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# The emergence of the Netherlands as a ‘democratic’ country

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## Abstract

This contribution sketches the emergence of democratic self-definitions in the Netherlands, from the end of the 18th century until the post-war period, when it had become commonplace to define the country as democratic. Its point of departure is the use of the word and concept of democracy by contemporaries and Dutch and foreign historians, and it argues that the history of Dutch ‘democracy’ has been characterized by an emphasis on freedom, self-government by a broadly defined elite and a strong civil society, rather than by participation of the population at large. Democracy only became really popular after the Second World War when it could be defined as protection against dictatorship. The Dutch case shows that we should be careful about equating a strong civil society or even the rule of law with democracy in the sense of the power of the people at large. Democracy was definitely accepted as a label to characterize the Netherlands after it had been redefined as in essence the opposite of dictatorship instead of the opposite of aristocracy. The Dutch case also shows that a highly developed, civil society can even confine rather than promote the need for political democracy and for a vibrant independent political sphere.

## Keywords

1780–1950, democracy, historiography, national image, the Netherlands

The story of the Dutch Revolt against foreign domination and the ensuing self-government by ordinary, that is to say, non-noble citizens has often been told. It has always attracted attention from authors everywhere. This story was certainly not framed as a history of democracy from the start, but it helped that the fighters for American independence of the late 18th century looked back at the Dutch Revolt as ‘our great example’ and ‘a proper and seasonable mirror for the Americans’ (Benjamin Franklin).<sup>1</sup> At that time, even the American Revolution was not seen as a democratic revolt, but during the 19th century the history of the United States was turned into a history of

1. H. Dunthorne, “Dramatizing the Dutch Revolt. Romantic History and its Sixteenth-century Antecedents”, in: J. Pollmann / A. Spicer (eds.), *Public Opinion and Changing Identities in the Early Modern Netherlands. Essays in Honour of Alastair Duke*, Leiden, Boston 2007, 11–31; esp. 16.

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'democracy'. With his international best-seller *The Rise of the Dutch Republic* (1856), American historian John Lothrop Motley firmly established the place of the Dutch Revolt in the prehistory of the American struggle for independence and democracy. Motley was a patrician Protestant New Englander, an American Whig who loathed populist democracy, and who was perhaps even attracted to the oligarchic side of Dutch self-government.<sup>2</sup> He presented the Dutch struggle for liberty as a history of proper democracy, that is to say, of a relatively limited form of democracy. By that time, even the American Whigs had already embraced the idea that the United States were a democratic community.<sup>3</sup> Although Motley's romantic interpretation of the Dutch Revolt was not very much appreciated by Dutch historians, his famous book was subsequently an important source for the chapter about the Netherlands in Thomas Erskine May's *Democracy in Europe. A History* (1877). In Erskine May's story, the Low Countries – later, also including Belgium – figure as a pioneering region in the history of democracy. Curiously enough, Motley and May were heaping praise on the history of Dutch democracy at a time when most Dutch themselves did not yet appreciate democracy, let alone wanted to call the country democratic. In the 20th century, however, political developments seemed to confirm the democratic nature of the Netherlands. When universal male and female suffrage was finally adopted in the Netherlands in 1917 and 1919, the Netherlands became, as a matter of course, part of a list of around 15 countries that, according to James Bryce's *Modern Democracies*, could be called 'a Democracy'.<sup>4</sup>

A couple of decades later, at the end of the Second World War, democracy had become an irresistible label all over the world. Everybody wanted to be called a democrat, almost regardless of the particular regime one wanted to defend, and it now became interesting to know exactly when a people had, in fact, started to call themselves democrats. Again the Netherlands played an important part in the story. In an often-quoted article from 1953, R.R. Palmer, an American historian and later the author of *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*, highlighted the early use of the word *democraten* as self-description in Dutch politics around 1800.<sup>5</sup> Still decades later, this influential article prompted a historian of an overview about 'Democracy since the French Revolution' to argue – in fact mistakenly – that the terms *democraat* and *democratie* 'retained some positive resonance in the Netherlands', after the backlash against the French Revolution had temporarily reduced their popularity at the beginning of the 19th century.<sup>6</sup>

Although it is clear that the Netherlands are no longer the historical example of democracy that some people considered them to be in the 19th century, the assumption still seems to be that the Dutch were not only a frontrunner in democratic practices but also in self-defining as a democratic country. But is this true? In this contribution, I will try to sketch the emergence of democratic self-definitions from the end of the 18th century until the post-war period, when it had become commonplace to define the Netherlands as a democratic country. I will argue that this history has

