Abolitionism, the Batavian Republic, the British and the Cape Colony

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The Rights of Man

Some things might have happened earlier in Holland.[1] The story goes that in early 1806 Reinier D'Ozy, secretary to the Government at the Cape, returned there with a decree ordaining that all slaves born after a certain date be freed.[2] Unfortunately, by the time he arrived, the British had reconquered the Cape, and the decree was never issued. Emancipation would only occur some three decades later, by when British rule had been firmly established.

The problem with this story is that it is almost certainly untrue. No confirmation of it has been found in the archives of the Raad der Aziatische Bezittingen, where it would be expected, or elsewhere. D'Ozy had been sent to the Netherlands to request that additional military stores be sent to the Cape, and the despatch he took back with him, not unnaturally, was a polite and wordy refusal to divert the Batavian Republic's scarce resources to a colony which, given British supremacy at sea, could not have been defended.[3] The story has achieved a certain modest place in the historiography because historians have copied one another without verifying their references, an unfortunate but not uncommon state of affairs. On this matter Ross (1988:218), Freund (1972:250) and Schutte (1976:149) all cite J.P. van der Merwe (1926:282) who cited Sir George Cory (1910-40, III:7) who, as was his wont, cited no-one.

I have been unable to discover the source of Cory's statement. The Dutch officers accompanying D'Ozy to the Cape were able to conceal the despatches they were carrying from British eyes (Nahuys van Burgst 1993:2-3, 16). The effect of their successful subterfuge may have been to launch all sorts of

1 My thanks are particularly due to Stanley Trapido for his comments on the original version of this paper and to Elizabeth Elbourne for discussions in the course of which many of my ideas on missionaries and evangelicals have developed.

2 As Stanley Engerman has pointed out in his contribution to this book, there were already precedents for such an action in a number of Northern states of the USA.

3 Raad der Aziatische Bezittingen to J.W. Janssens, 27 September 1805 (drafted by J.A. de Mist), Algemeen Rijksarchief (ARA), Raad der Aziatische Bezittingen 82.

rumors in Cape Town. The British probably took advantage of this circumstance to discredit the Batavians in the eyes of the Cape colonists. Imputing an abolitionist image to the Revolutionary regime would have been a useful piece of propaganda, which the British had certainly used on the occasion of their first occupation of the Cape in 1795.[4] All this is speculation, but the balance of probability is definitely that the incident never happened. However, the point is that it could have done. First, ideas to this effect had been current in Batavian discussions of slavery as early as 1797 (Schutte 1976:147-8). At that time they were entirely in the abstract, as the Netherlands was cut off from all its colonies by the British Navy. Secondly, the Cape Colony was the only one of the Dutch Atlantic possessions where the Batavian Republic was allowed a significant period of rule.[5] Following the peace of Amiens, the Dutch ruled the Cape of Good Hope for three full years, while in Suriname or the Antilles the equivalent interval before British reconquest was one of months, if not weeks. Thirdly, this had given the opportunity for the development of ideas about slavery in a less theoretical context than elsewhere and heretofore. The crucial figure in this was J.A. de Mist. An Overijssel aristocrat and moderate Patriot, he came to specialize in colonial affairs, particularly those of the Cape. In 1797 he had opposed the proposals to include emancipation in the new Batavian constitution, because there was no mechanism for effecting it. In 1802, in an effort to regain the influence he had lost in the course of the last five years, he compiled a memorandum to the Raad der Aziatische Bezittingen on the future government of the Cape which was soon to be returned to Dutch hands. In it he wrote:

> 'We do not intend to inquire into the necessity for, or the illegality and inhumanity of slave-trading in general. Religion and philosophy both pronounced sentence against it long ago; but statesmanship and self-interest, to their undoing, have appealed to the court of *necessity*, and in that court the case will not be decided for many years. Of this necessity, as far as the Cape is concerned, we are not convinced.' (De Mist 1920:251.)

