

The Low Countries and the Concert of Nations

Contributions to European Culture

188

[R. C. VAN CAENEGEM]

The purpose of this article is a panoptic survey of the specific contributions of the Low Countries to European culture in its various manifestations.

The historic Low Countries were a conglomeration of principalities in northern France and western Germany which, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, were welded together by their Burgundian and Habsburg rulers into a new political entity, separated from their original kingdoms and occupying their own distinct place on the European map. They reached their apogee as the Seventeen Provinces of Emperor Charles V. The Revolt of the Netherlands against his son, King Philip II, and the Spanish reconquest of the southern part caused the break-up of the Emperor's creation. The south became a Catholic dependency of the Spanish and later Austrian Habsburgs, and the north the Protestant Republic of the United Netherlands. The two parts were briefly reunited (with the addition of the Prince-Bishopric of Liège) under King William I (1815-30), but separated again by the Belgian Revolution. After the Second World War the Kingdoms of Belgium and the Netherlands and the Grand Duchy of Luxemburg formed a loose alliance called the Benelux.

Appraising the contribution of those lands to European civilization in areas stretching from philosophy and theology to the fine arts and constitutional law, I distinguished three categories of achievement: where they underperformed I call their role 'average', where they contributed significantly without being exceptional I speak of a 'distinguished' role, but where their performance was superior and changed the face of Europe, I call it 'outstanding'.

Philosophy

A quick glance shows that the Low Countries were no fertile soil for philosophy: abstract thought was clearly not their priority. They nevertheless played a modest role in the thirteenth century, when William of Moerbeke († 1286) translated Greek philosophy and science, was sent to Nicea, worked at the papal court and ended as Archbishop of Corinth. Siger of Brabant († 1283) was probably born in Liège and taught philosophy in Paris. He defended certain

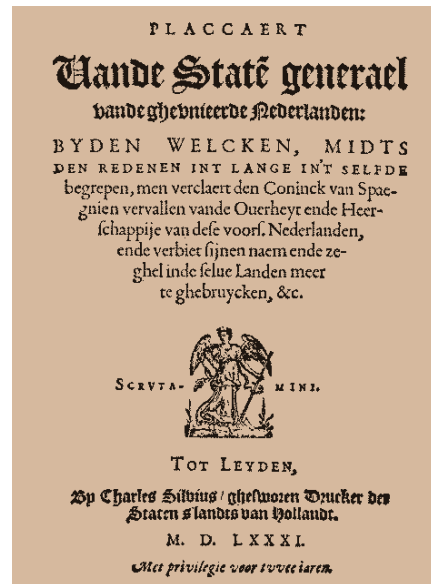


Dirck van Delen (?), *Interior of the Great Hall at the Binnenhof in The Hague During the Great Assembly of the States-General in 1651*
Detail, 1651, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Aristotelian tenets, which led to the condemnation of thirteen of his theses by the Archbishop of Paris. He fled to the papal court at Orvieto, where he died.

Modern Times did not mean modern ideas in Leuven, Leiden or Utrecht, three conservative centres of learning which for a long time were steeped in Aristotelianism and biblical cosmology. In a detailed study Professor Hilde De Ridder-Symoens traced the slow reception of Copernicus and Descartes.¹ At the University of Leuven 'Aristotelianism remained the basis of all sciences till far into the seventeenth century'.² In the Dutch Republic 'the Copernican worldview was not seen as a valuable alternative to the traditional worldview'.³ In the 1640s 'the Utrecht professor of theology Gisbertus Voetius denounced heliocentrism, declaring that it was contrary to the Holy Scripture'.⁴ Passions flared up when René Descartes's *Discours de la Méthode* appeared on the scene. 'Whereas his ideas', thus Professor De Ridder-Symoens, 'were quickly received in medical and scientific circles, his metaphysics and epistemology also immediately provoked fierce reactions particularly among the theologians'.⁵ No modern Netherlandish philosophers were a match for the great galaxy at the European top, such as Kant and Hegel.

Plakkaat van Verlatinghe, 1581 (Act of Abjuration (sc. of the Spanish King Philip II)). It is accepted that the Act of Abjuration, which has also been called ‘the Dutch Declaration of Independence’, was well known among the drafters of the American Declaration of Independence.