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2. O.D. Edwards, "John Lothrop Motley and the Netherlands", in: *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden / Low Countries Historical Review* 97 (1982), 561–588, esp. 571; cf. J. Verheul, *De Atlantische Pelgrim. John Lothrop Motley en de Amerikaanse Ontdekking van Nederland*, Amsterdam 2017.
  3. E.g. A.I.P. Smith, "The 'Fortunate Banner': Languages of Democracy in the United States, c. 1848", in: J. Innes / M. Philp (eds.), *Re-Imagining Democracy in the Age of Revolutions. America, France, Britain, Ireland 1750-1850*, Oxford 2013, 33.
  4. J. Bryce, *Modern Democracies* 2 vols., London 1921, I 26.
  5. R.R. Palmer, "Notes on the Use of the Word 'Democracy' 1789–1799", in: *Political Science Quarterly* 68 (1953), 203–226. Cf. R.R. Palmer, "Much in Little. The Dutch Revolution of 1795", in: *The Journal of Modern History* 26 (1954), 15–35.
  6. C.S. Maier, "Democracy since the French Revolution", in: J. Dunn (ed.), *Democracy: The Unfinished Journey 508 BC to AD 1993*, Oxford 1992, 125. Maier's references are rather scarce, but the only possible source that he mentions that could remotely support his claim is Palmer.

been characterized by an emphasis on freedom, self-government by a broadly defined elite and a strong civil society, rather than by participation of the population at large. Democracy only became really popular after the Second World War when it could be defined as protection against dictatorship. The Dutch case shows that we should be careful about equating a strong civil society or even the rule of law with democracy in the sense of the power of the people at large. It appears that a highly developed civil society can even confine rather than promote the need for political democracy and for a vibrant independent political sphere.<sup>7</sup>

## I. Early uses of the term democracy

If you look at the daily use of the term, the Netherlands is in fact revealed as not a particularly early user. There were isolated texts with the term democracy in the early modern period and a short-lived popularity of related terms around 1800, but the early instances should not be overrated. Until the end of the 18th century hardly anybody defended a ‘pure’ democracy. The few radicals that dared to advocate ‘democracy’, were exceptions that confirmed the rule that democracy was on the whole seen as a recipe for chaos. Democracy was only acceptable as part of a mixed constitution, and in the Dutch republic this meant in practice that it could be at most the junior partner in an aristocratic regime of the local notables or ‘regents’. However, the general idea was that the middle classes were entitled to some influence on the local administration, and this conviction could lead to protests and even riots that were based on the idea that the elite did not protect the interest of the people. A few texts in fact defended ‘democracy’ against the oligarchic local government of the regents, and the Act of Abjuration (from the Spanish King Philip II, 1581) contains the famous words that ‘the subjects are not created by God for the benefit of the prince, to submit to all that he decrees, whether godly or ungodly, just or unjust and to serve him as slaves; on the contrary, the prince is created for the subjects (without whom he cannot be a prince)’.<sup>8</sup> Thus, it does not come as a surprise that John Keane writes about the (early modern) Netherlands in his original, impressive and comprehensive history of democracy.<sup>9</sup> However, the reputation of liberalism, combined with some isolated texts about democracy, seems to have prompted him to paint an overly rosy picture of early democracy in the Netherlands. The Abjuration was certainly not ‘the first ever modern transition to representative government *in the name of democracy*’ (my italics). It is even doubtful that it happened in the name of ‘the people’, but even if it did, that was not the same.<sup>10</sup> Keane realizes some of the ambiguities of the situation when he writes that ‘the struggle to establish ‘democratic’ self-government was led by a God-fearing Protestant bourgeoisie which thought of itself as an ‘aristocracy’’.<sup>11</sup> One can doubt the God-fearing part – most regents did not belong to the most pious group of the population – but most problematic are the quotation marks surrounding

7. R. Aerts, “Civil Society or Democracy? A Dutch Paradox”, in: *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review* 125 (2010), 209–236.

8. E.g. A. Weststeijn, *Commercial Republicanism in the Dutch Golden Age. The Political Thought of Johan & Pieter de la Court*, Leiden 2012, 268–276 and passim; M. van Gelderen, *The Political Thought of the Dutch Revolt 1555–1590*, Cambridge U.P. 1992, 189–190; The Act is reprinted in: E.H. Kossmann / A.F. Mellink (eds.), *Texts concerning the Revolt of the Netherlands*, Cambridge U.P. 1974, 216–217.