The climate of the Cape, in contrast to the West Indies, was such that Europeans could work there in comfort, and 'hard working young farmers and dairymaids [should be] sent from the Netherlands'. Furthermore, if they were not treated with such harshness, the Khoisan could be persuaded to provide 'voluntary assistance'. Therefore, 'we believe that in time it will gradually become possible to give [the slaves] their freedom and to manage quite easily without them'. The slave trade should be phased out quickly.

4 G.K. Elphinstone and J.H. Craig to A.J. Sluyskens and the Raad van Politie, 29 June 1795, in Theal (1897-1905, I:95-6).

5 Even in Britain, East Indian slavery was never a major issue.

'Meanwhile, the tasks on which these people are employed should gradually be handed over to other persons, so that agriculture, stock-farming and viticulture may not suffer. In order to achieve this end, we would first of all suggest that all children in future born of slaves, should be free. At the same time, the first generation of freed slaves should be provided for. On reaching years of discretion, they should be granted plots of land for cultivation, or be assured of some definite means of livelihood, so that their freedom may not become a source of misery to them, or want and poverty drive them to thieving, and thus bring them to the gallows.' (De Mist 1920:252-3.)

These ideas De Mist maintained even as a colonial ruler. Later in 1802 he was sent to the Cape as Commissioner-General in order to establish Batavian government and to introduce reforms. While the Governor, J.W. Janssens, was nobbled by the Cape slaveowners into defending the maintenance of slavery and slave imports, De Mist remained convinced that slavery at the Cape was unnecessary and would be induced to wither away. He commented that his 'anti-slave system [does not] rest on new-fangled fragile so-called philanthropic grounds, but rather on practical maxims of state, whose falsity has at least to be shown before the contrary is defended' (Van der Merwe 1926:281; Freund 1972:244-50). Specifically he required of an unwilling Janssens that he investigate how slavery could be made to die out gradually in the Colony. By 1805 De Mist was back in the Netherlands, with a seat on the Raad der Aziatische Bezittingen. He may have given D'Ozy secret instructions of the tenet that Cory describes, but it does seem unlikely. What is clear is that the ideas he represented remained at the center of Batavian discussions about slavery, certainly with regard to the Cape of Good Hope.

Freedom from Sin

These ideas were at the highest level of Dutch politics, and even there were not central to political debate. They had little resonance beyond the political élite. As has so often been noted, there was no mass abolitionist movement in the Netherlands. Freedom in terms of the Rights of Man did not have the appeal in the Netherlands that Freedom as an essential tenet of evangelical Christianity had in Great Britain. As a result, the question that historians have to ask is not 'Why was there no mass abolitionist movement in the Netherlands which was just as much a capitalist society as Great Britain?'; rather the question should be 'Why was there no mass abolitionist movement in the Netherlands which was just as much a Protestant society as Great Britain?'

Two things follow from this reformulation. First, the exceptional nature of British abolitionism is even clearer. Logically, there is no more reason to assume that abolitionism arose from a peculiar British trajectory of Protes-

tantism than to claim that it derived from the particular structure of British capitalism. Empirically, the former strategy is probably preferable, though it is at least arguable that the course taken by British Protestantism from the mid-eighteenth century was itself in part a consequence of the way in which the country's capitalist economy developed.

