Second Boer War the use of populist rhetoric became more common and authorities tried to channel the national emotions of the public more fervently. The second Transvaal mass meeting in 1899; the visit of President Paul Kruger to Amsterdam in 1900; and popular media from this period: they all showed examples of early crowd control.

The rise of the consumer society during the same decennia gave an important impulse to the commercialisation of the national culture. 'The Netherlands' was increasingly presented as part of an experience

economy, shows chapter 5. The imagination of the nation took shape in a variety of places and media. Merchants and entrepreneurs turned to well-known national themes in order to reach a mass audience. Next to selling an ever-expanding supply of nationalist and orangist merchandising, shop owners lured customers to their stores by filling their shop with nationalist decorations, royalist busts and lifelike photographic portraits of Queen Wilhelmine during festivities. The commercial representations also responded to the demand for actualities. In 1893 the national newspaper *De Telegraaf* opened a 'news room' in the main shopping street and thus made the (illustrated) newspaper available to a larger public. Popular museums like the *Nederlandsch Panopticum* – the first wax museum in the Netherlands – offered visitors 'realistic' views on the Netherlands (like the folkloristic *Hinlooper kamer*) but also represented news events like scenes from the Second Boer War and the victory at Lombok in 1894. Early cinema let people relive events that had happened only a few days earlier in their own city: the pictures of the coronation of Queen Wilhelmine in Amsterdam in 1898 were a box-office hit.

The perspective of the ordinary citizen reveals how nineteenth-century popular nationalism was driven by many familiar nationalist themes. Yet people's motivations to express or recognise a national identity only partly revolved around the nation state. Of course, in a lot of cases a strong nationalist idea was present in the background: the sources leave no doubt, for example, about the sincere affection the inhabitants of the Willemsstraat felt for the Dutch monarchy. At the same time, however, the inhabitants of Amsterdam regularly linked such nationalist activities to a variety of individual and local wishes or demands. At these moments nationalist expressions became a means to a different end. Street decorations also provided a way to improve the public image of one's neighbourhood, to enhance one's personal status by creating a profile for oneself as the leader of a decorative committee, to make a profit, or to have fun with neighbours, friends and family. Nationalist agency was thus grounded in a variety of non-nationalist motivations. This tenden-

cy was by no means restricted to the lower social classes, but involved the higher middle class and urban elites as well: each social group used the national framework to further its personal interests and improve its position in society.

Accordingly, national themes and repertoires proved to be most successful when they offered the possibility to combine individual agency with the opportunity to be absorbed by the public domain. This was an important lesson for the nineteenth-century elites as well. It was the upper social classes who possibly had to adapt themselves the most. In the 1850's the festive committees took little trouble to look for contact and interaction with the lower social classes: masses were kept at a distance; national emotions were to be avoided. From the 1880's onwards the elites realised it could have advantages to tap into popular needs and feelings. Besides keeping up the task of 'civilising' the urban lower class majority, they now understood they could also learn something of their fellow-citizens. In the 1880's and 1890's the upper level of society started to expand all kinds of popular practices, like the organisation of street decorations or public games. They also started to stimulate and steer public emotions, like the popular feelings for Transvaal or the veneration of the young Queen Wilhelmine. For ordinary citizens these changes were less radical than historiography often seems to suggest. Although at the end of the century national festivities slowly became more accessible and inclusive, it was the elites who were following popular practice, not the other way around.

The ways in which Amsterdam citizens experienced the nation did change, however, during the second half of the nineteenth century. In this context the question is not so much *what* the nation looked like, but *where* and *when* national agency was expressed. In the first place, changes in experience took place on a geographical level. The appearance of the capital modernised profoundly during the period described in this book: filthy and smelling canals were turned into neatly paved streets, large infrastructural developments improved the accessibility of the old city centre, new neighbourhoods were constructed, an electrified tram-

way network came into existence, and telegraph and telephone poles made their appearance in the streetscape. The geographical integration of the city had a clear impact on the social organisation of its inhabitants and kept pace with the unification of the nation as a whole. Amsterdam had become a large metropole, newspapers noted during the coronation of Queen Wilhelmine in 1898. This expansion was linked to a larger modernisation process and changed the mental horizon of the city dwellers: nationalist experiences were no longer limited to one's street or neighbourhood, but increasingly experienced through the city as a whole and as a member of an anonymous urban crowd.