9. J. Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy*, London 2009, in particular 242–243, 250, 254–257, 277, 455–56, 467, 475.

10. *Ibid.*, 242–243; on 243 Keane gives an imprecise translation of the Act of Abjuration which did actually not use the word ‘people’ in the sentence he is quoting, but ‘subjects’ (*ondersaten*). The use of the word people in a translation of the Act could be warranted in some cases, but not in Keane’s text, where the whole point is about the use of the actual words.

11. *Ibid.*, 257.

'democratic' which suggest that this was the actual word that was used at the time. The Dutch self-government was often described as the rule of an aristocracy but hardly ever as democratic.<sup>12</sup> If the word democratic was used, it was as part of a mixed constitution and even if very few isolated voices advocated the ideal of democracy, this could only be in the distant future. The claim that the 'burghers of the Low Countries' had already transformed the word democracy 'from a literary device into a political weapon' in the 17th century, is certainly not true.<sup>13</sup>

Democracy's journey 'from book to life'<sup>14</sup> did not really start until the end of the 18th century. 'It was', according to Palmer, 'the last decade of the [eighteenth] century that brought the word out of the study and into actual politics'.<sup>15</sup> And, it is true that at first, the Dutch played a prominent role. As a response to the abominable 'aristocracy' of the bourgeois patrician rulers or regents, some people started calling themselves 'democraten' in the revolutionary era of the 1790s. As in other countries, the fight against the 'aristocracy' – in the Netherlands in fact for the most part a bourgeois elite – was the real issue and at first democracy figured mainly as the opposite of aristocracy. This did not necessarily mean that democracy was radical: even one of Palmer's examples, the radical periodical *De Democraten*, advocated a balanced middle course between the two extremes of 'Absence of Government' or anarchy, on one hand, and 'Aristocracy' on the other.<sup>16</sup> In the revolutionary Dutch National Assembly that was founded after the French army had invaded the Netherlands, not democracy as such but 'people's government by representation' (*Volks-Regeering by Representatie*) was the catch phrase. This was in tune with developments in the United States and France, in Thomas Paine's famous words in his *Rights of Man* (1792): 'representation engrafted upon democracy'.

*De Democraten* had maintained that popular sovereignty should be upheld: 'representatives without represented' would be 'monsters'.<sup>17</sup> Popular sovereignty would be rejected anyway, though. After the revolutionary era had passed, Napoleon was beaten and the Dutch state had regained independence in 1813, a representative government of sorts was installed. The King dominated the government and the system all but neglected the (very limited) electorate, let alone the population at large. The age of democracy had died along with the revolutionary era, or so the elite thought. They considered democracy as something that belonged to the past or to foreign countries.

## 2. The 19th century

Democracy was once again only acceptable as part of a mixed constitution, and mitigated by representation. The Netherlands Restoration was quite successful in swiping away all political radicalism: in contrast to the revolutionary constitution of 1798 (the first written modern Dutch constitution), the constitutions of 1814 and 1815 did not contain popular sovereignty, nor was popular sovereignty ever introduced into the constitution afterwards. The Netherlands constitution has never contained the terms democracy or democratic, either. The Restoration re-installed the old ways of quiet negotiating in the inner circle of councils of the state and the provinces, and this time

12. Cf. E.H. Kossmann, *Political Thought in the Dutch Republic: Three Studies*, 1960; Amsterdam 2000.

13. Keane, *Life and Death of Democracy*, 475.

14. J. Innes / M. Philp, "'Democracy' from Book to Life: The Emergence of the Term in Active Political Debate, to 1848", in: J. Kurunmäki / J. Nevers / H. te Velde (eds.), *Democracy in Modern Europe. A Conceptual History*, New York 2018.

15. R.R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution. A Political History of Europe and America, 1760–1800*, 2 vols., Princeton U.P. 1959–1964, I 20.

16. *De Democraten* I (1796–1797), 2 (in the opening article of the periodical).

17. *De Democraten* I (1796–1797), 4.

even without the pressure of the (lower) middle classes on the local government that had been quite normal during the Republic. Political life was dormant. It would be hard to picture the Netherlands of that period as an example of democracy, although many cultural societies existed.

