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Regional Resilience in the Age of Revolutions: The Persistence of the Dutch Provinces, 1748–1848

Diederik Smit

Although in recent years the study of regionalism has received increasing scholarly attention, continuities in regional identity between the modern period and previous centuries have so far seldom been considered.¹ One of the reasons for this lack of a *longue durée* approach to regionalism seems to be the division of labour in the historical disciplines. Whereas ‘modernists’ tend to consider regions and regional identity primarily as ‘modern’ phenomena, coinciding with the rise of nationalism in the

¹ Joost Augusteijn and Eric Storm, eds., *Region and State in Nineteenth-Century Europe. Nation-Building, Regional Identities and Separatism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); and Eric Storm, ‘Regionalism in History, 1890–1945. The Cultural Approach’, *European History Quarterly* 33: 2 (2003), 251–265.

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late nineteenth century,² historians of the early modern period often focus exclusively on regionalism in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.³ Moreover, the division between ‘modernists’ and ‘early modernists’ is reinforced by the notion that the ‘age of revolutions’ provided a decisive rupture with the past. On both sides of the Atlantic, the political and societal upheaval of the late eighteenth century redefined the relation between nation and region, and central and regional authorities.

The Dutch Republic is a good case in point in this regard. Between 1798 and 1813 successive regimes attempted to enforce a fundamental geographical and administrative redivision of the Netherlands. The provinces that had been sovereign states within the Republic of the United Netherlands for over two centuries were dissolved and, as in France, replaced by ‘departments’, subordinate to the new national government. These executive bodies were supposed to be no longer reminiscent of their powerful predecessors. Both their shapes and their names differed; they were fewer in number, larger in size, and bore neutral, non-historical names. After years of ineffective deliberations on the role of the Dutch province, this radical reform was the ultimate attempt to break with the republican past and emphasise the transition from the old confederation to a modern centralised state.

The experiment with these new departments, however, was short-lived. Following their independence from France in 1813, the former provinces were more or less restored. The new Kingdom of the Netherlands remained a unitary state and was given a King as its sole sovereign, but the old provincial names, borders and even specific regional offices were reintroduced, apparently without major problems.

² E.g. Celia Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials. The German Idea of Heimat* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Thomas Kühne, ‘Die Region als Konstrukt. Regionalgeschichte als Kulturgeschichte’, in James Retallack ed., *Sachsen in Deutschland. Politik, Kultur und Gesellschaft 1830–1918* (Bielefeld: Verl. für Regionalgeschichte, 2000); and Jean-Clément Martin, ‘La construction culturelle d’une région. La Vendée’, in Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, Michael G. Müller and S. J. Woolf, eds., *Regional and National Identities in Europe in the XIXth and XXth centuries. Les identités régionales et nationales en Europe aux XIXe et XXe Siècles* (The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 1998).

³ E.g. Raingard Esser, ‘North and South. Regional and Urban Identities in the 17th-Century Netherlands’, in Steven G. Ellis and Raingard Esser, eds., *Frontiers and the Writing of History, 1500–1850* (Hannover: Wehrhahn Verlag, 2006); and Judith Pollmann and Robert Stein, eds., *Networks, Regions and Nations. Shaping Identities in the Low Countries, 1300–1650* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

The ease with which this restoration was carried out suggests that, despite all the reforms, the old provinces had retained more of their significance than historians have acknowledged so far. It raises the question of to what extent the political and societal role of the province had actually changed. Surprisingly, until now there has been an almost complete lack of interest in Dutch historiography in what happened to the provinces in the period around 1800. Except for a few (local) historical studies,⁴ the case of the Dutch province has been studied only by legal experts and scholars in public administration, whose focus is mainly on the constitutional position of the province.⁵ As is the case with the study of regionalism in general, continuities between the nineteenth century and earlier centuries are hardly taken into account in these publications.

In this chapter, I would like to focus on the persistence of the Dutch provinces during the Revolutionary Era, from the days of the Dutch Republic until the early years of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. I will argue that, appearances notwithstanding, the idea of the Netherlands as ‘a nation of provinces’ was never abandoned and remained at the heart of Dutch society. Although the confederate Republic was dissolved in 1798, the old provinces remained an important focus of identification, both culturally and politically. Feelings of provincial belonging continued to exist and even grew stronger as the nineteenth century dawned, resulting in a renewed interest in regional history and culture. Also, the deprivation of the provinces’ sovereignty did not result in complete demolition

⁴ Jos Gabriëls, *De heren als dienaren en de dienaar als heer. Het stadhouderlijk stelsel in de tweede helft van de achttiende eeuw* (The Hague: Stichting Hollandse Historische Reeks, 1990); Thimo de Nijs, ‘In een groter geheel. Politiek en openbaar bestuur’, in Thimo de Nijs and Eelco Beukers, eds., *Geschiedenis van Holland* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2003); Yme Kuiper, ‘Politiek en bestuur, 1795–1848’, in Johan Frieswijk, e.a. eds., *Geschiedenis van Friesland 1750–1995* (Amsterdam: Boom, 1998); Renger de Bruin, *Wij en onze opvolgers zullen iedereen recht doen. Het Utrechtse Provincie Bestuur in historisch perspectief* (Utrecht: Centraal Museum, 2003); and Ida Nijenhuis, Johanna Roelevink and Ronald George Herman Sluijter, *De leeuw met de zeven pijlen. Het gewest in het landelijk bestuur* (The Hague: Instituut voor Nederlandse geschiedenis, 2010).

⁵ Combertus Willem van der Pot, *Bestuurs- en rechtsinstellingen der Nederlandse provincien* (Zwolle: Tjeenk Willink, 1949); Marcel van Dam, e.a. eds., *Het onzichtbare bestuur. Over provincies, stadsprovincies en regionale vraagstukken* (Delft: Eburon, 1996); Herman Sietsma, ‘Korte schets van de geschiedenis van de provincies’, in Arno Seinstra and Herman Sietsma, eds., *Provincies van binnen en van buiten* (Nieuwegein: Reunion, 2012), 30–33; and Harmen Binnema and Hans Vollaard, eds., *Provinciale politiek. De provincies democratisch getoetst* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2019).

of the old republican framework. At the provincial level, some old region-specific offices, privileges, and institutions survived the iconoclastic fury of the Revolutionary Era and were incorporated into the new state.