Against this mediocre background the famous philosopher Baruch Spinoza († 1677) was the exception confirming the rule. He was a lone and lonely figure in the Dutch landscape who became a cosmopolitan esoteric thinker of European fame. He was born in Amsterdam in 1632 of Portuguese ancestry, but belonged to no Dutch tradition of philosophy and founded no school of his own. As a freethinker he was banned by his synagogue, but found refuge in circles of critical Christians. He was reprimanded by Calvinist devines and in 1674 his *Tractatus theologico-politicus* was outlawed. His main work, *Ethica more geometrico demonstrata*, was an idiosyncratic attempt to give ethics a mathematical foundation and was influenced by René Descartes, with whom he corresponded. From all this it is clear that Netherlandish philosophy can claim no higher classification than ‘average’.

Theology

For many centuries theology - the Science of God – was the supreme intellectual pursuit, not only among clerics but also among eminent scientists. Isaac Newton, for example, was the author of a voluminous commentary on the Book of Revelation.

The contribution of the Low Countries started with Henry of Ghent († 1293), who taught theology in Paris. He was famous in his time, but nowadays is only known to scholars, who assiduously study, edit and translate his work.⁶ In the seventeenth century Bishop Cornelius Jansenius († 1638), professor of theology at Leuven in 1618 and Bishop of Ypres in 1635, wrote a posthumously published book entitled *Augustinus*, the starting point of a controversial worldview known as Jansenism. It advocated a severe, even ascetic approach to Christian morality and was tainted with the doctrine of predestination. It was influential in France, where Blaise Pascal was a follower and where it was associated

with Gallicanism, which stood for an independent national Church. In the early eighteenth century Jansenism, combated by the papacy and the Jesuits, was a spent force.

In the nineteenth century the Low Countries again played a role on the theological scene: Neo-Thomism, the revival of the medieval doctrine of Thomas Aquinas, became dominant in Catholic countries, particularly after Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris* of 1879. The attraction of St. Thomas's doctrine for modern Catholic philosophy and theology was his attempt to reconcile Aristotle's rational approach with Christian dogma. Making Holy Scripture intellectually acceptable was important in the face of modern science.

The University of Leuven played a significant role in the study of the medieval authorities. In 1882 Désiré Mercier († 1926), the later cardinal, was appointed to the chair of Thomistic philosophy, founded at the request of the aforementioned Pope Leo XIII. In 1881 the University became the seat of the internationally renowned Higher Institute for Philosophy, with Mercier as its first president. Neo-Thomism inspired numerous theologians and philosophers as well as Catholic politicians, but after World War II it had spent its force - Jansenism and neo-Thomism were backward-looking, drawing their inspiration from St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, so no great innovation was to be expected from that quarter.

The Low Countries produced no illustrious theologians on the European scene comparable to Thomas Aquinas in the Middle Ages, or Luther and Calvin and Carolus Borromeus at the time of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. No Netherlandish theologians arose comparable, in our own time, to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the leading Protestant theologian who was executed by the Gestapo in 1945, the controversial Swiss Catholic professor Hans Küng, or the leader of the critical *Nouvelle Théologie*, the French Jesuit Henri de Lubac, who was forced to give up his teaching in 1950 but rehabilitated by Pope John XXIII.

By way of conclusion it seems justified to place Netherlandish theology in the 'average' category.

Music

The musical record of the Low Countries is unremarkable in spite of a brilliant start. The Netherlandish polyphony of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries enjoyed international fame. Johannes Ockeghem († 1497) became musical director of King Louis XI of France. Josquin des Prez († 1521) served the Sforzas in Milan and joined the papal choir in Rome. Jacob Obrecht († 1505) was active in Cambrai, Bruges and Antwerp before working, at the end of his life, at the court of the Duke of Ferrara. Adrian Willaert († 1562) joined the chapel of Milan Cathedral and became, in 1527, musical director of San Marco in Venice for the rest of his life. He was the founder of the Venetian School, whose most famous composer, Claudio Monteverdi († 1643) occupied Willaert's post at San Marco in 1614. Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck († 1621), composer and organist in Amsterdam, was influential in Germany.