Even the important revision of the constitution of 1848 certainly did not bring ‘democracy’. Ministerial responsibility and direct (instead of indirect) elections of the lower house were introduced into the constitution, but the architect of the new constitution, the doctrinaire liberal Johan Rudolf Thorbecke, definitely did not want democracy. He indignantly rejected the accusation of being a supporter of ‘democracy’.<sup>18</sup> He was in favour of representative government, which to his mind was the opposite of (direct) democracy. The connotations of the word democracy came close to the connotations of the term populism today.

The connotations of anarchy, lawlessness and mob rule or even despotism were so strong, that ‘democracy’ was not used very often, not even to say that it was *not* desirable. Arguably, the lack of the word democracy demonstrates the conservative nature of Dutch politics. The strength of conservative attitudes and elites was illustrated by the weakness of democratic movements that did not succeed in putting ‘democracy’ on the political agenda. In 1848, the French Republic described itself as ‘democratic’, and ‘democratic’ groups developed everywhere in Europe.<sup>19</sup> The tiny and short-lived Dutch ‘Democratische Vereeniging’ was part of this international movement, but it made hardly any impression at all, certainly not in the long run.<sup>20</sup> The unrest caused by the international revolutions of 1848 was channelled into a liberal, not a democratic constitution.

How is it possible, then, that Thomas Erskine May included the Netherlands in a small number of pioneering countries in his history of democracy? The short answer is that his story is only about the late medieval and, in particular, the early modern period. Could it be argued that the democratic nature of the Netherlands was weakened rather than strengthened when the localized and fragmented Republic was replaced by a modern unitary state? There is much to be said for this interpretation, as both the autonomy of local government and the means common people had to influence (local) government disappeared under an at first authoritarian Kingdom. However, this is not the whole story. When we look closely at Erskine May’s argument, his interpretation of democracy turns out to be rather specific.

‘The history of the Netherlands presents illustrations of democracy under two distinct aspects’, Erskine May writes. ‘The first exhibits the growth and political power of municipal institutions; the second, the assertion of civil and religious liberty’. Obviously, this has more to do with freedom than with democracy, and Erskine May concludes his chapter about the Netherlands with the remark that in their struggle for ‘their traditional franchises the people had never been moved by the principles and aims of democracy’. ‘Their liberties are now far greater than any to which they aspired in former times. They have retained their municipal franchises, while the people have acquired the political rights of citizens, and a share in the sovereignty of a free State. Their past struggles have fitted them for the temperate exercise of popular privileges, and their institutions are in harmony with their traditional sentiments and predilections’.<sup>21</sup>

18. H. te Velde, “De domesticatie van democratie in Nederland. Democratie als strijdbegrip van de negentiende eeuw tot 1945”, in: *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review* 127 (2012), 9.

19. Cf. e.g. C. Meier et al., „Demokratie“, in: *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* I, Stuttgart 1972, 821–899; R.L. Hanson, „Democracy“, in: T. Ball / J. Farr & idem (eds.), *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*, Cambridge 1989, 68–89; P. Rosanvallon, «L’histoire du mot démocratie à l’époque moderne», in: *La pensée politique: Situations de la démocratie*, Paris 1993, 11–29; idem, *La démocratie inachevée: Histoire de la souveraineté du peuple en France*, Paris 2000; R. Saunders, *Democracy and the Vote in British Politics, 1848–1867: The Making of the Second Reform Act*, Aldershot 2011.