To illustrate the lasting importance of provinces in the new unitary state, two types of evidence will be analysed. First, I will concentrate on the debates of the successive constitutional commissions, installed by the Dutch government between 1795 and 1815. How did they deal with the confederate legacy of the former Republic and to what extent did old provincial loyalties play a role in the creation of the new state? In addition, I will look at literary sources, ranging from history books to provincial almanacs. What ideas of provincial identity and regional diversity were expressed in these texts? By taking both constitutional and literary sources into account, I hope not only to demonstrate the persistence of the Dutch provinces and the enduring impact of the republican legacy on the Kingdom of the Netherlands but also to shed some light on the ways in which regional continuities coincided with change at the national level.

CONCORDIA RES PARVAE CRESCUNT

The creation of the Dutch Republic at the end of the sixteenth century was by no means the result of a well-thought-out or preconceived plan. From the very outset, the new confederate state had been little more than a loose affiliation of rebellious provinces, a haphazard alliance of local and regional forces united in battle against their Habsburg overlord. Although clustered together in the northern part of the Netherlands, they had little in common. Economically and geographically, the landscape of the confederate Republic was fragmented and diverse. The coastal provinces of Holland, Zeeland and Friesland were densely populated and urbanised, and their economies were built on international trade, manufacturing industries and intensive agriculture. The inland provinces, on the other hand, were quite the opposite. Apart from a few urban areas along the rivers Rhine, Meuse and IJssel, they were predominantly rural, scarcely populated and characterised by woods and uncultivated lands.

Politically, too, the confederal Republic was like a patchwork: the newly created state consisted of seven sovereign provinces, including one former duchy (Guelderland), two former counties (Holland and Zeeland) and four former lordships (Utrecht, Friesland, Overijssel and Groningen). Each of these had its own government, the Provincial Estates, its own

laws and institutions and enjoyed a high degree of political independence. About one-fifth of the Republic's territories was made up of the so-called Generality Lands, which were provinces that had been conquered from the Habsburgs and that did not enjoy full membership of the confederacy. Unlike the seven provinces mentioned above, they did not have their own sovereign government, nor any representation at the national level. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, these Generality Lands functioned as de facto colonies, directly governed by the confederate government, the Estates-General, in The Hague.⁶

This diverse and decentralised character of the Republic secured, on the one hand, many of the economic and political liberties the provinces had fought for during their revolt against the Habsburg Empire. In matters of taxation, religious organisation and jurisdiction, local and provincial authorities remained largely in control. This in turn stimulated economic specialisation and social mobility between the different parts of the country. In this respect, the pluralist nature of the Netherlands was certainly applauded by some. When Ludovico Guicciardini published his *Description of the Low Countries* a few years before the Dutch Revolt, he explicitly praised the rich variety of the Netherlands, an opinion that was echoed by later generations of writers.⁷ Even today scholars link the birth of the Dutch Golden Age in the seventeenth century to the unique political system and economic diversity of the Republic.⁸

On the other hand, when it came down to decision-making, this diversity and decentralised structure were less beneficial. In comparison with neighbouring countries such as France, England and later also Prussia, the central government of the Dutch Republic was relatively weak. Its main central institution, the Estates-General, was made up of representatives of the different provinces, each of whom had the right to veto. In order to reach an agreement on issues concerning foreign policy or military affairs, it was necessary to get unanimity among the various provinces. This was

⁶ One of the leading studies in English on the history of the Dutch Republic is Jonathan Israel's *The Dutch Republic. Its Rise, Greatness and Fall, 1477–1806* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

⁷ Lodovico Guicciardini, *Descrittione di tutti i Paesi Bassi, altrimenti detti Germania Inferiore* (Antwerpen: Apresso Guglielmo Siluio, 1567).

⁸ E.g. Maarten Prak, *The Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century. The Golden Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

a difficult task that required a lot of patience and persuasion and could take weeks, months and sometimes even years to accomplish.

As early as the late sixteenth century, people acknowledged the possible dangers this system of endless negotiation could entail. Especially in times of war, unity among the provinces and efficient governance were crucial to the survival of the Republic. Initiatives to strengthen the position of the central government, however, all proved unsuccessful. Although various plans for constitutional reform were put on the national agenda, most notably during the Great Assemblies of 1651 and 1716–1717, none of these led to real change. In the end, respect for the ‘ancient rights and liberties’ of the provinces outweighed the wish for constitutional reform.⁹

The result was a continuation of the status quo: throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Republic remained a unity in diversity. At the international level, the Dutch Republic had proven its ability to act like a proper state early on. In the seventeenth century, the Republic was able to operate as an aggressive superpower, but in the eighteenth century, its geopolitical clout had dwindled. Domestically, the provinces competed with one another, as their economic and military interests often differed, and a balance of power between them was rarely achieved. Holland in particular was a force to be reckoned with. As the richest and most populous of the seven sovereign provinces, and the source of over half of the annual tax revenues, it would usually set the tone in the meetings of the Estates-General. To bring the others into line, though, was not an easy task: provinces like Friesland, Guelderland or Zeeland would frequently challenge Holland’s leading position or work together to obstruct its plans. In these cases, the official Latin slogan of the Dutch Republic *Concordia res parvae crescunt*, which was decoratively written on the ceiling of the Estates-General’s meeting hall, was little more than an empty phrase.

THE ONE AND INDIVISIBLE REPUBLIC

It was not until the end of the eighteenth century that things began to change. The relative decline of the Dutch economy, in combination with a growing unease with the political elite, prompted a big wave of political reform plans, in particular during the 1780s. Following the American

⁹ Israel, *The Dutch Republic*, 774–784, 1089–1090.

