Rich Cities, Deep Dykes

Burgundians and Calvinists

To what extent are the striking cultural differences between Flanders and the Netherlands rooted in their divergent political and religious backgrounds, commonly described as 'Burgundian' and 'Calvinist'? They involve many aspects of their respective life-styles: differences in the way the day is divided up, in eating habits, appreciation of the role that fine food and drink plays in social intercourse, etiquette, negotiating tactics and, ultimately, values in general. In fact, one might wonder whether what is at issue here is not rather the contrast between Northern and Southern Europe.

Gastronomic culture

What one eats, in what circumstances and at what times, is a cultural characteristic. That is not surprising. In most cultures, meals and drinking sessions serve as markers and affirmations of life's important events. The Dutch are constantly amazed at the elaborateness of what Belgians refer to as 'lunch', while the Flemish never tire of talking about the two sticky rolls and one currant bun with a glass of buttermilk, and, on a good day, a greasy croquette, that they are so generously given when they were expecting a proper dinner. The Dutch lean towards the British tradition of providing sandwiches during a short lunch break in the middle of the day. In the Southern Netherlands, and in this respect there is little difference between Flanders and Wallonia, they follow the customs of Southern Europe where people will happily take the time to enjoy an elaborate cooked meal. If one is entertaining guests, it provides a perfect opportunity for pleasant and relaxed conversation. If it is a business lunch, calculations of profit and loss are put to one side. Rather, it is seen as an opportunity to get to know each other better and create a relationship of trust. If one really wants to strike a good deal and create a durable relationship, then building up trust is more important than pressing for a quick decision. The Flemish enjoy the culinary experience quite as much as the social, and are prepared to invest in it with an eye to the long term. Of course they hope it will be reciprocated. They want to get to know the person behind the business partner, so that they

Members of the Old Reformed Congregation at Ederveen go to Sunday service, 2006. Photo by Marcel van den Bergh.

can accurately assess his way of working. In this process, subjective considerations can sometimes gain the upper hand. The Dutch are always inclined to give precedence to business considerations, and regard elaborate dinners as a waste of time and money. They prefer to do their negotiating over a cup of coffee, relying on thorough homework and rational calculation. Southerners often find that approach narrow-minded, cold and opportunistic. It is surprising how these cultural differences, which are so well-known, still create problems in negotiations between North and South, whether it has to do with large-scale business mergers or simply the working of bilateral agreements. Drinking each other's health is a solemn moment that seals a relationship. Socialising is pre-eminent in providing the opportunity to confirm good relationships and create new ones. A century ago, the sociologist Max Weber described these fundamentally contrasting ways of seeing, being and doing business as goal-oriented versus means-oriented rationality. Both attitudes are rational in their own way, but the first focuses on the desired objective and the second on the method of achieving it. How can two such close neighbours differ so fundamentally from each other?

During the last few decades the Flemish and the Dutch have become more oriented towards each other. Nevertheless, in the profiles outlined above the Flemish still have more in common with the Walloons than with the Dutch. In so far as those patterns of behaviour are linked to eating and drinking habits, they point to the material origins of their cultures. Since when have we been eating and drinking in the particular way that we do on everyday or ceremonial occasions? The most important characteristics of our material culture are not much older than the nineteenth century, though some parts are older and others more recent. And how did these obviously different cultural features develop which the Dutch and the Flemish now consciously use to distinguish themselves from each other? In my opinion neither the Dukes of Burgundy nor Calvinism played a decisive role. What is eaten and drunk every day depends on the food that is available in a particular environment. In Europe there are regions that produce wine or beer, olive oil or butter, fish or meat. The environment provides opportunities which people then develop using the technical means available to them.

Holland's export economy

In the fourteenth century Holland developed herring fishing and beer brewing into important export industries. Using techniques they had learned on the Kattegat, between Sweden and Denmark, they improved their method of gutting herrings, removing the head and entrails from the fish and then salting and storing them by the thousand in barrels. Initially the salt was extracted from peat lands, but very soon better quality salt was transported in much greater quantities by ship from salt pans and marshes along the Atlantic coast between Brittany and Portugal. Shipmasters from Holland and Zeeland made a good profit as the salt was the return freight for bulk goods like grain, wood and wine. The salted fish could be transported long distances by water, up the Rhine, Maas and Scheldt rivers and along the Atlantic seaboard. When herring stocks in the Kattegat became exhausted in about 1400, the fishermen of Holland, Zeeland and Flanders found new fishing grounds around Scotland and later on near Iceland. The Dutch still exploit this rich source of vitamins to feed themselves, and they also export the processed young fish known as