The Netherlandish polyphonists were the gifted forerunners of the great Italians and Germans, Palestrina, Monteverdi, Bach and Handel. There was, however, no follow up to this great promise when inspiration ran out. Later cen-

turies merely produced composers like Pierre van Malderen († 1768), known only to erudite scholars. César Franck († 1890) was born in Liège but spent all his life in Paris, and the fact that the ancestral home of the Beethovens stood at Mechelen is only a very indirect contribution to the glory of European music.

So, we will reluctantly put Netherlandish musical composition in the 'average' category.

Medicine and Science

In both these fields the Low Countries present an honourable record. Their achievements in medicine started with Andreas Vesalius in the sixteenth century, followed by Jan Baptist van Helmont in the seventeenth, Jan Palfijn and Herman Boerhaave in the eighteenth, and Joseph Guislain, a pioneer in the humane treatment of the mentally ill, in the nineteenth century. The crowning achievement came when the Nobel Prize for medicine was won by three Belgians, Jules Bordet, Corneel Heymans and Christian de Duve, and by two Dutchmen, Christiaan Eykman and Niko Tinbergen (born in The Hague in 1907, became a British citizen in 1955).

Likewise, the line of scientists started in the sixteenth century, with the botanist Rembert Dodonaeus, the cartographer Gerard Mercator and the mathematician Simon Stevin, the first innovator in his discipline since antiquity. In the seventeenth century Christian Huygens was a mathematician, physicist and astronomer of European fame and a member of the Paris Académie des Sciences.

Here again the twentieth century brought a crowning achievement when a galaxy of Dutch scholars became Nobel Laureates for physics or chemistry, H.A. Lorentz, R. Zeeman, J.D. van der Waals, H. Kamerlingh Onnes, F. Zernike, J.H. van 't Hoff, P.J.W. Derby, P. Crutsen, G. 't Hooft, M. Veltman and A. Geim. In Belgium Ilya Prigogine (born in Moscow in 1917, became a Belgian citizen in 1949) won the Nobel Prize for chemistry, and Jacques Englert for physics.

So, although the Low Countries produced no giants like Galilei, Leibniz, Newton or Pascal or, closer to us, Max Planck or Albert Einstein, their record certainly deserves the epithet 'distinguished'.

Architecture

The Low Countries are rich in cathedrals, town halls, belfries and castles. The oldest go back to the twelfth century, i.e. the Cathedral of Tournai, the Church of St. Servatius in Maastricht and the Count's Castle in Ghent, where the crusader's cross above the gate recalls the trip to the Holy Land of the Count of Flanders, Philip of Alsace. The following centuries witnessed the building in the Gothic style of imposing cathedrals in Antwerp, Brussels, Ghent, Haarlem and Mechelen, as well as the splendid town halls of Bruges, Brussels, Ghent, Leuven, Middelburg, Oudenaarde and Utrecht. Some of them were conceived and built by seven generations of one family, the Keldermans, who were architects, stonemasons and sculptors from the late fourteenth to the mid-sixteenth century. In 1516 Rombout II Keldermans became Emperor Charles V's



Saint Carolus Borromeus church on Hendrik Conscience square, Antwerp.
Photo by Jonas Lampens.



Willem van Oranje,
Petit Sablon square, Brussels.
Photo by Jonas Lampens.

Chief Architect. In 1561-65 the Renaissance style appeared when Cornelis Floris de Vriendt built the magnificent town hall of Antwerp. In the following century the Baroque triumphed in Antwerp with the House of Peter Paul Rubens and the Church of St. Carolus Borromeus, built by the Jesuits Frans d'Aguilon and Pieter Huyssens. Nearer to us some creative architects gained European fame, such as Herman Berlage († 1934) in the north and Victor Horta († 1947) and Henry van de Velde († 1957), two members of the Art Nouveau movement, in the south. Netherlandish architects did not invent the great European styles – Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque of French or Italian origin – but they worked wonders with the common Western heritage, which yields them the 'distinguished' grade.