Revolutionary War and the subsequent Fourth Anglo-Dutch War, the so-called Patriots demanded not only regime change but also a structural reform of the Republic's decentralised constitution. Inspired by Enlightenment ideas they called for 'democratic' elections, freedom of the press and the removal from power of the Prince of Orange-Nassau who, as 'Stadtholder', had been the Republic's main military commander since the mid-eighteenth century. In 1787, after the Patriots had taken control of the city councils and provincial governments, it even looked as if they would succeed in reforming the Republic. However, intervention by the Prussian army prevented a proper revolution: the supporters of the Patriot movement were purged from power and many of the reformists' key figures fled to France.¹⁰

Although the Patriot movement's plans for constitutional reform had been nipped in the bud, their legacy would have a lasting impact. After the French revolutionary armies invaded the Republic in the winter of 1795, many of the exiled Patriots were able to return to the Netherlands and regain their former positions in the local and provincial governments. This time the reformists or 'Batavians', as they called themselves, were firmly in power: backed by the French army, they now exercised complete control over the Republic's institutions. Moreover, during their exile in Paris, their political ideas had developed further. Many of the men who were now in charge of the Republic had experienced the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror at first-hand, and their political views were more radical than those of the original Patriot movement.

Maybe the most important difference between the ideas of the Patriots and their Batavian successors was the stance on the sovereignty of the provinces. Whereas the former proposed a bottom-up reform within the existing political framework of the confederacy, the latter advocated a more top-down approach whereby the provinces were to some extent subordinate to the central government. Some Batavians, like Johan Valckenaer or Bernard Bosch, even went so far as to propose a complete dissolution of the confederate state. In their view, only a strong unitary state could voice 'the will of the people', and cure the Republic of its 'provincial disease'. Not only did they want to break the political power

¹⁰ C.f. Simon Schama, *Patriots and Liberators. Revolution in the Netherlands, 1780–1813* (London/New York: Harper Perennial, 1977).

of the provinces but their ultimate wish was to get rid of the historical provinces altogether.¹¹

In this respect, the views of these more radical Batavians echoed Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès' famous pamphlet *Qu'est-ce que le tiers-état?* According to Sieyès, one of the fathers of the French Revolution, the sovereignty of the state always lay with its people and could therefore not be divided.¹² This principle of the 'one and indivisible Republic' also formed the basis for the 1793 Jacobin Constitution, which many Batavians considered a blueprint for a new Dutch constitution. Following the French invasion of 1795, Sieyès himself had even been sent to the Netherlands to discuss the future of the Dutch Republic with the Batavian government, and during this stay, the conditions for constitutional reform were already being created. First, many of the politicians and administrators who had served under the old regime were forced to resign and were exiled to England or Prussia. Next, most of the old institutions were dismantled, including many of the confederacy's political bodies. The Estates-General, for example, which had been the central government of the Republic for two centuries, were disbanded and replaced by a new national parliament, whose main task would be the creation of a new Constitution.

This National Assembly, which first convened in The Hague on 1 March 1796, differed in many ways from the old Estates-General. One of the most striking differences was the fact that the National Assembly no longer represented the interests of the separate provinces. Instead, its members represented the people of the Dutch Republic as a whole, including those who had formerly been politically side-lined, like religious minorities and the inhabitants of the former Generality Lands. In this sense, the National Assembly was indeed national: whereas the old Estates-General had been a mere platform for interprovincial cooperation and coordination, the new parliament symbolised the unity of the state and its people.¹³

¹¹ Joost Rosendaal, *Bataven! Nederlandse vluchtelingen in Frankrijk 1787–1795* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2003), 529; and Vrijhart [pseudonym Bernardus Bosch], *Aan het volk van Nederland over de ware Constitutie in Holland* (n.p., 1793).

¹² Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, *Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès. The Essential Political Writings* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

¹³ Joris Oddens, *Pioniers in schaduwbeeld. Het eerste parlement van Nederland 1796–1798* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2012).

The symbolic unity, however, did not automatically imply unanimity among the members of the National Assembly: although most members of the National Assembly agreed that the discord among its ‘nine peoples’¹⁴ had been one of the main problems of the old Republic, few thought the existence of the different provinces and their historical sovereignties could simply be ignored. During the two years, the National Assembly was in session many arguments on this point would be exchanged. On one side, radical Unitarists pleaded for a top-down dissolution of the provincial system. In their view, the new Constitution could simply deny the existence of the historical provinces and enforce a unitary state: as long as it stated that the Republic was indivisible, its people would be one, and vice versa. On the other side, Federalists advocated a more gradual bottom-up approach, urging their fellow Members of Parliament to respect the cultural and historical differences between the various parts of the Netherlands. They argued that ‘small republics’ (i.e. the provinces) were needed to stay in close contact with the people, and looked for guidance not to France, but to other federal states like the United States and Switzerland.¹⁵ The result was a deadlock that lasted for two years: several plans for provincial redivision were presented, but none of them were put into practice.

UNITY OR DIVERSITY?

Why was the Federalist resistance in the National Assembly so fierce? In recent decades, most of the literature on the Dutch Republic in the revolutionary era, and on the process of unification in particular, has focussed on the rise of nationalism and the creation of new national institutions, all leading up to the new unitary state.¹⁶ The concurrent rise of regional awareness, the omnipresence of federalist feelings among many of the

¹⁴ The National Assembly was made up of representatives of the peoples of Holland, Zeeland, Guelderland, Utrecht, Friesland, Groningen, Overijssel, Drenthe and Brabant.

¹⁵ Mart Rutjes, *Door gelijkheid gegrepen. Democratie, burgerschap en staat in Nederland 1795–1801* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2012), 46–49.