Pieter Saenredam, *Saint Odulphus Church at Assendelft*, 1649. Oil on panel, 50 x 76 cm. Collection Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

maatjes to the rest of Europe. And they have done the same with beer. Almost every village in Northern Europe has always brewed some form of beer. The big leap forward, however, was made in North-West Germany where they discovered that adding hops improved the brew's taste and also its storage life. Beer production no longer had to be limited to local consumption. In Holland the raw materials were readily available, and from the fourteenth century on beer was produced for export. It was the lighter grains, especially barley, that were needed, and they grew better on the thin soils of the polders than did the bread grains, wheat and rye. Hops, clean water and peat were also plentiful. In

all this the omnipresent navigable waterways played a major role in shipping the beer barrels to the cities of Flanders and Brabant. Hollanders also shipped dairy products to the South. So from the fourteenth century they developed not only their own patterns of consumption but also an export economy which dominated maritime transport between the Baltic and Portugal. Today *maatjes* herring and cheese are typically associated with Holland, and one of the largest brewers in the world is Dutch. The long coastline, the favourable situation on the great rivers and a soil unsuitable for growing bread grains created both the need and the opportunity for Holland to develop into a great economic power. Their difficult environment, producing few luxury items and constantly in need of new investment to keep the sea at bay, forced them to look overseas for new possibilities and to be very conscious of costs and benefits.

Water management

And this brings us to another geographical feature without which it is impossible really to understand Dutch culture: for centuries, about half the land now occupied by the Netherlands has been engaged in a life-and-death struggle against flooding. All the coastal provinces were involved, as well as the regions along the great rivers. The story is well-known: cultivating the layers of loam on the peat lands required drainage through the construction of ditches and canals which in turn needed dams, dykes, sluices and, from about 1400, windmills. Arable farming quickly impoverished the soil and the drainage led to soil compaction and a rapid drop in the level of the land, resulting in an ever-greater need for more drainage and protection against flooding. As early as about 1400 arable farmland had to be converted to pasture on a massive scale, which though less labour-intensive also needed to be connected to a marketing system. Over the centuries these problems became steadily greater and the small-scale solutions of the early years were no longer adequate. But from as early as the eleventh century, it was always the local communities who found and implemented methods of draining their land and keeping it dry in increasingly difficult circumstances. There were no great landowners involved, unless the problems extended across the borders. This did indeed happen more and more frequently, but even then every solution ultimately depended on the experience and skills of the local population and their willingness to invest their time and effort. Every decision therefore required the agreement of the inhabitants, who were well aware that only by cooperating would they be able to protect their property against the threat from rivers, inland waterways and the sea. The development of an increasingly extensive system of water management relied on the voluntary input of labour and resources from everyone whose land needed protection. Furthermore, the infrastructure itself needed to be constantly inspected and maintained. All of which required a great deal of organisation and consultation. This was provided by the local, provincial and regional water boards. The small scattered units set up almost a thousand years ago to meet local needs have gradually merged into ever-larger organisations. The invariable principle was that everyone should contribute to the common defence in proportion to the size of their land, whether leased or freehold. In return, they would have a say in whatever decisions were made. The water boards had the authority to carry out public works, raise taxes to pay for them, to lay down regu-

lations for their maintenance, ensure these were complied with and punish any negligence. For serious failures that could harm the whole community, the dyke reeve or the dyke boards and their bailiffs could even impose the death penalty.

The community's survival depended on collective decisions, on communal work that might also be contracted out, and communal sharing of the agreed costs. The constant threat from the environment encouraged a strong sense of community; it went hand in hand with collective action and the realisation that strict supervision of all the agreed measures was essential. Awareness of one's duty was closely linked with participation in the decision-making process. Everybody knew that the negligence of a single landholder might lead to the collapse of a dyke with disastrous consequences for the entire community. So as early as the Middle Ages, a rational approach to land management led to careful administration and a management culture imbued with a consciousness of the collective interest and the need to involve every inhabitant. In that sense, political participation in the water boards is more deeply rooted in society than is urban political participation. Town and country, however, were closely connected through the market, and the ownership of land by townsmen.

The wealthy South

In the Southern Netherlands the water problem was much less serious; the organisations set up to deal with it were never as important as in the North. Only in the most north-westerly parts of Flanders and Brabant, along the coast and the Scheldt, does one find peat bogs and infertile sandy land. Further south, layers of loam and chalk make the land fertile. In Hainault, Artois and Picardy it was possible to grow wheat on a large scale, much of which was transported north along the coast or down the Leie or Scheldt rivers. This led to the rapid growth of an urban population as early as the twelfth century, three or four centuries before Holland. In around 1300 Artois and Flanders had seven cities with more than 20,000 inhabitants, while Bruges and Ghent probably already had twice and three times that number respectively. Nowhere else in the Low Countries did such high urban concentrations appear so early.