Visual Arts

We have now reached two fields of human endeavour where the Low Countries occupy a seat in the front row, the visual arts and the pursuit of good government. In the course of six centuries Flanders and the Netherlands were the home of superb artists, whose work occupies pride of place in museums, palaces and churches throughout the world. It all began in the fifteenth century with the Old Flemish Masters, Hubert and Jan van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden, Hugo van der Goes, Hans Memling and Dirk Bouts.⁷ After the apocalyptic visions of Jeroen Bosch and the landscapes – sometimes lovely and sometimes ominous – of Pieter Breughel, the great masters of the seventeenth century – Rubens, Rembrandt, van Dyck and Vermeer – astonished the world. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries carried the torch further. Some painters enjoyed local celebrity, such as the Schools of Amsterdam and Latem, but others achieved cosmopolitan status, such as Vincent van Gogh († 1890) and René Magritte († 1967) or, most recently, Luc Tuymans.



Rachel Baes,
Les tics de Spinoza
(l'Éthique) ou cogitata
metaphysica,
Oil on canvas, 1967,
Private collection.

That European art history is unthinkable without them needs no further elaboration. Two points, however, will strike every observer. Firstly the variety of styles, from late Gothic to Renaissance, Baroque and Impressionism, and secondly these artists' sudden entry on the scene: van Eyck's *Mystic Lamb* was a total revelation – like Athena emerging from Jupiter's head. One wonders how the human mind could create something so marvellous out of nothing.⁸ This impressive array of artists, comparable to the great Italians from Giotto to Tiepolo, certainly deserves to be classed as outstanding, for even if European culture lasts for another thousand years, Dutch and Flemish paintings will always be admired.

The art of government: federalism

Justice and prosperity are the sweet fruits of good government, whereas anarchy and corruption are the bitter fruits of the bad. The blessing of *buon governo* and the disasters of its opposite are graphically depicted in the famous allegory by Ambrose Lorenzetti in a fresco of 1338-1340 in the Sala della Pace of the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena. Good government is a cultural achievement to which I now turn my attention, hoping to show the contribution made by the Low Countries to the rise of federalism and republicanism, two pillars of modern constitutional law.

In Europe the Seventeen Provinces of Emperor Charles V were the first federal state. Other countries knew unitary kingdoms (unity often imposed by force, as when in 1707 the Spanish King Philip V punished the rebellious provinces of Aragon and Valencia) or free city states. Switzerland was a loose federation of autonomous cantons, which only became a federal nation state in 1848. In the sixteenth century the Low Countries formed a body politic composed of principalities, each having its own identity, government, parliament, laws, privileges and judiciary, but united by a personal union, as they shared a common ruler. Their union was ensured by the Pragmatic Sanction of 1549, which streamlined their laws of succession. In 1531 Charles V reorganized the central bodies of the Netherlands creating the Council of State, which together with the existing Privy Council and Council of Finance (the three Collateral Councils) formed the national government. Already in 1504 a supreme court of appeal, the Great Council of Mechelen, had been founded. And there was a pan-Netherlandish parliament, the States General, which first met in Bruges in 1464. The Habsburg Netherlands were a distinct state on the European map, but not a kingdom. Charles V was King of Spain and of Germany, as well as Roman Emperor, but in the Low Countries he was Duke of Brabant and Luxembourg and Count of Artois, Flanders, Holland and so on. He was, however, a monarch, so that his Netherlands can best be called a federal monarchy. It was the European prototype of a federal state, combining respect for regional diversity with the advantage of a central government. Like many other lands, the Low Countries produced parliaments and charters of liberties early on, but there is no need to expatiate on this here.⁹

The Revolt of the Netherlands against King Philip II of Spain led to the break-up of his father's inheritance. The ten Catholic southern provinces remained under Spanish rule, while the seven Protestant provinces in the north escaped

Philip's reconquest and were left free and ready for 'the Rise of the Dutch Republic'.¹⁰ The Republic of the United Netherlands was, as the name indicates, a federal state in the footsteps of Charles V. Each of the seven provinces had its own identity, government, parliament and judicature, but there were overarching, central institutions. We have already mentioned the States General, an assembly of the deputies of the provincial states, which was constantly in session. There was also the Council of State, for home affairs, the General Chamber of Accounts and the Monetary Chamber, which controlled the finances of the Union, and finally five Admiralties. Defence was in the hands of the Stadholder, a descendant of William of Orange, the 'Father of the Fatherland'. The Dutch Republic, formally recognized as a sovereign state by the treaty of Munster in 1648, became a great success, whose federal constitution inspired the young United States of America, where it was well known and carefully studied.¹¹ America in its turn was the model for the Republic of Weimar and ultimately for the German Federal Republic, a successful democracy and federal state in the heart of Europe.