If this is indeed a correct argument, then, secondly, the roots of abolitionism have to be found in the British (and to a lesser extent North American) evangelical revival of the eighteenth century. The first point that has to be made is that the sources of that revival were just as much available in the Netherlands as in Britain. The phylogeny of the Revivals can be traced back not to the lands on the shores of the North Sea, but rather to the increased religious tension between Catholics and Protestants of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The revocation of the Edict of Nantes and the crusading vigor of the (Catholic) Habsburg empire sent waves of ideas and refugees to the North and West (Garrett 1987; Ward 1992). The influence of the United Brethren, better known as the Moravians, on Wesley, for instance, is well known, but they were more prominent in the Netherlands, that traditional refuge from Catholic persecution, than in Britain. Much the same can be said of the Huguenot, particularly Camisard, exiles from France. The sources of the Evangelical revival were thus available in the Netherlands, and there were a few Dutchmen (and possibly women) who accepted its message in ways analogous to the British evangelicals. The most notable individual in this regard was Johannes van der Kemp, instigator of the first Dutch missionary societies, one of the most notable of the first wave of missionaries employed by British societies and, among other things, fervent opponent of slavery. Now, Johannes van der Kemp was *sui generis*. Probably the only (later) missionary to maintain a mistress in the Volmolengracht in Leiden, he was at various stages of his career cavalry officer, philosopher, medical doctor, and missionary. He was a genius, in his command of languages,[6] in the depth and breadth of his reasoning and in his ability to drive matters through to the ultimate, not a trait which made him a comfortable associate (Enklaar 1988; Elbourne 1991a). But his career does show that the ideas which led to abolitionism were available in the Netherlands (Boneschansker 1987:72-4).

To take the analogy with biological evolution somewhat further, arguments about the descent of ideas have to be allied to those of advantage in natural selection. There are at least three interlocking reasons to explain the

[6] For instance, he once excluded himself from missionary work in Persia because of his faulty command of Persian, a criterion which, *mutatis mutandis*, would have effectively prevented any overseas missionary work; he travelled through the wilds of Africa with a gospel in Syriac and apparently produced the only devotional work ever written in Cape Khoi, a language about as far removed from those of Northwest Europe as is possible, and one that defeated all other missionaries.

relative success of political Evangelicalism in Britain, in comparison to the Netherlands. The first has to do with the industrial revolution, to use convenient shorthand. There seems to have been an 'elective affinity', to use Weber's concept, between members of that broad social category conventionally split between the upper working and lower middle classes and Evangelical Protestantism. This was the group from which the majority of early missionaries derived and provided the rank and file of the abolitionist movement (Drescher 1986:67-88). It was obviously a group which grew sharply in numbers and political weight during the eighteenth century in Britain, but not in the Netherlands, which was relatively speaking in depression. Although they did not achieve any real political power, they were able to set the terms of debate in Evangelical circles to which Wilberforce and others had to respond.

Secondly, the second wave of Evangelical revival in Britain, in the 1780s and 1790s, saw a revitalization of Old Dissent (Elbourne 1991b). While the growth of Methodism from the 1730s on was, at the very least, politically ambivalent, the re-emergence of the Quakers and Independents, notably Baptists and Congregationalists, as a religious force towards the end of the century brought the radicalism which had slumbered since the Restoration back into the center of British political life. These groups were the carriers of the tradition which had had such a hectic life during the English Revolution, but which had never crossed the North Sea to the Netherlands. The results included a resurgence of millenarianism from the 1790s (Harrison 1979; De Jong 1970), which led fairly directly to the foundation of that most radical of organizations, both in the British Caribbean and South Africa, namely the (London) Missionary Society (Van den Berg 1956; Porter 1991).[7] The rapid conversion of the heathen was imperative, as otherwise it would be too late, and, for some missionary pioneers, their conversion would bring on the Millennium (Elbourne 1991b). Indeed the question arises whether it was the slave trade which prevented the coming of the Millennium, a question which I have never seen posed. And it was from this stage of Evangelicalism, rather from than the earlier Methodism, which abolitionism derived. True, millenarianism died away after the ending of the Napoleonic wars, which had provided it with much of its fuel. John Philip, for instance, made an exemplary transition from a millenarian position in 1813 to one which explicitly combined Christianity and the political economy of Smith and Malthus by the mid-1820s (Philip 1813, 1828).[8] Nevertheless, here too the respectable abolitionists, who were to drive the various measures

[7] The events surrounding the arrest and trial of John Smith in Demerara in 1823 provide Caribbean parallels.