While these townsfolk were supplied with food by the fertile hinterland with its good system of navigable waterways, they earned their bread through trade and industry. The most important sector was textiles, with a Europe-wide reputation for high quality. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries Bruges was the undisputed centre of a network that linked England, the Baltic and the Rhineland with the then much more advanced Mediterranean area. The cities of Northern and Central Italy formed the core of a trading network that brought a wide range of such high-value products as wines, silk, spices, sugar, fruits, precious stones and dyes from the South and the East as far as to Bruges, where merchants from all over the known world established their offices, warehouses and residences. In about 1560 when Antwerp was at the peak of its economic and cultural power with about 100,000 inhabitants, the population of Amsterdam, the largest city in the North, had reached 30,000: smaller than Ghent and Bruges and comparable to Brussels, Mechelen and 's-Hertogenbosch. In 1581, a third of Antwerp's population declared themselves to be Protestants of one kind or another, while no more than another third openly claimed to be Catholic. So it is likely that a small majority of the city's residents had converted to Protestantism. The city

council would also fall into Calvinist hands, as had happened in the other great cities of Brussels, Mechelen, Ghent and Bruges. So Calvinism as such should not be necessarily or solely associated with the sobriety and puritanism traditionally attributed to the rulers of the Dutch Republic.

Burgundian? Calvinist?

For convenience' sake, in the foregoing I have set North against South. But on closer examination we should perhaps also emphasise the differences between West and East, seeing that the greatest concentrations of population, wealth and creativity were in the coastal provinces and less in those inland. Moreover, my analysis thus far has been fairly materialistic, focusing on the quality of the land, hydrography, geographical location, merchandise and eating habits, to which I linked such factors as population growth, urbanisation and social organisation. And I am indeed convinced that what is called 'the Golden Age of Burgundy' was to a large degree determined by and found in the great cities of the Southern Low Countries. Long before a Duke of Burgundy was proclaimed Count of Flanders in 1384, Bruges' annual fairs were bulging with all the expensive products to be found in Europe. From there some of them would find their

Hieronymus Bosch, *Gluttony,* ca. 1485, detail from *The Seven Deadly Sins.* Oil on panel, 120 x 150 cm. Prado, Madrid.

Jacob Jordaens,
The King drinks, ca. 1640.
Oil on canvas, 156 x 210 cm.
Royal Museum for Fine Arts,
Brussels.

way to purchasers elsewhere in Europe. The splendour we associate with the Burgundian court was made possible by the wealth and highly specialised skills of craftsmen and artists in the great cities of Flanders, Brabant and Artois. The wide range of artistic skills to be found there did not exclusively serve an itinerant court but also supplied a regular clientele of wealthy burghers, merchants and churchmen at home and abroad. The better-known painters, illuminators, gold- and silversmiths, sculptors and tapestry-weavers had clients throughout Europe. They had moved to these vibrant centres to find inspiration from fellow-artists and a market for their own work. On occasion they received commissions from the dukes, but none of these artists was entirely dependent on the Court. The Court rarely appeared in the Northern provinces and its ceremonial entries / processions there were a great deal more sober than in the South. In general, the absence of a Court can be seen as another fundamental difference between North and South. The influence of courtly culture had already disappeared from The Hague by about 1425, from Utrecht in 1527 and Guelders in 1543. Under the Republic there was even a fundamental aversion to it. In Mechelen, Brussels and Liège, by contrast, the courts continued to provide extravagant role models until the end of the 18th century. The sovereign Habsburg princes Albert and Isabella (1598-1621) maintained a courtly way of life that was mirrored by the nobility and became a role model for the rest of society.

The 'Burgundian Netherlands' is a term coined by modern historians. The dukes themselves spoke of 'the lands around here' as opposed to those 'around there' referring to the Duchy of Burgundy and the Franche Comté. Shortly after

the duchy fell into the hands of the Kings of France in 1477, the dynasty became formally described as Habsburg through the marriage of Mary of Burgundy to Maximilian. Nevertheless, the splendour of the Burgundian dynasty continued to be an important source of imagery, even though it had ruled only a part of the Netherlands and that for less than a century. The Emperor Charles V retained the symbols of the Burgundian dynasty, such as the Order of the Golden Fleece and the organisation of his court. The 'Burgundian Circle' which was intended to give the Low Countries a regular status within the Holy Roman Empire from 1549 was yet another reference to the imagined illustrious past.

The label 'Burgundian' that is now such a popular sales tool of the Dutch catering industry, which describes a rotund, good-natured man who fully enjoys the pleasures of life, is a twentieth-century invented tradition. It is popularly contrasted with Northern Calvinist sobriety, but neither has much to do with dynasties on the one hand or religious persuasion on the other. I hope that I have shown that both were grafted on to cultures that had been formed much earlier. Willem Frijhoff's contribution elsewhere in this volume shows that during the Reformation Calvinism spread earlier and more strongly in the South and that it never appealed to a majority in the North. Nevertheless, in the Republic it proved possible to tack a rigorous interpretation of Calvinism on to the much older administrative culture that was characterised by the rational use of scarce natural resources, collective decision-making, a sense of duty, and communal solidarity. It was the absence of a genuine princely court and of a widespread aristocratic culture which led to ordinary respectability becoming the standard and extravagant enjoyment being regarded as alien. ■

Translated by Chris Emery