¹⁶ E.g. Niek van Sas, *De metamorfose van Nederland. Van oude orde naar moderniteit, 1750–1900* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008); and Frans Grijzenhout, Niek van Sas and Wyger Velema, eds., *Het Bataafse experiment. Politiek en cultuur rond 1800* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2013).

revolutionaries, and the importance of the existing provincial institutions have hardly been taken into account.¹⁷

This is remarkable, not only because of the confederate background of the Republic but also in light of the growing amount of literature dealing with regional or provincial subjects, published from the mid-eighteenth century onwards. These works ranged from books on provincial history and antiquities, regional cuisine and dress, to works in provincial dialects and languages. The most striking example of this new wave of cultural regionalism could be found in the Northern Province of Friesland, where a strong regionalist movement had already been flourishing since the 1740s. Here, in cities like Leeuwarden, Franeker and Harlingen, both local intellectuals and newly founded societies devoted themselves to the study of Frisian culture, in particular the province's language and ancient history. Driven by the idea that the Frisian people were descendants of an ancient Germanic tribe and that their language took up a separate position from other Germanic languages, their publications emphasised the uniqueness of the province within the Dutch Republic and even within Europe.¹⁸

Although Friesland was most successful in cultivating its own provincial identity, this kind of cultural particularism was not unique; it was also promoted in other parts of the Republic. In the eastern province of Guelderland, for example, a similar interest in the province's early origins resulted in a series of publications about the province's illustrious past and historical monuments, which was aimed at setting the province apart from the other parts of the Republic, and presented the Guelders people both as the oldest and as the most 'freedom-loving' people of the entire Netherlands. Even Holland, a province where urban rivalries had long stood in the way of a shared provincial identity, now witnessed a sudden interest in its regional culture: during the second half of the eighteenth century several studies about Holland's customs, morals and types of dress were published, putting this part of the Netherlands on the map as the cultural heartland of the Dutch Republic.¹⁹

¹⁷ A rare exception is Rutjes, *Door gelijkheid gegrepen*, 47–57.

¹⁸ C.f. Philippus Breuker, *Opkomst en bloei van het Friese nationalisme, 1740–1875* (Leeuwarden: Wijdemeer, 2014).

¹⁹ Cf. Eveline Koolhaas-Grosfeld, *De ontdekking van de Nederlander. In boeken en prenten rond 1800* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2010); and Ad de Jong, *De dirigenten van de*

As these examples show, regional awareness was still very much alive and kicking in the late eighteenth century, even though at the same time national sentiments were on the rise as well. In this light, it is also no surprise that by the time the National Assembly first convened in 1796, many of its members found themselves struggling with the implications of a ‘one and indivisible Republic’. In the eyes of many representatives, the Republic was still a nation of different historical peoples. Endorsing the idea of popular sovereignty would therefore mean endorsing the sovereignties of the peoples of Friesland, Guelderland, Holland, et cetera. Although the vast majority of the Batavians supported the notion of a strong central government, only a few wished to go so far as to dissolve the old union completely and redraw the map from scratch. Most representatives did want to strengthen the union and cure the Republic of its ‘provincial disease’, but under the condition that the regional differences between the various parts of the country would be respected.

During the debates on the new constitution, this position was clearly expressed: when the role of the provinces was discussed, several representatives pointed out that the cultural and ethnic differences between the peoples of the Republic could not be ignored. The Frisian representative Simon Stijl, for example, argued that ‘due to the lack of immigration’ the people of Friesland were quite different from those who were living in Holland. According to Stijl, the Frisians were ‘more complacent and consistent, and also more adherent to their own laws and customs than somebody from Amsterdam’.²⁰ His colleague from the province of Brabant, Joannis Krieger, also urged his fellow Members of Parliament to take the subject of provincial diversity seriously. From his viewpoint, too, it would be a difficult task to create unity among the Dutch people, as ‘the peoples of Friesland, Guelderland, Holland, and Zeeland all had their different characters, prejudices, and interests’.²¹

Both Stijl and Krieger, like many others in the Federalist camp, were quite critical towards the possible introduction of a French-style departmental system, which deliberately ignored historical boundaries and provided little room for regional diversity. They would rather look

herinnering. Musealisering en nationalisering van de volkscultuur in Nederland, 1815–1940 (Nijmegen: SUN, 2001).

²⁰ Leonard de Gou ed., *Plan van constitutie van het volk van Nederland. Ontworpen door de daar toe aangestelde commissie in het jaar 1796* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1975), 80.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

beyond revolutionary France to the United States of America, where the Founding Fathers had created a state that embraced ‘unity, not uniformity’. However, for radical reformers, a federal state like the one in North America was not an option. ‘As long as the United States were still in their infancy, and their great leader George Washington was alive’, thus remarked the outspoken Unitarist MP Pieter van Kastelee, ‘nobody knew how this political experiment would end’.²² The case of France, on the other hand, had proven ‘that it was possible to successfully unite a country with even bigger regional differences than the Dutch Republic’.²³

As the debates on the possible introduction of French-style departments continued into 1797, the divide between those who favoured a radical break with the past and those who opposed it deepened. After the parliamentary ‘committee for the division of the Batavian Republic into departments’ had presented a compromise, which involved only a partition of the provinces of Holland, Guelderland and Brabant, representatives from the Unitarist camp accused its members of ‘federalist’ and ‘provincialist’ sympathies. According to the radical MP Joachim Nuhout van der Veen, the committee had even acted ‘in contradiction to the principle of the one and indivisible Republic’ and shown their real face by committing itself to the ‘old system’.²⁴

A similar kind of criticism was heard after the committee had presented its second plan. This time the allegations came from both sides: in the debate on the possible partition of the province of Groningen, for example, both radicals and moderates accused each other of acting in their own provincial interest. After some of the representatives of this northern province had complained about the proposed new borders, their adversaries rebuked them for not thinking ‘nationally’. After all, were they not all ‘Dutch citizens’ now? The Groninger MPs, however, struck back by accusing the committee members of stealing land for their own good. The representatives from neighbouring provinces had used their privileged positions on the committee to enlarge their own territories at the cost of the people of Groningen.²⁵

²² See the chapter by Dana Nelson in this volume.

²³ De Gou, ed., *Constitutie*, 72.

²⁴ Oddens, *Pioniers in schaduwbeeld*, 212–216.

²⁵ De Gou, ed., *Constitutie*, 480–481.

