



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Review of Oomen, G. (2020) Werk in uitvoering: het functioneren van de Tweede Kamer tijdens, voor en na de grondwetsherziening (1840-1853)

Heyer, A.

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Gerrit Oomen, *Werk in Uitvoering. Het functioneren van de Tweede Kamer tijdens, voor en na de grondwetsherziening (1840-1853)* (Kampen: Aldo Manuzio, 2020, 640 pp., ISBN 9789492701121).

1848 is one of those historical moments that changed the course of history forever. This is the year in which a seismic wave of revolutions shattered the political order of European states. In most historical accounts, 1848 is treated as an unexpected, sudden and radical moment, perhaps because the revolution took most contemporaries by surprise, too. Yet, in the Netherlands, reform prevailed over revolution. Attempting to explain the absence of revolution in the Netherlands, historians have focused on Dutch King Willem II's decision for reform.¹ According to this monograph, however, it is parliament, the institution that implemented the new constitution, that has remained a bit of a black box for historians of 1848.

Werk in Uitvoering. Het functioneren van de Tweede Kamer tijdens, voor en na de grondwetsherziening (1840-1853) by Gerrit Oomen attempts to fill in this black box. Written as doctoral thesis, this monograph focuses on Dutch parliament as the main actor in the reform process of 1848. The author convincingly shows that the reform of the constitution and the active role of parliament was by no means a historical anomaly in the Netherlands. To the contrary, reform was a natural extension of parliamentary culture of the previous decade – an argument that fits well into current Dutch historiographical debates. A recent research project led by Judith Pollmann and Henk te Velde has likewise emphasized continuity of political culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Moreover, Lauren Lauret's monograph offers an analysis of the meeting practices of Dutch parliament of both the eighteenth and nineteenth century.²

Two different methodologies connect this monograph. First, the qualitative description of parliamentary debate, and second, the quantitative voting patterns of parliamentarians. The descriptions of parliamentary debates are written with an eye for detail. Oomen has studied a considerable amount of parliamentary debates and enriched his analysis with additional sources, such as press commentary. The second line of inquiry provides a systematic account of the voting patterns of parliamentarians, which left a recognizable mark on legislation. Systematically studying voting patterns of parliamentarians is uncommon, albeit not completely new for historians. For the case of the Netherlands, this is a useful approach as it makes the years before and after 1848/1849 comparable.

With this mixed-methods approach, the author provides us with a detailed study that shows how parliament became a capable player in 1848 and how it operated under the new political circumstances it had helped create. The monograph answers a number of relevant questions for our understanding of parliament: which member voted for what? When did someone vote for a specific topic, and, most interesting, how did individual votes relate to the voting pattern of other parliamentarians? The latter question in particular is the goal of this analysis of the voting pattern of each legislative period. Consequently, Oomen shows that there was considerable opposition in the period before 1848. Parliamentarians did not always agree with the government and were not afraid to show it. Another relevant finding is that voting patterns were irregular. There was no clear group, let alone party formation, that determined voting patterns. Polarisation became more prevalent after constitutional reform, but ‘1848’ did not constitute the ‘birth of a new parliament’ (569). Oomen argues that parliament continued its productive working approach to balance the dominant role of Thorbecke and the integration of new parliamentarians.

Two additional highlights in the findings of this monograph are the accounts of financial debates in parliament, and the growing dissatisfaction of parliamentarians with the unwillingness of the government to implement the necessary cuts. Another theme is the parliamentary discussions about direct voting rights for citizens. The literature on the transformation of political legitimacy is particularly strong in Dutch historiography.³ Although legitimacy is not his main interest, Oomen offers a detailed account of the arguments of parliamentarians and their positioning as representatives in regard to monarchy, suffrage and public opinion.

The more than 600-page monograph’s strength is also its weakness. By devoting much space to what is happening in parliament, the chapters have a descriptive character that sometimes overshadows the analysis of the introduction and conclusion. Within this wealth of information, readers have to pay close attention to recognize the analytical results of this meticulous study. For a broader audience, a less detailed and more contextualized approach would have made this publication more accessible.

The book is structured in an unusual but logical way, so readers should consult the table of contents carefully. The introduction succeeds in positioning the book as a relevant contribution to existing historiography. The three main chapters aren’t arranged chronologically. Whereas the first chapter focuses on parliament in the crucial years 1847 and 1848, the second

1 Jeroen van Zanten, *Koning Willem II: 1792-1849* (Boom 2013).

2 Lauren Lauret, *Regentenwerk: vergaderen in de Staten-Generaal en de Tweede Kamer, 1750-1850* (Prometheus 2020).

3 Ron de Jong, *Van standspolitiek naar partijloyaliteit: verkiezingen voor de Tweede Kamer 1848-1887* (Verloren 1999).

chapter analyses the period before constitutional reform starting in 1840, and the third chapter focuses on the aftermath of reform, from 1849 until 1853.

In conclusion, this book is a welcome contribution to the scholarly literature on Dutch political history. An inside view on parliament during, before and after the most defining constitutional moment of the Netherlands had been missing from specialized bookshelves for too long. In the chapters, Oomen follows a perhaps more conventional purpose of historical research by providing a detailed description of the period 1840-1853. Admittedly, for non-specialists, it might require determination and time to read the book from beginning to end. Although other (shorter) publications might provide a better starting ground for time-pressed readers, this rich account will offer many valuable insights for aspiring and advanced specialists of nineteenth-century political history.

Anne Heyer, Universiteit Leiden