20. M.J.F. Robijns, *Radicalen in Nederland (1840–1851)*, Leiden 1967.

21. T. Erskine May, *Democracy in Europe. A History*, 2 vols., London 1877, II 1, 83–84.

Erskine May's book was almost completely ignored in the Netherlands – even today, only a couple of Dutch libraries stock his book and at the time, there were no reviews to speak of – and that is not hard to understand. He made an early attempt at domesticating democracy by, on the one hand, arguing that democracy was about freedom and not about mob rule, and on the other hand, suggesting that all kinds of historical developments were related to 'democracy', even if the historical actors had neither thought about democracy nor used the term. This strategy would work perfectly well when democracy had been accepted as a good thing in the 20th century, but in 1877, it was too early for that in the Netherlands. Until the end of the 19th century, the Dutch parliament did not even debate democracy. The first real advocate of democracy only entered parliament in the late 1880s. Until the 1890s, even the *word* democracy was only used about a hundred times in the Dutch lower house and then another hundred times until the end of the century.<sup>22</sup> In the 20th century examples of its use proliferated rapidly. Newspapers used the term more frequently (already at the end of the 19th century), but were at first often referring to other countries. More significantly, historians also began to use the term in their description of the national history. However, this was done either in order to warn against the detrimental effect of unchained and unleashed democracy, or as a descriptive concept for the self-government of towns in the Middle Ages. Robert Fruin was the doyen of the Dutch historians, occupying the first chair in (Dutch) history in the Netherlands (in Leiden, from 1860). He wrote of 'restraining an uncontrollable (tempestuous) democracy', and thought that the Athenian democracy had degenerated into mob rule, although he also used the term in a more neutral way.<sup>23</sup> His preferred pupil and successor, Petrus Johannes Blok, used the term more often and more free from values judgements. In his multi-volume *History of the People of the Netherlands* (1892–1908; English edition 1899–1912; third revised edition 1923–1926), the word democracy appears quite often, to indicate local self-government by the lower and middle classes, among other things. It is certainly not the central concept, however, and Blok's ambition was not to write a history of democracy, but rather a history of a people, and the history of a fight for freedom and rights.<sup>24</sup> For Blok as well as for others, the story of the Dutch Revolt was the core of the national history, but Dutch historians have never really framed this story as a fight for democracy.

Fruin and Blok were conservative liberals, but even Jan Romein, a Marxist historian who wrote a national history during the 1930s, did not paint Dutch history as a history of or even a struggle for democracy. The Dutch Republic had been a 'pure commercial aristocracy' (*zuivere handelsaristocratie*) with an 'aristocratic-oligarchic' character. The Dutch bourgeoisie was the oldest in the world, it was dominated by patrician regents instead of the middle classes, and even the fight for democracy around 1800 did not end this regime of 'early capitalism'.<sup>25</sup>

Until the end of the 19th century at least, and even in the first decades of the 20th century, Erskine May's strategy did not work in the Netherlands. At the end of the 19th century, French or Belgian politicians would routinely assume that popular sovereignty and democracy were good things and democracy was also increasingly praised in Britain.<sup>26</sup> In the Netherlands, politicians

22. Te Velde, "Domesticatie van democratie" (based on a search in <http://www.statengeneraaldigitaal.nl>).

23. R. Fruin, *Verspreide geschriften*, ed. by J. Blok / P.L. Muller / S. Muller, 11 vols., Den Haag 1900–1905, I 64 (1873); III 143 (1862, in a comment on Motley); V 225 (1876); IX 265 (1859). Willem Hendrik de Beaufort, "Oranje en de democratie (1784–1787)", in: *De Gids* (1875) 210–238, 387–416, is an early example of a rather neutral description of 'democracy' in the Netherlands around 1800 by a historian.

24. P.J. Blok, *Geschiedenis van het Nederlandsche volk* 8 vols., Groningen 1892–1908 (idem, *History of the People of the Netherlands*, 5 vols., New York 1899–1912); 4 vols., Leiden 1923–1926.

25. J. Romein / A. Romein-Verschoor et al., *De lage landen bij de zee. Geïllustreerde geschiedenis van het Nederlandsche volk van Duinkerken tot Delfzijl*, Utrecht 1934, 272, 288, 401, 467, 472, 519, 654.

26. See e.g. the contrast in M. Beyen / H. te Velde, "Passion and Reason. Modern Parliaments in the Low Countries", in: P. Ihalainen / C. Ilie / K. Palonen (eds.), *Parliaments and Parliamentarism. A Comparative History of a European Concept*, New York, Oxford 2016, 81–96.

who advocated these things were still considered dangerous radicals. This was not caused by heavily authoritarian rule or by a strong conservative party (neither existed), but probably by the structure of politics in the Netherlands. Politics tended to be conceived as administration. The ambition of the political elite was to deliver ‘good government’ rather than listening to the electorate. It was significant that there was not much in the way of public politics in the Netherlands until the 1880s: hardly any large social movements, hardly any large demonstrations in the streets, very small and often empty public galleries in the parliament.

This did not mean that there was no ‘freedom’. The liberal constitution of 1848 regulated the rule of law, there was a free and serious press, there were different political currents or parties, and the parliamentary system worked rather well, although only a small portion of the male population had the vote. The bourgeois elite cherished civil rights and religious freedom and they certainly did not need to call this democracy, nor did they want to. Only in the 1880s did a public movement emerge that demanded general suffrage.