Disputes like these turned out to be typical. During the two years the National Assembly was in session, no consensus on the future of the Dutch provinces was reached, leaving the situation largely as it was. Radicals like Bosch, Valckenaer, Van Kastele and Nuhout van Veen had not been able to break ‘the provincial spirit’ and were left frustrated by the Federalist opposition. In August 1796, when a nationwide referendum on the new Constitution resulted in yet another defeat for the reformers, the Unitarist camp lost their patience: if their goal of a ‘one and divisible Republic’ could not be achieved democratically, the option that remained was to impose constitutional change by force.²⁶

On 22 January 1798, a small group of Unitarists staged a coup d’état, in which parliament was purged of its Federalist members, and all provincial sovereignties were repealed. Backed by the French army and with the opposition locked away, the remaining members were now able to carry out the institutional changes they wished for. In the months following the purge, a new Constitution was adopted, a second coup took place, and on 30 March 1799 the old provinces of the Republic were finally dissolved. From now on, the new unitary state would be made up of eight new administrative departments, similar in size and named after local rivers and other waterways. It was the definite end of the old provincial system and the beginning of a period of successive administrative and geographical reforms that would shake up the Dutch political landscape for the next fifteen years.²⁷

THE MANY-FACED NATION

The 1798 Unitarist coup was a truly revolutionary moment. Even more than the Batavian Revolution of 1795 or the founding of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1815, it would define the future of Dutch politics and the course of Dutch history. The subsequent ratification of the Constitution meant a radical break with the past and a definitive end of the confederacy: from now on the Dutch Republic was a unitary state in which the central government was ultimately supreme and the departments only exercised powers that the central government chose

²⁶ C.f. Joost Rosendaal, *De Nederlandse revolutie. Vrijheid, volk en vaderland, 1783–1799* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2005), 103–104.

²⁷ Herman Theodoor Colenbrander, *De Bataafsche Republiek* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1908), 183.

to delegate. Moreover, the departments were not even remotely reminiscent of the old provinces of the Dutch Republic: they were fewer in number, more or less uniformly shaped, and bore neutral, geographical names like ‘Department of the Old IJssel’, ‘Department of the Rhine’ and ‘Department of Texel’.²⁸

Constitutionally, one could say that the Republic was now finally ‘one and indivisible’. For the first time in its history, it possessed a centralised government that was fully in control. Modelled on that of the Directory in France, it was given the power not just to look after the new state’s finances and defence, but also after its educational system, tax system and judicial institutions, all matters that were previously dealt with by the Provincial Estates. From now on the departments were subordinate to the national government and no longer able to act independently from each other or from the central powers in The Hague.

In reality, however, the situation was more ambiguous. First of all, the new central administration was hardly in the position to implement national policies. Although its task was now far more extensive than before, it was still very small in size. Its executive branch consisted only of a handful of people, and therefore their activities were largely dependent on the old institutions of the confederacy. If the new Ministry of Justice, for example, wanted to pursue its policies of unification and standardisation, it required the cooperation of the various old provincial courts, magistrates or tribunals. Moreover, many of the men who were now in power lacked the specific expertise and local networks to implement the new national legislation. In order to complete their revolutionary goals, the help and support of their former political adversaries at the regional level was much needed.²⁹

Secondly, with the introduction of the departmental system, the old provincial identities did not fade away. On the contrary, the political emasculation of the provinces and the redrawing of the map of the Netherlands only seemed to energise the provincial spirit. In almost all the

²⁸ *De Bosatlas van de geschiedenis van Nederland* (Groningen: Noordhoff Atlasproducties, 2011), 199.

²⁹ C.f. Hofman J., ‘Het bestuur in de jaren 1795–1813, de Bataafs-Franse tijd’, in Willem Koppers and Felix Villanueva, eds., *Van Gelre tot Gelderland. 650 jaar besturen van Gelderland* (Nijmegen: Nijmeegs Museum ‘Commanderie van Sint-Jan’, 1989), 48–49; and Hendrik Albert Kamphuis, *Stad en Lande tijdens de Bataafse Republiek. Bestuurlijke en gerechtelijke verhoudingen in Groningen, 1795–1807* (Assen: Koninklijke Van Gorcum, 2005).

former provinces scholars continued to show a great interest in regional culture, language and history. In the former province of Friesland, the literary movement that had started in the mid-eighteenth century thrived throughout the 1790s and early 1800s, and even though the province had officially ceased to exist, the production of books concerning Friesland's cultural exceptionalism flourished during this period.³⁰ The same story applied to other parts of the former confederacy. In the former province of Guelderland, for example, local historians like Van Hasselt and Van Spaen kept the memory of the illustrious duchy alive by salvaging the old provincial archives and publishing a series of books on medieval Guelders, while in Zeeland church ministers and novelists idealised the character and landscape of the former province in their sermons and writings.³¹

At the dawn of the nineteenth century, both this persistence of the old provincial identities and the need for a good institutional relationship between central government and the regions caused the authorities to rethink their strategy. Following pressure from France to reform the political system again, a third coup took place, and in September 1801, a new Constitution was adopted. This Constitution not only enabled federalists and Old Regime administrators to take office again but also reversed some of the more radical changes of the previous years, most notably the introduction of the departmental system. By 1802 the original medieval provinces of the Netherlands were restored to their former borders and most of the old provincial dignitaries were back in power.

The 1801 coup d'état has long been interpreted as a half-hearted counter-revolution and an attempt to limit the democratic reforms of 1798.³² However, this does not do full justice to the political importance of the event and the intentions of the perpetrators of the coup. Both the coup and the subsequent restoration of the provinces and their old elites can best be understood as an effort to 'nationalise' the revolution

³⁰ Breuker, *Friese nationalisme*, 90–125.

³¹ Willem Anne van Spaen, *Oordeelkundige inleiding tot de historie van Gelderland*. IV delen (Utrecht: Wild & Altheer, 1801–1805); Gerard van Hasselt, *Bijdragen voor d'oude Geldersche maaltijden* (Arnhem: J.H. Moeleman Jr., 1805); Gerard van Hasselt, *Geldersche oudheden* (Arnhem: J.H. Moeleman Jr., 1806); and Arno Neele, *De ontdekking van het Zeeuwse platteland. Culturele verhoudingen tussen stad en platteland in Zeeland 1750–1850* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2011).

