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43. The city as a tool to promote European integration: Napoleonic Amsterdam

Martijn van der Burg and Anne van Wageningen

In the period from the French Revolution (1789) until the Congress of Vienna (1814-15) Europe underwent an extensive reorganisation. The patchwork of early modern states made way for a more modern system of nation states. At the time, it was not the European Union itself, but one of the major European powers – France, to be more precise – that was the driving force behind European integration. Between approximately 1799 and 1815, France was ruled by Napoleon Bonaparte. Later in his life, as an exile on the island of St Helena, he declared that he had striven to found ‘a grand federative European system (...) conformable to the spirit of the age, and favourable to the progress of civilisation.’ From the perspective of Paris at the time, integration was inextricably bound up with ‘modernisation’, i.e. the transition from a traditional to a modern form of society.

The goal was the unification of Europe along the lines of the French model. The Napoleonic regime attempted to impose its own state institutions top-down on the subjected populations of Europe, in part because it saw itself as the driving force behind the modernisation of the continent. And the Napoleonic model of modernisation, directly or indirectly, did indeed leave its mark beyond the French borders. Among other things, modernisation took the shape of a modern governance system involving a hierarchical structure very much inspired by the French one.

Of course, these developments had major consequences for the capital of the Netherlands, Amsterdam. The years around 1800 were not exactly the city’s heyday. It was a period in which the city lost many of its residents. Where during the Golden Age it had had a population of 220,000, by the end of the Napoleonic

era this number had dwindled to around 180,000. Compared with other cities, this was a tremendous decline in population. At the same time, Amsterdam's place on the global stage was changing. The city was increasingly embedded in larger structures. Amsterdam had always been fairly autonomous: as the most powerful city in the province of Holland, it had enjoyed a lot of influence both within the Dutch Republic and beyond. Even after the Batavian Revolution of 1795, Amsterdam was still able to play a central role. Although The Hague became the seat of the new central government, Amsterdam remained influential. Under Louis Bonaparte (Napoleon's brother, who was King of Holland between 1806 and 1810) Amsterdam even became the King's place of residence. New national institutions, such as the precursors of the Rijksmuseum and the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, based themselves in Amsterdam.

In spite of Amsterdam's decline, the French (who annexed the Netherlands in 1810) still held the city in high regard. That was understandable: there was still a great deal of capital to be found there. Amsterdam's still affluent and influential elite enabled it to weather the economic crisis in Europe reasonably well. More importantly, after Paris (with a population of 600,000) Amsterdam was the largest city in Western Europe (if we choose to exclude the UK from this category, which most Brits will probably not object to) – a fact that is probably less commonly known today. In order for the Napoleonic integration of the Netherlands to succeed, it was vital that Amsterdam was successfully integrated – of that the regime was sure. Under Napoleon I, Amsterdam remained the capital following the annexation, just like Rome – though both took second place to Paris, of course. Napoleon had elected to have three capitals in his new empire.

Institutional integration

The Napoleonic regime saw the potential in Dutch cities to be engines for successful administrative integration and

possibly cultural integration too. The dense urban network in the Low Countries – Holland in particular – could speed up the implementation of a uniform system. Of course, the process of modernisation that was embarked upon led to its fair share of clashes between different administrative, legal and cultural traditions. One of the major effects of King Louis Bonaparte's reign was the introduction of a single executive authority at all administrative levels, entirely subordinate to the central government. The king considered this French approach to be superior to the Dutch system, which he felt was characterised by a large degree of passivity. He was frustrated with the passive resistance of the old Dutch elite, which only wanted a modern approach to governance if it did not differ too much from their own traditions. This was also the case during the annexation of the Netherlands by France (or the *réunion*, as the regime called it).

Furthermore, institutional integration turned out to be problematic in practice because cooperation between the different authorities did not always work very well. Other state institutions, such as the army and the police, often interfered with governance. The French authorities agreed that the integration of Amsterdam, and by extension North-western Europe, was the French Empire's number one priority, but were unable to achieve consensus as to which strategy to use.

Cultural integration

Institutional integration was one thing; cultural integration was an altogether different story. Napoleon's attitude towards the Dutch was ambivalent in that regard. He had a certain respect for the former Dutch Republic and its history, but he looked down on its administration and politics. For this reason, Napoleon had different opinions on the Dutch depending on the context. He had, incidentally, always been very negative about the people of Amsterdam, whom he considered to be arrogant. The confident Dutch believed that the works on

science and art that were written in their own language made Dutch worthy of being protected by the Emperor, just as he also protected the Italian language. And Napoleon did indeed allow the Dutch to retain their language. Charles-François Lebrun, the Governor-General of the Dutch departments, who lived in the Royal Palace on Dam Square (known at the time as the *Place Napoléon*, Napoleon Square), operated on the principle that the local circumstances should always be taken into consideration. Lebrun, along with many other Napoleonic administrators in the region, endeavoured to reconcile local and national interests, as they believed this was the only way that integration could end in success.

Governor Lebrun's approach to integration was one that William I was later to employ, albeit in his own way. William had to find a middle ground between the ideal of a return to the pre-revolutionary past on the one hand and the desire to preserve the revolutionary Napoleonic legacy on the other. This could only be achieved either by attenuating the Napoleonic institutions, or by reintroducing the old structures alongside them. After Napoleon, local and provincial authorities, as well as independent state institutions, were able to regain part of their autonomy. In the longer term, this development often turned out to be counterproductive. Since the time of William I, the reforms to the system of the Kingdom of the Netherlands were a slow and difficult process. Johan Rudolph Thorbecke was the one who, with the 1850 Province Act (*Provinciewet*) and the 1851 Municipal Government Act (*Gemeentewet*), did away with the 'mixture of antiquated Dutch and Napoleonic-French elements' once and for all. In doing so, he removed a lot of the contradictions that had existed within the Dutch constitutional administrative system. This historical example shows that making a real choice – in favour either of modern uniformity or traditional pluriformity – increases the effectiveness of governance.

Although Napoleon very much preferred a top-down approach to governance, administrators in the regions often

considered cities to be essential tools for forging European integration. Amsterdam, in particular, was regarded as a strategic centre and testing ground for the durable integration of the country into the French Empire. Perhaps the European Union should take a similar approach. The EU undertakes a lot of initiatives and has a lot of policy documents that assign local governments a significant role in the process of European integration. Napoleon's officials already knew that integration is most effective when local communities are actively involved. The most successful Napoleonic administrators entered into a dialogue with the local administration, which tended to consist of the old elite. However, the current structure of the European Union – with prominent roles given to the delegates from the Member States in each decision-making process – leaves little hope of the cities entering into a dialogue with the EU independently, let alone being involved in decision-making. It seems that both Napoleon and the EU can be considered ambivalent towards the cities, and somewhat inconsistent in their approach to them. While viewing cities as playing a major role, at the same time both their styles of governance betray a centralist approach.

The authors

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