[8] On his progress, and that of the South African mission in general, see Elbourne and Ross forthcoming.

through the British Parliament, had to respond to these sorts of movements on their ideological flank in a way which has not been incorporated into even the best studies of their movement (Turley 1991).

The third crucial difference between the development of Protestantism in the Netherlands and Great Britain was that the former had been conquered by Revolutionary France and the latter had not. What is important in this context about the ideology of the French Revolution, and of its Dutch counterpart which led to establishment of the Batavian Republic, was that it was resolutely secular. In reaction, the Dutch Protestantism in general, and its most vibrant early nineteenth-century expression, known as the Réveil, in particular, were always politically conservative. Abolitionism could not take root among those groups and tendencies within Dutch society who had most in common with the British abolitionists because it was seen as part of a revolutionary liberal ideology against which they were struggling in many aspects of Dutch life, political, theological, and social.[9]

After the restoration of the House of Orange in 1813, abolitionism was seen as part and parcel of a rejected ideology. In the reaction – in both senses of the word – to what is still disparaged as the *Franse Tijd* (French period), it was impossible to build on the ideas which a man like De Mist had expressed. Whatever the relation between abolitionism and capitalism, the connections between abolitionism and Evangelicalism are far clearer in Britain and North America. There are very good reasons why the two never came together in the Netherlands.

Cape Abolitionism and Missionary Politics

With this in mind, it is instructive to return to the question why, even after the establishment of British rule at the Cape, the abolitionist movement there remained weak. In his recent, detailed discussion of the matter, Watson (1990) demonstrates that during the 1820s a vigorous debate developed in the Cape Colony about the desirability and viability of slavery. While this was fed from metropolitan sources, it was very much an argument conducted in the Cape and in Cape terms. There were of course those who took up something approaching an abolitionist position, but they were either marginal to the society as a whole or, like John Fairbairn, editor of the *South African Commercial Advertiser*, surprisingly moderate in their anti-slavery. The only significant abolitionist society was the Cape of Good Hope Philanthropic Society, which hoped to end slavery gradually by purchasing young slave women for emancipation. In total, the Society emancipated 126 slaves, not enough to make a dent in the colony's slave population of

9. In this, Dutch Protestantism had much in common with its German counterpart. See Huffman 1977:445-70.

around 36,000 (in 1834). Since many of the leading members of the society were themselves slave owners, the degree of abolitionist fervor it exhibits was not great. Thus while slavery was debated an abolitionist movement as such was more or less absent.

Now, 'weakness' is a comparative term, and Watson's explicit referent in his arguments is the United States, which is rather misleading. The United States was very rare in possessing both a large slave sector and a large area whose economy was almost entirely based on free labor, and the abolitionists came almost exclusively from the latter. Moreover, the heyday of North American abolitionism was after the emancipation of slaves in the British Empire. In comparison, say, with the abolitionist movements in Jamaica,[10] Suriname or Alabama, the Cape does come off too badly. Equally, Watson misses the degree to which there was a conscious international division of abolitionist labor. The Cape activists, notably John Philip of the London Missionary Society, left agitation for the emancipation of slaves to people in Britain and the West Indies. They concentrated their efforts on the plight of the indigenous Africans, mainly the Khoisan – and by extension the free blacks – but, after the conquest of the Western Xhosa in Hintsa's war of 1835, with them as well. Philip managed to convince Thomas Fowell Buxton the two struggles were in fact one, and after the emancipation of slaves Buxton concentrated his major efforts on the deleterious effects of colonialism on the (non-slave) colonized peoples, notably through the Select Committee (of the British Parliament) on Aborigines (Ross 1989:140-52; Elbourne 1991b:273-94, 323-30).