³² Cf. Ernst Kossmann, *De Lage Landen. Twee eeuwen Nederland en België, 1780–1980*. I, 6th ed. (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2001), 87.

by regionalising it, and to bring the unitary state into line with the reality of the Dutch cultural and political landscape. By embracing its historical plurality, the new regime made a deliberate attempt to unite the various factions within the Republic and bridge the gap between national unity and regional diversity. This different approach was also highlighted by the Republic's new name: instead of 'the one and indivisible Batavian Republic', politicians and government officials now talked about the 'Batavian Commonwealth', a name that implied a far less monolithic view of the nation.

Although the Batavian Commonwealth would turn out to be the overture for the installation of Napoleon's brother, Louis Napoleon, as 'King of Holland', and eventually even the incorporation of the Netherlands into the French Empire, this shift from uniformity towards a more pluralist perspective would have a critical impact. During the first decade of the nineteenth century, the national government persisted in its policy of centralisation. This time, however, it respected the different regional circumstances and provincial peculiarities. The provincial capitals, for example, retained their functions as important political centres, while existing, often region-specific, offices and institutions were incorporated into the new national framework.³³

Culturally, the notion of unity in diversity was predominantly expressed in literary works, like novels, books on national history and so-called geographical descriptions. One famous example is Evert Maaskamp's *Afbeeldingen van kleeding, zeden en gewoonten in de Bataafse tijd*.³⁴ This extensive study of the different Dutch 'characters, customs and clothing styles', published in 1803, explicitly stressed the multicultural character of the Commonwealth and painted a picture of the Dutch nation in all its regional varieties. Just as some of his early modern predecessors had done, Maaskamp even went so far as to say that 'nowhere in the world was the ethnic-cultural diversity as great as in the Netherlands', a feature that made the country both unique and vulnerable: if the new state wanted to survive, it was necessary that all Dutchmen be aware of the provincial differences and the customs of their fellow countrymen.³⁵

³³ Hofman, 'Het bestuur in de jaren 1795–1813', 49–53.

³⁴ Evert Maaskamp, *Afbeeldingen van de kleeding, zeden en gewoonten in de Bataafsche Republiek* (Amsterdam: E. Maaskamp, 1803).

³⁵ Koolhaas-Grosfeld, *De ontdekking van de Nederlander*.

THE OLD TIMES WILL REVIVE

The mere existence and popularity of works such as Maaskamp's illustrated that nationalism and cultural diversity were not considered to be incompatible. On the contrary, for the majority of the Dutch people, the creation of the Commonwealth was a reasonable compromise: it reconciled the will to unite the nation politically with the cultural and institutional heritage of the former confederacy. The French, however, were less content with the arrangement. Napoleon in particular was unhappy with the progress made so far; the lack of power to tax in the Netherlands, the country's ambivalent attitude towards the Continental System, and the failure to raise Dutch troops for the imperial army were just too much for the Emperor. Disillusioned by his brother's unsuccessful attempt to promote French interests in the Netherlands, Napoleon made a drastic decision: in July 1810, he dethroned his brother as King of Holland and, almost overnight, incorporated the Netherlands into the French Empire.

With the incorporation into the French Empire, the Netherlands entered yet another phase of seemingly radical change. Not only did the Dutch state lose its political sovereignty but it also had to conform to the French administrative system: along with the *Code Napoleon*, the *maires* and *préfets*, this meant the reintroduction of the departmental system that had been abolished a decade earlier. For the second time in twelve years, the provinces' historical borders were redrawn and their old, familiar names replaced by neutral, geographical indications.³⁶

In the three years that followed, the Emperor sped up the process of centralisation, disbanding almost all the remaining provincial institutions. Even in the countryside, which had so far been affected little by the consecutive regime changes, a separation of power was introduced. Napoleon's efforts to integrate the former provinces into his Empire would probably have continued, had it not been for the miserable failure of his military campaigns. Following the Emperor's disastrous campaign in Russia and his defeat at the Battle of Leipzig, Russian and Prussian

³⁶ Matthijs Lok and Martijn van der Burg, 'The Dutch Case. The Kingdom of Holland and the Imperial departments', in Michael Broers, Agustín Guimerá Ravina and Peter Hicks, eds., *The Napoleonic Empire and the New European Political Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 100–111.

troops invaded the eastern part of the Netherlands in November 1813, thus liberating the former Dutch provinces from French occupation.³⁷

In the meantime, a provisional government, led by Gijsbert Karel van Hogendorp, had installed itself in Holland. From the very beginning, his government had made it clear that its primary objective was to ‘revive the old times’ by restoring Dutch independence and the political power of the House of Orange-Nassau, and maybe even by restoring the former union. Van Hogendorp, in particular, propagated the revival of ‘the Burgundian Netherlands’. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the former statesman, who had been an admirer of the American Constitution and a close friend to both John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, had already written several political treatises that offered alternatives to the centralist French-style constitutions.³⁸ His famous *Schets eener constitutie*, for example, was a sophisticated mix of ancient, constitutional laws and privileges and modern presidential and monarchic elements.³⁹

None of these plans, however, were immediately implemented. As soon as Prince Willem Frederik, the son of the last Stadtholder, had returned from exile in England, it transpired that the new state would differ from the old Republic in many ways. Not only would the Prince of Orange be inaugurated as the new Sovereign but he would also preserve much of the French administrative system. The country would remain a unitary state, led by a single head of state, and with a national government in The Hague.⁴⁰

This situation raised the question of what to do with the old provinces: would they remain mere administrative units, or should they be restored

³⁷ Wilfried Uitterhoeve, 1813. *Haagse bluf. De korte chaos van de vrijwording* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2013).