Thus the federalism of the historic Low Countries was an outstanding contribution to European civilization. The irony of it all is, however, that the land of its birth gave up, in the early nineteenth century, its ancient constitution and became a unitary and centralized nation state under King William I.

The art of government: republicanism

In a republic the citizens govern themselves for themselves. In a monarchy the people are lorded over by kings from their palaces and knights from their castles. In a republic, not the 'Sovereign' but the nation is sovereign. The republic was well known in antiquity, most famously through Plato's eponymous work. Throughout the Middle Ages and for a long time afterwards monarchy was the norm (except for a few rural communities in Switzerland), but among the Italian city states republicanism was taken seriously and put into practice. However, after the capture of Florence by Emperor Charles V in 1530, Italian democracy was a thing of the past. Monarchy triumphed in the country, with a kingdom in the south, a papal autocracy in the middle and dukedoms in the north.

Not long afterwards republicanism was given a new lease of life north of the Alps, in the Dutch Republic. In an Act of Abjuration of 1581 the States General of the United Netherlands declared that Philip II was a tyrant and had forfeited the throne. After some futile attempts to find another monarch to succeed him, the States General decided in 1587 to carry on without a king and adopted the republican form of government. It was a revolutionary step, if not entirely without precedent. Republican ideas had inspired Flemish towns in their revolt against their counts, and from 1577 to 1582 Ghent was a Calvinist Republic.

The Dutch made a success of their newfound republic, a tolerant and law-based state, where government was in the hands of elected representatives of the country. For two centuries it was the only country with a republican constitution (with the exception of the ephemeral republic of Oliver Cromwell), an anomaly on the map of Europe.¹²

But after the American Revolution (which was inspired by the Dutch Republic) and the French Revolution (which was not) the republican ideal became



Restoration of the Ghent Altarpiece by Jan van Eyck
in the Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent.

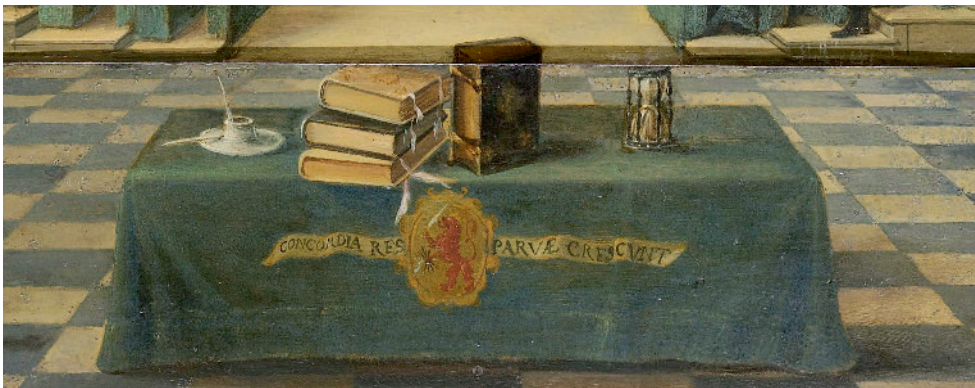
unstoppable and at present four large European countries – Germany, France, Italy and Poland – are republics, and so are many smaller ones. But what about the kingdoms – Britain, Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway and Sweden? Here it is necessary to distinguish between appearances and reality. Those countries do indeed have kings and queens – one even crowned and anointed by the Church – but they have no impact on national politics. Their role is ceremonial, opening new kindergartens or offering condolences to the victims of a railway crash. Power is wholly in the hands of politicians and elected parliaments. The government even fixes the salaries of the members of the royal family, and when, as protocol dictates, Queen Elizabeth II reads the political programme of 'her' government for the forthcoming year, in a solemn address to the two houses of Parliament, it is not 'her' government nor is the programme she outlines her text, but one drafted by the Prime Minister.

So shall we call these 'kingdoms' pseudo- or crypto-republics camouflaged by the trappings of royalty, as they are the embodiment of the ancient republican ideology of popular self-government? Are kings and queens useless then? Certainly not, for hereditary monarchy is a visible sign of the identity and unity of the nation. It is anchored in the past, part of the national heritage and stands for continuity and confidence. It also saves the country the turmoil of periodic presidential elections along party-political lines.