It was largely, though not exclusively, through the missionaries, that the political programs of evangelicalism came into the Cape Colony. As in Great Britain, the influence and fervor of political evangelicalism began to wane after the 1830s. Nevertheless, it was able to survive the disastrous consequences of a – millenarian-inspired – rebellion of many mission converts in 1851-1853 to provide the basis of later nineteenth-century Cape Liberalism. There is thus a clear ideological line of descent in South Africa from the abolitionists of the later eighteenth century down to the Christian Liberals of the twentieth. Indeed, the influence of evangelical political moralities and the Christian justification for political action passed through the missions to become an integral part of the ideological heritage of the African National Congress, and indeed of that of the élite of Botswana, one of Africa's few functioning democracies (and economies).

Nevertheless, it is self-evident that political radicalism deriving from evangelicalism was not dominant among South African whites in the early nineteenth century, or ever since. This was true no matter what language

[10] Watson (1990:199) admits that this was more or less non-existent.

they spoke. The main group of British immigrants, the 1820 settlers and their descendants in the Eastern Cape, had a record of racial illiberality which outdid anything the colony's Dutch could manage, as was shown by their harassment of the Xhosa and the Kat River Khoi (Kirk 1973; Crais 1992). Equally, successive colonial governors and their immediate entourages were with few exceptions high Tory soldiers. A number had West Indian experience. Except for one period in the late 1820s, they did not wish to liberalize the colony. When Lord Charles Somerset, for instance, realized that measures for the amelioration of slavery were inevitable, his reaction was to promulgate his own variety, later repudiated by the Colonial Office in London, as a preemptive strike and in the hope that he could get away with as little as possible (Rayner 1986:160; Peires 1989:472-519). After emancipation, a whole set of measures, for the control of vagrancy, squatting, and master and servant relations, continued in this vogue, although the first was in fact disallowed by the Colonial Office in London (Marincowitz 1985). And much later, slave-holding practices in the Transvaal (Boeyens 1991) were not a major source of friction between the British and the Boer Republic there until, for other reasons, the British needed to bring the Transvaal more firmly under British hegemony, and deployed all the ideological weapons at their disposal to this end (Kistner 1953; Delius and Trapido 1982).

There is thus a sense in which British political fights were replayed in South Africa. This is of course far from unusual for a colony. Nevertheless, it was also the case that even after the British conquest of the colony Dutch political disputes, or perhaps more correctly Dutch politico-theological disputes, were also played out at the Cape. In both cases, though, the choice of positions was selective. In the late eighteenth century there was a certain affinity for the Patriot movement, but this was more as a weapon with which to attack Dutch East Indies Company rule than from any great degree of ideological agreement (Schutte 1989:309-15). On the other hand, the secularism inherent in the Batavian Revolution was never attractive to a group for whom the *dominees* were still the main intellectual cadres, particularly as the lawyers, the other main section of the intellectuals, were increasingly divorced from developments in the Netherlands.[11] The ideologies of the Rights of Man, which De Mist had propagated, thus never gained a lasting foothold among Dutch South Africans.

There were those, nevertheless, who were attracted to ideas which could be said to derive from revolutionary ideas, if interpreted in very different ways. A direct line can be drawn from the Batavians through the writings of

[11] Pre-revolutionary Dutch law remained in force in the Cape Colony, and the Batavian codification was never enacted. In part a consequence of this, the influence of British-trained lawyers, whether English or Scotch, became paramount.

W.S. van Ryneveld,[12] to the self-consciously 'progressive' arguments of the annual *Cape Almanac*, in the middle of the nineteenth century. The introductions to this work, edited by B.J. van de Sandt and later his adoptive son B.J. van de Sandt de Villiers, form a clear location for the development of arguments about the necessity of progress in general, and for the Cape Colony in particular. By this time, the arguments of these anglicizing Afrikaners had merged with those of such British publicists as John Fairbairn to create a colony-wide progressive ethos (Du Plessis 1988:52-74).