³⁸ Edwin van Meerkerk, *De gebroeders Van Hogendorp. Botsende idealen in de kraamkamer van het Koninkrijk* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Atlas Contact, 2013); and Fredericus van Hogendorp, ed., *Brieven en gedenkschriften van Gijsbert Karel van Hogendorp*. III (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1876), 172.

³⁹ Gijsbert Karel van Hogendorp, ‘Schets eener Constitutie’, in Fredericus van Hogendorp, ed., *Brieven en gedenkschriften van Gijsbert Karel van Hogendorp*. III (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1876); and Niek van Sas, ‘Onder waarborging eener wijze constitutie’, in Niek van Sas and Henk te Velde, eds., *De eeuw van de Grondwet. Grondwet en politiek in Nederland, 1798–1917* (Deventer: Kluwer, 1998), 117–120.

⁴⁰ C.f. Matthijs Lok, *Windvanen. Napoleontische bestuurders in de Nederlandse en Franse Restauratie (1830–1820)* (Amsterdam: Bakker, 2009).

to their former glory? On this point, opinions within the new government differed. Some, like Willem Frederik Röell, who had made his career in the Napoleonic era, regarded the province as nothing more than a *manus ministra*, meant to serve the new Sovereign.⁴¹ Others, like Van Hogendorp, had a different opinion. In their eyes, the old provinces had been more than just administrative units: they had represented the different peoples of the Netherlands with their own historical backgrounds, customs and institutions. Moreover, these provincial communities had been the backbone of the country for centuries, and therefore could not be ignored. In his function as chair of the constitutional commission of 1814, Van Hogendorp stressed the importance of this aspect. According to him, each province had ‘its own spirit, which made the people feel a Hollander, a Gueldersman, a Frisian, etc.’, and to ignore these essential feelings, was ‘to act against nature’.⁴²

In the end, the constitutional commission largely agreed with Van Hogendorp’s view. The provinces were restored to their original pre-1799 borders, and again the familiar names of Holland, Groningen, Frisia, Zeeland, Brabant, Drenthe, Overijssel, Utrecht and Guelderland were back on the map.⁴³ Furthermore, the formal name of the new country, Princedom (after 1815 Kingdom) of the Netherlands, would emphasise the plurality of the nation. This was a Princedom that was explicitly made up of different (Nether)lands, a fact that that was also highlighted by the reintroduction of the Provincial Estates, which would again function as electoral colleges for the Estates-General. This was a function common in most federal or confederal states, but quite rare in the context of a unitary state.

One of the results was that many of the families that had once dominated the Estates-General prior to 1795 also got a seat in the new Estates-General and, despite the centralist Constitution, provincial elites still had a huge influence on national politics. This compromise, which in many ways recalled the situation in the Batavian Commonwealth, would

⁴¹ Herman Theodoor Colenbrander, *Ontstaan der Grondwet. Bronnenverzameling*. I (The Hague: Nijhoff 1908), 160–161.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 161.

⁴³ Olav Moorman van Kappen, ‘Het provinciaal bestuur van Gelderland in de negentiende eeuw. Inrichting en werkzaamheid’, in Willem Koppers and Felix Villanueva, eds., *Van Gelre tot Gelderland. 650 jaar besturen van Gelderland* (Nijmegen: Nijmeegs Museum ‘Commanderie van Sint-Jan’, 1989), there 53.

lay the foundation for the process of nation-building in years to come. On the one hand, the Prince of Orange, the future King William I, would be at the centre of Dutch politics. Supported by his modern, French-style bureaucracy, he had the power to almost single-handedly force through national legislation and appoint governors and administrators at nearly every administrative level. On the other hand, the reintroduction of the Provincial Estates reopened the door to power for the old federalist elites: having reclaimed their seats, they were able to restore many of the regional rights, privileges and offices that had existed before the unification of the Netherlands.

In Frisia, for example, the Provincial Estates decided to continue in the same old way as much as possible. As a result, many of the traditional ruling families regained control over their local communities. Not only were they again entitled to administer justice; they also reclaimed the right to appoint rural administrators or *grietmannen*: a privilege that dated from the Middle Ages and had been one of pillars of the renowned 'Frisian Freedom' in early modern times.⁴⁴ Similarly, in nearby Groningen, the oligarchical families exploited the old provincial rights and privileges to strengthen their positions. In 1816, for example, the Provincial Estates reintroduced the right of collation. This privilege, which had been assumed by the representatives of Groningen after the Reformation, enabled local noblemen or dignitaries to appoint clergymen in their own parishes. They held the right to put forward a nominee, who subsequently would be installed by the provincial government. The decision to continue this practice reinforced the ties between the noble families and the church and provided Groningen's old elites with a powerful instrument in both political and religious matters.⁴⁵

Also in other provinces, the restoration of the Provincial Estates went hand in hand with the revival of semi-feudal practices and offices. In Overijssel, for example, the Estates tightened their grip on the countryside

⁴⁴ Anton Falck, *Reglement omtrent de zamenstelling van de Staten der provincie Vriesland* (The Hague: s.n., 1814); N.A., *Reglement omtrent de zamenstelling der staten, op het bestuur ten platten lande en voor het bestuur der steden in de provincie Vriesland* (Leeuwarden: Menno van den Bosch, 1826).