Considering this triumph of the republican idea, it can rightly be called an outstanding contribution of the Low Countries to European civilization.

But it is ironic again that, in the early nineteenth century, the pioneering Dutch turned their backs on the republic and converted (or should I say reverted, as they had briefly been a kingdom a few years earlier?) to monarchy, when William, a descendant of William of Orange and a line of stadholders, became king (and a king with autocratic leanings after the fashion of the Enlightened Monarchs). On 3 November 1813 he landed, with British support, at Scheveningen, returning from exile in England, at a time when the French Empire was crumbling. Initially William was styled 'Sovereign Monarch' and on 16 March 1815 he assumed the title of King. In September of that year he made a ceremonial entry into Brussels as King of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands (north and south together again).

In a recent study Matthijs Lok, Assistant Professor of Modern European History, had a critical look at how the Dutch nation so unexpectedly became a kingdom.¹³ He showed how William built on the experience of the short-lived Kingdom of Holland under Louis Napoleon (1806-10), a brother of Emperor Napoleon I. Louis Napoleon's kingdom had been a united, centralized and bureaucratic state along, not unexpectedly, Napoleonic lines. King William I even took over a large section of the officialdom of that first Dutch kingdom and, in so doing, took a leaf out of the book of his arch-enemy, Emperor Napoleon. ■



Dirck van Delen (?), *Interior of the Great Hall at the Binnenhof in The Hague During the Great Assembly of the States-General in 1651*, Detail, 1651, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

'Small Things Grow Great by Concord'

NOTES

- 1 H. DE RIDDER-SYMOENS, 'Intellectual Freedom Under Strain in the Low Countries During the Long Sixteenth Century', in: R.A. MÜLLER (ed.), *Wissenschaftsfreiheit in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart*, Basel 2008, pp. 229-48.
- 2 H. DE RIDDER-SYMOENS, op. cit. p. 237.
- 3 Op. cit., p. 244.
- 4 Op. cit., p. 245.
- 5 Op. cit., pp. 245-46.
- 6 So recently R.J. TESKE (ed. and trans.) *Henry of Ghent's Summa of Ordinary Questions: Articles Thirty-one and Thirty-two on God's Eternity and Divine Attributes in General* (Medieval Philosophical Texts in Translation, 49), Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, 2012.
- 7 The term Flemish Primitives that is often applied to these highly cultured artists of genius is both absurd and insulting.
- 8 Recent research, however, has thrown new light on the role of the painter Melchior Broederlam, who worked in Ypres from 1381 to 1409, as a precursor of the Van Eycks. See C. STROO, 'Broederlam's World of Surface Appearance: Traditional and Innovative Aspects', in: M. DEMEY, M. MARTENS and C. STROO (eds.), *Vlaamse Primitieven tussen visie en materie*, Brussels, Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Wetenschappen en Kunsten, 2012, pp. 67-91.
- 9 In April 1996 a conference at St. George's House, Windsor Castle, assessed the historic contribution of Britain and the Low Countries to the development of democracy in Europe. The papers were published in John PINDER (ed.), *Foundations of Democracy in the European Union. From the Genesis of Parliamentary Democracy to the European Parliament*, London, 1999.
- 10 Thus the title of J.L. MOTLEY's famous 3 vols. published in London in 1856. The same author also published a *History of the United Netherlands from the Death of William the Silent to the Twelve Years' Truce*, 4 vols., The Hague, 1860-67.
- 11 R.C. VAN CAENEGEM, *Historical Considerations on Judicial Review and Federalism in the United States of America, with Special Reference to England and the Dutch Republic*, Brussels, 2003 (Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie van België voor Wetenschappen en Kunsten, Academiae Analecta, New Series, 13). See also C. BONWICK, 'The United States Constitution and its Roots in British Political Thought and Tradition', in: J. PINDER (ed.), op.cit., pp. 41-58.
- 12 See the encyclopaedic study by Jonathan ISRAEL, *The Dutch Republic. Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall (1477-1806)*, Oxford, 1995.
- 13 M. LOK, 'The Establishment of the Orange Monarchy in 1813-15. A National Myth', in: *The Low Countries. Arts and Society in Flanders and the Netherlands*, 21, 2013, pp. 208-18.