Just as in the Netherlands, both Batavian and later progressive arguments brought forth a self-consciously reactionary counterweight from *dominees* of the Nederlandsch Hervormde Kerk. In the nineteenth century, the Cape Church was in much closer touch with developments in the Netherlands than it had ever been under Dutch East Indies Company rule, in part because it was a far livelier institution than its moribund predecessor. Even the attempts to anglicize the church ironically only increased metropolitan Dutch influence, since the several Scots who were recruited to serve at the Cape all spent a year in the Netherlands, ostensibly to learn the language, before sailing south. In general they spent the time studying at the Utrecht University, as did most of those South Africans who wished to be admitted to the ministry. There they joined the theological society (*dispuut*) Sechor Dabar, which was a prime channel for the influence of the Réveil to new generations of preachers.

The Réveil was at once a movement for the spiritual renewal of Dutch Protestantism and a movement of reaction against the secularization inherent in the Batavian revolution. Its leading figures, such as Willem Bilderdijk and Isaac da Costa (1823), were determinedly against 'the spirit of the age', and intent on glorifying the virtues of the Dutch past. It was a movement which eschewed all political radicalism, and thus did not include abolitionism within its programme until the mid-nineteenth century. By then, abolitionism was so accepted in Christian circles throughout Europe that it had ceased to be radical, and had in fact become a necessary part of a Christian movement's political programme.

In this, the new ministers influenced by the Réveil were in tune with the ethos of the Cape Church, whose leading ministers at the beginning of the

[12] W.S. van Ryneveld, 'Beschouwing over de veeteelt, landbouw, handel en finantie van de Kolonie de Kaap de Goede Hoop, in 1805', *Nederduitsch Zuid-Afrikaanse Tijdschrift* 8-10 [1831-1833], published posthumously. On the other hand, Van Ryneveld's 'Replies to the questions on the importation etc. of slaves into the colony; proposed by His Excellency the Earl of Macartney Etc Etc, dated 29 November 1797', were only published – very obscurely – in the *Journal of Secondary Education*, for 1931, and so can have had no immediate effect on the Cape thinking. See the extracts of both articles in Du Toit and Giliomee 1983:56-7. Van Ryneveld, who was a leading official and member of the Cape élite, did of course disseminate his ideas in general conversation.

century were themselves slave owners (Elbourne and Ross forthcoming). As a result, there was no religious impulse for social reform emanating from the Nederlandsch Hervormde Kerk, as was the case with at least some of the British Evangelical missionaries. Furthermore, the conservatives were strong enough to fight off later attempts to liberalize to Cape church (Du Plessis 1988; Du Toit 1987:48-63). They were not as yet Afrikaner nationalists. G.W.A. van der Lingen, the leading figure in this movement, was indeed a fervent *Groot-Nederlander*, before his time, and Andrew Murray jr., his successor as the dominant man within the Cape Nederlandsch Hervormde Kerk, remained more Scotch than Afrikaner, even though he was born and brought up in the Cape (Du Plessis 1988:116-25; Du Toit and Giliomee 1983:8). Nevertheless, this tradition was to be one of the blocks on which later Afrikaner nationalism was built, as Van der Lingen's heritage was transmitted to later movements through his protege Ds. S.J. du Toit (Moodie 1975:4, 57-9).

Intellectual lineages are difficult to analyze, and certainly not everything can be explained by phylogeny. Afrikaner conservatism developed as it did in dispute with its competitors, notably, in the nineteenth century, the ideas of progress, and also in reaction to the material conditions and social relations of the Cape Colony and South Africa as a whole. Nevertheless, the rejection of the sort of ideas propagated by De Mist, both in the Netherlands and in South Africa, had considerable long-term consequences. It would not have made much difference if D'Ozy had arrived a few months earlier, even if he had really been carrying the letter that rumors said he was. However, if the Batavians had had the chance to develop their colonial policies at the Cape, and if the transmission of ideas from the Netherlands to South Africa during the nineteenth century had not been so totally in the hands of their opponents, not their heirs, then the history of political philosophies, and thence of political practice, in South Africa would undoubtedly have followed a course other than that which it did. Just how different, it is impossible to say. Counterfactuals of the qualitative are outside the range of the historians' vision.

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