### 3. The acceptance and redefinition of democracy

In the 1870s, a self-styled orthodox Protestant form of ‘democracy’ emerged, in the 1880s ‘social democrats’ entered the political scene, and in the 1890s progressive liberals and radicals officially started to call themselves ‘democrats’ (*vrijzinnig-democraten*).<sup>27</sup> All these democratic initiatives were controversial, and in particular the somewhat populist form of democracy of the Protestant leader Abraham Kuyper shocked the ruling class. With a bit of sophistry, Kuyper still rejected popular sovereignty but advocated a broad male suffrage or ‘family suffrage’. Orthodox Protestants were supposed to be conservative and a little backward, and now Kuyper appeared as ‘the kind of politician of the democratic society, American style’.<sup>28</sup> Coming from Willem de Beaufort, a patrician conservative liberal, this comment was not meant as a compliment. According to him, Kuyper was an opportunist, pious only in name, charismatic but ruthless and only interested in elections. He wrote this in his private diary around 1900, and his views were rapidly becoming outdated. Within a couple of decades, the fight against democracy was turning into a rearguard action. At the beginning of the 20th century even conservatives such as de Beaufort began to think that democracy in the sense of general suffrage had become inevitable. In 1913, the last liberal Prime Minister,<sup>29</sup> Pieter Cort van der Linden, presented the advent of democracy as perhaps not very attractive, but as inevitable nonetheless.<sup>30</sup> He did not like the role of the ‘masses’ in modern society and thought that true democracy would also have to take the historical traditions of the nation into account. Yet, he faithfully executed the introduction of general male suffrage (1917) and made possible the introduction of general female suffrage (introduced in 1919).

Formal democracy was now an accomplished fact. This changed the way Dutch society was described. After socialists had half-heartedly tried to start a revolution in 1918, orthodox Protestants and progressive liberals alike argued that this was ‘undemocratic’ or a violation of the principle of majority rule.<sup>31</sup> During the First World War – when the Netherlands were neutral – some authors

27. An old but still useful overview is J. van de Giessen, *De opkomst van het woord democratie als leuze in Nederland*, Den Haag 1948.

28. W.H. de Beaufort, *Dagboeken en aantekeningen 1874–1918*, 2 vols., Den Haag, 1018.

29. That is, until the current Prime Minister Mark Rutte, the first liberal PM in a century.

30. J. den Hertog, *Cort van der Linden (1846-1935). Minister-president in oorlogstijd, een politieke biografie*, Amsterdam 2007; H. te Velde, *Gemeenschapzin en plichtsbef. Liberalisme en nationalisme in Nederland, 1870–1918*, Den Haag 1992, 243–248.

31. J. Gijsenbergh, *Democratie en gezag. Extremismebestrijding in Nederland, 1917–1940*, Amsterdam 2017, 42; R. Aerts / H. te Velde, “De taal van het nationaal besef, 1848–1940”, in: N.C.F. van Sas (ed.), *Vaderland, Een geschiedenis vanaf de vijftiende eeuw tot 1940*, Amsterdam 1999, 391–454.

characterized the Dutch people as ‘democratic’ by nature because they did not like authoritarian rulers and loved freedom, and because they were individualists and had already fought for their freedom in the 16th century.<sup>32</sup> The authors who used this frame of ‘historical democracy’<sup>33</sup> almost equated democracy and freedom, and were talking about civil society and the national character rather than politics in the strict sense of the word. Erskine May’s book was forgotten, but these authors argued, in fact, along similar lines. They interpreted democracy – which in the past to many Dutch and other authors had meant anarchy, mob rule or even dictatorship – as something inherently benevolent, traditional and ‘already there’. This new interpretation came at a price, though. Not only was this type of democracy politically speaking only liberal democracy – or ‘parliamentary democracy’, to use the equivalent Dutch phrase – but even more significantly, it was not first and foremost political in the strict, institutional sense of the word at all. It was almost a state of mind – something people possessed and if not, that they should be taught.

