



Piet de Rooy, *A Tiny Spot on the Earth: The Political Culture of the Netherlands in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015, 405 pp., ISBN 978 90 8964 704 7).

Piet de Rooy takes as his title the somewhat disparaging description of the Netherlands coined by Rutger Jan Schimmelpenninck in 1796 to frame the country's political culture since the Batavian Revolution. In so doing, he highlights the widespread conception of the country as one with a glorious past, but one struggling with military occupation, economic dislocation and imperial defeat in the aftermath of 1795. This was to become a *leitmotif* for the Netherlands in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in coming to terms with its diminished status in the world. However, the mission of this book is to chart the constitutional and political development of the country over the last two centuries. This in itself is a major achievement, made all the more laudable for being available in English and thus accessible to a worldwide audience whose understanding of Dutch political culture perhaps extends only as far as a basic understanding of *verzuiling* and the concept of the *poldermodel* in the post-1945 era.

His fundamental thesis is to explain the political development of the Netherlands over the last two centuries and perhaps provide a critique to the often cited 'politics of accommodation' noted by Lijphart in the late 1960s that has characterised the understanding of the country and its institutions. The bridging of the deep religious and class divides to create a stable democracy during the nineteenth and early twentieth century has long been seen as an explanation for the *effenheid* (evenness) and egalitarian nature of Dutch society, epitomised by Huizinga's claim in the 1930s that 'we Dutch are all bourgeois'. In his critique, de Rooy argues that there have been too many elements of teleology in the analysis of Dutch politics, 'with too great an emphasis on continuity and too little focus on the far reaching changes that occurred' (9). He also critiques the idea that this came about through a gradual transformation and posits the idea that there were instead periods of 'sudden, rapid change' that he refers to as 'critical junctures', thus providing a methodological as well as a semantic allusion to Antonio Gramsci.

These identifiable moments of rapid change are then used to frame the book's structure. Proceeding chronologically, each chapter focuses on a particular theme, for example 1798: The Constitution, and 1813: The Nation State. This is continued with discussion of the impact of 1848 and the formation of 'modern' political parties in the later 1870s. In each case, De Rooy clearly outlines the key issues at stake and shows how the developments

he highlights came about. There is also perhaps a gesture to Zeldin with a chapter entitled 'Justice and Love' that deals with ideology in the fin de siècle and discusses the development of socialism, social democracy and feminism. Following this, there appears to be a chronological caesura as the author jumps to an analysis of *verzuiling* in the 1930s, suggesting that there was little or nothing of note to discuss in the first thirty years of the twentieth century. Essentially De Rooy seems to see this period and the Dutch experience of the Great War as continuing from trends established in previous decades, although he acknowledges some important changes, for example the offer of three cabinet seats to the social democratic SDAP (Sociaal-Democratische Arbeiderspartij) in 1913 that the party declined to take up, and the introduction of female suffrage under the shadow of potential revolution in 1918-1919.

The period between 1930 and the end of the 1950s is portrayed as a high point of *verzuiling* and De Rooy provides a clear explanation for its continuance after the five years of German occupation. He notes the changes in the ways in which parties worked together in coalition, for example the Roman-Red coalition that held sway between 1945 and 1958 and which saw employment and social security as the key to maintaining stability and preventing any future excursions into political extremism. He also notes the perceived deep moral and cultural crisis of the postwar era and how successive governments attempted to address this to prevent a breakdown of the social order through a process of 'controlled modernisation'. Beyond this, he sees 1966 as an important turning point and also analyses the shift towards populism at the end of the century, as epitomised by the rise of Pim Fortuyn.

In the conclusion, De Rooy returns to the core of his thesis, identifying four phases that were crucial in Dutch political development; the revolution of 1798, the liberal constitution of 1848, the formation of political parties and the development of compromise that led to *verzuiling*, and finally to the democracy after the 1960s that relied less on deference and respect for political leaders and institutions, and more on the material benefits that the system could bestow, not least in terms of a growing economy and increasing welfare state. As a postscript, there is also a brief reflection on the shocks to that system; the loss of the East Indies, the banking crisis after 2008, and the loss of confidence in the European ideal to name but three. This is a deep and thoughtful analysis of the Netherlands that will repay close reading and will undoubtedly stand the test of time as the foremost synthesis of Dutch political development in the modern era for many years to come.

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