⁴⁵ N.A., *Reglement voor de Ridderschap der Provincie Groningen, geapprobeerd bij Koninklijk Besluit van den 3 julij 1816* (Groningen: s.n., 1816); and Jonn van Zuthem, 'Een nieuwe provincie 1814–1848', in Maarten Duijvendak, Doeko Bosscher and Hanneke de Vries, eds., *Geschiedenis van Groningen. III. Nieuwste tijd-heden* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2009), 55–121.

by reinstating the former office of *drost*, while in neighbouring Guelderland, they granted the restored nobility several ceremonial prerogatives, thus restoring the traditional hierarchy among their members.⁴⁶ Moreover, almost everywhere in the Northern Netherlands, the reconstruction of provincial administrations was coupled with a restoration of former seigneuries (*heerlijkheden*). These private dominions, which had lost their special legal status during the Batavian-French period, would once again enjoy a wide spectrum of privileges, ranging from hunting and fishing rights to the right to nominate local officials.⁴⁷

From a cultural perspective, too, the provinces were able to retain their own specific character. In the provincial capitals, societies, universities and journals remained important bearers of provincial identity, providing a platform for regional literature, history and news stories.⁴⁸ During the 1820s and 1830s, each of the Dutch provinces, for example, would print its own 'provincial people's almanac' which, in addition to the usual astronomical data, provided the reader with historical anecdotes, local legends and poetic descriptions of the province in question.⁴⁹ Nationally, many of these expressions of provincial culture, in their turn, were incorporated into a national narrative. Provincial histories and stories of local heroes would end up in books on Dutch history, and when the King visited the various parts of the Netherlands his welcome ceremonies would often have a specific regional character.⁵⁰ On some occasions, the royal family would even dress up in local, provincial costumes.⁵¹

In the end, regional continuities like these served as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the restoration of provincial institutions and the

⁴⁶ N.A., Reglement van bestuur ten platten lande van de provincie Overijssel (Zwolle, 1818), 20–29; N.A., Reglement voor het platteland van de Gemeente Gelderland, Aldus goedgekeurd en geaprobeerd door's Konings Besluit, van den 22 juny 1817 (Arnhem, 1817); and Moorman van Kappen, 'Het bestuur in de jaren 1795–1813', 55–57.

⁴⁷ Christoph van Houte de Lange and Vincent van der Burg, *Heerlijkheden in Nederland* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2008), 21.

⁴⁸ De Jong, *De dirigenten van de herinnering*, 41–62.

⁴⁹ E.g. *Zeeuwsche Volks-almanak* (1835–1846), *Friesche Volks-Almanak* (1836–1866), *Groninger Volks-Almanak* (1837–1851), *Utrechtse Volks-almanak* (1837–1869), *Geldersche Volks-Almanak* (1835–1927).

⁵⁰ Christianus Robidé van der Aa, *Gelderlands hulde aan Koning Willem II bij Hoogstdezelvs eerste komst in dit gewest in Bloeiimaand 1841* (Arnhem: Is. An. Nijhoff, 1841).

⁵¹ *Leeuwarder Courant*, 23 juli 1841, Breuker, *Friese nationalisme*, 123.

cultivation of provincial identities responded to the needs at the provincial level. They accommodated feelings of regional belonging and provided the traditional elites in the provinces with a platform to regain access to power. On the other hand, the same continuities also benefitted the new central government. Not only did the restoration and appropriation of provincial names and customs legitimise the new regime but the institutional structures of the provinces also proved to be instrumental in the process of nation-building. Instead of being disbanded, provincial administrations and distinctive regional institutions, such as courts of law and universities, were incorporated into the new national framework. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, they would continue to function largely as they had done in the past.⁵² This time, however, they followed national policies, rather than provincial ones.

Thus, by ‘regionalising’ the nation and using provincial institutions as instruments of national legislation, the Kingdom of the Netherlands found a balance between continuity and change, and in following decades, regionalism and nationalism would continue to go hand in hand. In this light, it may not be surprising that even sixty years after the creation of the unitary state in 1858, an author noted that in his age ‘the provincial spirit was as alive as it had been in the days of the National Assembly and the old Republic’. To him it seemed that ‘this spirit would probably never fade’, and in case it might, he concluded that ‘it would not be in the interest of the Fatherland’.⁵³

CONCLUSION

Historiographically, the Revolutionary Era has predominantly been studied as a period of radical change, a *Sattelzeit* in which modernity took root and new nation states rose from the ashes of the Ancien Régime. Also in the case of the Netherlands, the great rupture in this period is undeniable: between 1795 and 1815, the country was turned upside down and transformed from a confederate republic into a kingdom with a single head of state. One could almost argue that the difference between the two periods could not have been greater.

⁵² Cf. Wim van Schaik, *In de maat en uit de pas. Utrechtse dorpsbesturen 1780–1813* (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren BV, 2019).

⁵³ Campegius Lambertus Vitringa, *Staatkundige geschiedenis der Bataafsche Republiek*. Deel II (Arnhem: Is. An. Nijhoff, 1858).

However, as this chapter has pointed out, not everything had changed. Although the old confederacy had been replaced by a unitary state, this new state was still considered to be a unity in diversity. The medieval Burgundian provinces that had made up the Dutch Republic in the early modern period would not lose their appeal. Despite the successive constitutional and administrative reforms around 1800, they remained important objects of identification. The adherence to these old provincial identities became apparent not only in regionalist literature or other forms of region-specific culture and folklore but also during the constitutional debates of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Both in the 1795–1798 and the 1813–1815 debates on the Dutch Constitution the issue of regional diversity was brought up in the discussions. In both cases, those in favour of the continuation of the existing provincial division in the Netherlands pointed to the fact that Dutch society consisted of different provincial peoples and that the new state should not completely ignore these historical differences. Eventually, their argument was successful and a compromise was reached: the old provinces were incorporated in the new kingdom, linking the different peoples of the Netherlands to their new central government.

This persistence of the provinces of the Netherlands during the Revolutionary Era shows us that certain identities, practices and institutions were able to survive in times of radical change and social disruption. What is more, it gives us insight into how continuity at one level could enable change at another level and what had to stay the same in order to make change possible. As the case of the Netherlands has demonstrated, the cultivation of provincial identity and the persistence of provincial institutions was, in the end, not considered to be incompatible with the idea of national unification. On the contrary, once the constitutional relationship between the old provinces and new nation state was settled, the two were even believed to be in harmony with each other: ‘the provincial disease’ had become a blessing, and the very same institutions that had once stood in the way of reform were now indispensable links in the process of nation-building. Whether it involved the Provincial Estates, the provincial courts or provincial synods, from 1814 onwards the new unitary state would be built on an institutional structure that was still very much regionally organised. Constitutionally, the emphasis may well have shifted, but in the nineteenth century the Netherlands was still very much a unity in diversity, and it has been ever since.

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