Moreover, the character of nationalism changed during the second half of the nineteenth century. The emphasis shifted from a state driven nationalism – education, official festivities, statues – to a nationalism that was driven by initiatives from broader society. The commercial activities elaborated on in chapter 5 formed an early culmination of this development and showed the increasing importance of the mass audience. It is easy to condemn the commercialisation of the nation for its triviality – like some contemporary advocates of highbrow culture certainly did. The official and moralistic language of nineteenth-century schoolbooks or the affective nationalist rhetoric of early nineteenth-century poets like Hendrik Tollens were deeply ingrained in society. Yet, the commercialisation and commodification of 'the Netherlands' stimulated the spread and cultivation of a nationalist discourse by and for a broad audience. As such, the cultural life of the 'big city' contributed to the popular imagination of the Netherlands. These alternative ways to create a popular 'imagined community' offered a range of possibilities that would be further explored in the twentieth century.

Finally, the subject of this book raises the question whether the nation has become more democratic during the second half of the nineteenth century. From a top-down perspective the awareness (and recognition) of the national activities of ordinary people certainly increased in this period. The phenomenon of 'popular nationalism' could even be counted as a blessing by the urban elites: after all, in a society based on social

difference it always has been a challenge to give shape to something inclusive like 'national togetherness'. Although social demarcations were often meticulously preserved, this book shows several attempts to open up national discourse and festivities to society as a whole. The efforts by the authorities and organising committees to enhance social inclusion were, however, mainly directed at disciplining the masses. This strategy left increasingly little room for contributions from people from lower class neighbourhoods. The rise of the Dutch system of 'pillarisation' in the first decennia of the twentieth century proved to be a real turning point here. The various politico-religious groupings – the 'pillars' – in society started to employ the widely shared nationalist themes for their own uses. In this way, popular nationalist expressions became increasingly organised, institutionalised and disciplined within the various politico-religious segments of society.

The (proto)pillarisation of society in the nineteenth century created new organisations (with political parties in the lead), which slowly took away the possibilities and aspiration to organise nationalist initiatives on an individual basis. This process was not only driven 'from above', but also took shape from below, with citizens organising themselves in clubs, societies and trade unions. On the one hand, this new way of organising Dutch society led to the emancipation of 'silent groups' and offered lower social classes the possibility to contribute via these organisations to the construction of the nation. The rise of local orangist societies, as described in this book, is one example of this. Another example is the important role of labour organisations in creating the local Transvaal movement. On the other hand, these late nineteenth-century clubs and societies created new social structures and showed a strong tendency for self-disciplining measures. The organisations tried to follow and emulate the style of the establishment: in order to express their involvement with the nation the societies implemented forms and manners that expressed 'good citizenship'. Those citizens who did not have official membership were not allowed to join nationalist (or other) activities. As such the club life was socially exclusive.

When historians discuss politics of nineteenth century 'ordinary' people, they often emphasise the moments of struggle and resistance: by political groupings like the early socialists, but also by citizens without party-political intentions. The ways in which the inhabitants of Amsterdam – both bourgeois and lower class – expressed their national identity, could often count on (reciprocal) criticism: the erection of a bronze statue of Rembrandt did not compare to a visit to a wax figure in the *Panopticum*, the singing of the anthem for king William III was not the same as hailing miracle doctor Sequah with the *Wien Neêrlands bloed*, and the violent rows during the *Oranjefurie* or emotional pleas for action at the Transvaal meetings were far removed from the decent and controlled political debates in Dutch parliament. However, this book presents a variety of alternative examples that show us how various social groups in society were able – and willing – to work together. Bourgeois citizens discussed the street decorations with their servants; money collections for the Boer Wars were an inclusive and widespread phenomenon. Even if it was only for a short moment, popular nationalism had the power to overcome the social differences and offered a voice in which 'high' and 'low' could find each other.