It is no coincidence that some of the democratic authors were prominent educationalists who also saw democracy as an important issue of education. If all mainstream political parties agreed on anything, it was on the importance of educating (future) citizens for democracy.<sup>34</sup> For instance, socialists argued that general suffrage entailed the duty to educate the people.<sup>35</sup> Eventually, Philipp Kohnstamm, one of the educationalist authors would argue that the right to vote presupposed that everybody should follow courses in democracy. He also said that ancient Athenian democracy was Rousseauist and, in fact, totalitarian, and very different from what was called ‘democracy’ in his own time. Modern democracy should be about equal rights, and majority rule was just a means to achieve that end. According to him, modern democracy was not derived from Athens and Rousseau, but rather from (Dutch) Calvinist roots and a Protestant mentality, and had originated in a struggle for freedom of conscience.<sup>36</sup> Although essays about democracy were seldom really historical studies, the reference to the Dutch past is significant. The re-interpretation of the national past as a democratic history helped to add positive connotations to the meaning of democracy. Left-leaning authors were also arguing that democracy resulted from an age-old struggle for certain principles which had coloured national politics.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, democracy was also made acceptable to conservative politicians by arguing that democracy and authority were not antonyms, but rather belonged together.<sup>38</sup> The Netherlands were a *democratische rechtsstaat* – an expression that seems to appear for the first time in the 1930s – that is to say, a democratic constitutional state ruled by law, but this *rechtsstaat* could only be maintained if laws were obeyed, authority was accepted and law and order were enforced.<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, social democrats thought that the *rechtsstaat* should be defended but also developed, and the Jewish community – in vain, it would turn out – hoped that the

32. I.M. Tames, “Voorbereid op nieuwe tijden. De Nederlandse discussie over ‘de ware democratie’ tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog”, in: M. de Keizer / S. Tates (eds.), *Moderniteit. Modernisme en massacultuur in Nederland 1914–1940*, Zutphen 2004, 47–65.

33. S. Ritsema van Eck, *Historische democratie*, Amsterdam 1915, put it.

34. Gijsenbergh, *Democratie en gezag*, 76–77.

35. Socialist leader P.J. Troelstra during parliamentary debates about general suffrage in 1916, quoted by W. de Jong, *Van wie is de burger? Omstreden democratie in Nederland, 1945–1985*, Amsterdam 2014, 47.

36. A.L.R. Vermeer, *Philipp A. Kohnstamm over democratie*, Kampen 1987, 40–41, 80, 115, 142 (prof. Philipp Kohnstamm in 1917 and 1945–1946). Cf. J. Havelaar, *Democratie*, Arnhem 1921, 8: Protestantism as the root of democracy; see also R. van Eck, *Historische democratie*.

37. Gijsenbergh, *Democratie en gezag*, 150.

38. *Ibid.*, 149, 181, 205.

39. E.g. *Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië* 13 December 1938, quoting a Dutch Catholic newspaper; *De Tijd* 15 December 1936 (Catholic lawyer C. CH. A. van Haren).



Netherlands could provide an example in that respect to the international world.<sup>40</sup> It now also became common to underline that the *rechtsstaat* was built on certain typically Dutch moral principles that should also be taught in school.<sup>41</sup>

The struggle against fascism and extremism changed the connotation of democracy. On the one hand, it could be useful to underline the democratic nature of the Netherlands against such enemies, but this democracy was then on the other hand first and foremost defined as the opposite of dictatorship (instead of aristocracy, as used to be the case in the 19th century). In the interwar years, mainly social democrats and left-wing liberals defended democracy in this way. The others accepted democracy, sometimes grudgingly, but did not often regard it as the basic moral principle. It was still hard to say with self-confidence that ‘the Netherlands is a democracy’, a line that could hardly be found before the 1930s.<sup>42</sup>

#### 4. 1945: Democracy as the moral education to liberty

The war sealed the upgrading of democracy. As one communist put it in the Dutch parliament in 1945: ‘Our people have put their life at stake for the battle against the Nazi regime and the victory of democracy’.<sup>43</sup> The social democratic Prime Minister of the first post-war government, which consisted of social democrats and Catholics, said that they wanted to develop ‘a national democracy’.<sup>44</sup> Even an old industrialist and Catholic member of parliament, who wanted to thank the American liberators, now reminded his fellow MPs that the ‘democratic American constitution’ had used the constitution of the Dutch Republic as an example.<sup>45</sup> Current contemplations of democracy underlined, of course, the protection of the rule of law and human rights against dictatorship. Democracy was not about majority rule in the first place, and definitions of democracy often did not even contain explicit references to the participation of the people, let alone their power. This restricted interpretation of democracy was, of course, not a peculiarity of the Dutch.<sup>46</sup> In the post-war era, the distinction between a ‘good’, predominantly Anglo-American interpretation of democracy as primarily liberty, and a less good, originally French Jacobin interpretation of democracy as primarily equality, was rather common in American literature.<sup>47</sup> Yet, Dutch intellectuals and politicians were, even comparatively speaking, remarkably successful in ignoring the participative and anti-aristocratic side of democracy.

At the same time, the educationalist interpretation of democracy was ubiquitous. Significantly, Willem Banning, one of the driving forces behind turning the social democracy into a broad Dutch labour party, said that he felt rather as an educator than as a politician, and he thought that the group that wanted to open up the old social democracy was, in fact, a social pedagogic movement.<sup>48</sup> In

40. The use of ‘*democratische rechtsstaat*’ in social democratic and socialist circles (see [www.delpher.com](http://www.delpher.com) with that lemma for the 1930s); *Nieuw Israelietisch weekblad*, 8 April 1938.

41. *Leeuwarder Nieuwsblad*, 18 February 1939, quoting G. van Veen in the liberal daily *Algemeen Handelsblad*.

42. *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 1 April 1937: ‘Democratie en dictatuur. C.W. de Vries over de leiding der besten’ (There is a group saying ‘The Netherlands is a democracy’).

43. *Handelingen Tweede Kamer*, 10 October 1945, 37.

44. In the parliament: Willem Schermerhorn in *Handelingen Tweede Kamer*, 10 January 1946, 212.

45. *Handelingen Eerste Kamer*, 19 December 1945, 14.

46. T. Buchanan / M. Conway, “The Politics of Democracy in Twentieth-Century Europe: Introduction”, and M. Conway, “Democracy in Postwar Western Europe: The Triumph of a Political Model”, in: *European History Quarterly* 32 (2002) 7, 59–84.

47. E.g. G.H. Sabine, “The Two Democratic Traditions”, in: *The Philosophical Review* 61 (1952) 4, 451–474; cf. J.L. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, 2 vols., London 1952–1960; G.A. Almond / S. Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*, Princeton 1963.

48. J. Bank, *Opkomst en ondergang van de Nederlandse Volksbeweging (NVB)*, Deventer 1978, 216; De Jong, *Van wie is de burger*, 148 (also *passim* for the strong educationalist sentiments after the war).

the 19th century, liberals had thought that the population needed first to be educated to qualify for full political citizenship. Advocates of general suffrage had already changed that order in the beginning of the 20th century, because every adult was entitled to acquire the right to vote, and the state and private societies had the responsibility to provide for the necessary education of citizens and future citizens. Gradually, this idea was broadened to include developing a democratic spirit among the population.

In 1945, a Protestant newspaper was stating a common idea when it wrote that ‘many people dislike politics. That has always been the case in the Netherlands, ever since the introduction of the constitutional monarchy’.<sup>49</sup> The political elite considered politics in the first place as a branch of administration. Willem Drees was prime minister for 10 years. He was a principled social democrat but he concentrated on administration. Many politicians did the same. Many of them also worried about the advent of ‘the masses’, not because they feared that the masses would start a revolution, but because of their hedonist and materialist attitude.<sup>50</sup> However, except for an abortive attempt immediately after the war, they did not want a national education in democracy either, they preferred education in their own ranks. Dutch society was divided into so-called Protestant, Catholic, social-democratic ‘pillars’, socio-political groups with their own schools, trade unions, voluntary societies and so on.<sup>51</sup> This societal division used to exist in Germany as well, and in the post-war years, it still existed to a certain extent in Belgium, Austria and other countries as well. Yet, the social rather than political nature of these groups was more pronounced in the Netherlands. It was an illustration that Dutch democracy was more about the freedom of civil society than about the power and the participation of the common people.

However this may be, there was now something approaching a consensus among the established parties, that the Netherlands was a democratic country. In the modernist post-war age, providing historical legitimacy to such a claim was less important than it would have been in the 19th century, so its history remained mostly implicit. This could also be read as another conformation that the Dutch interest in ‘democracy’ of that time should primarily be understood as an interest in freedom and rule of law.

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49. *Trouw*, 30 June 1945.

50. Cf. H. te Velde, “Politics and the People. Perceptions of the Masses in Dutch Politics”, in: H. van Nierop / B. Moore (eds.), *Twentieth-century Mass Society in Britain and the Netherlands*, Oxford, New York 2006, 17–29.

51. Among the huge literature, see, for example, the recent overview by P. de Rooy, *A Tiny Spot on the Earth: The Political Culture of the Netherlands in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century*, Amsterdam 2015, chapter VI.