



Joris Oddens, Mart Rutjes, and Erik Jacobs (eds.) *The Political Culture of the Sister Republics. France, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Italy* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015, 280pp., ISBN 978 908 964 606 4).

This volume dedicated to the political culture of what are called the ‘Sister Republics’ in the age of revolutions comes at a timely moment. As Biancamaria Fontana notes in the prologue, the historical experience of the Sister Republics between 1794 and 1806 – the Dutch ‘Batavian’, Swiss ‘Helvetic’, Italian ‘Cisalpine’ and ‘Neapolitan’ republics, and, of course, the French *république mère* – raised the question of what a federation of European states supporting common values might look like. Arguably, as an historical example the revolutionary project of a federation of free European republics bodes ill for the future of an ‘ever closer union’. Insofar as the promotion of the model of French republican government was a moment of liberation at all, within less than a decade it succumbed to the imperial ambitions of a French general.

However, precisely the fact that ‘France is no longer a great nation’, in the words of the French historian Pierre Serna (183), has opened up the possibility of revisiting this fascinating era of parallel revolutionary experiences. Herein lies the strength of this volume. It shuns the teleological perspective that the revolutionary experiments were doomed to fail, and rejects the idea that Europe’s age of revolutions was simply one-way traffic, that is, from Paris to the rest.

The editors Joris Oddens, Mart Rutjes and Erik Jacobs were associated with the NWO project ‘The First Dutch Democracy: The Political World of the Batavian Republic, 1795-1801’ (University of Amsterdam, 2009-2012). In their introduction they rightfully underline the embeddedness of the respective evaluations of the Swiss, Italian and Dutch revolutions within long-term national historical narratives rooted in nineteenth-century nationalist historiographies. Whereas Swiss historians have long debated the rupture of the revolutionary era in terms of modernisation, Dutch historiography has been preoccupied with the ‘Dutchness’ (or rather the lack of it) of the Batavian revolution, while for a long time Italian historiography has viewed the revolutionary *triennio* (1796-1799) in light of Italy’s unification in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Yet since the 1990s, and in some cases earlier, as nationalist historiographies have given way to transnational and comparative historical perspectives, historians in all three countries have been eager to rediscover the political culture and ideas of their respective

revolutionary republics, including parliamentary practices, ideas, languages, concepts and the press. *The Political Culture of the Sister Republics* can be seen as a result of this historiographical trend.

The editors have divided the volume in five parts – 1. The transformation of republicanism, 2. Political concepts and languages, 3. The invention of democratic parliamentary practices, 4. Press, politics, and public opinion and 5. The Sister Republics and France. A striking feature of the articles (20 in total, excluding the introduction) is their size – eight pages on average. As a consequence – and to this reviewer it is puzzling why the editors have chosen this format – hardly any of the articles presents a systematically presented and richly documented historical argument (although the individual contributions of the editors themselves stand out positively). Most of them are simply too short, and amount to no more than, as one title tellingly puts it, ‘some remarks’ (127). The status of the four to five page ‘introductions’ to each part is also ambiguous; they are consequently more or less redundant. To take one example, in three different contributions (on pages 31, 44, and 50) we can read no less than three times the very same quotation from Franco Venturi’s 1971 *Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment*.

Nevertheless, the volume is a welcome addition to the existing literature. While the study of the ‘age of revolutions’ is currently booming, with dozens of articles and books coming out every year on an ever expanding range of comparative, global and ‘interconnected’ topics, the exploration of the ‘Sister Republics’ has somewhat lagged behind. In that sense, I expect that researchers and students within the field will appreciate this collection as it offers in a single volume – and in the English language – some glimpses of the latest research done by historians working with primary sources in a variety of languages (most often not mastered by those working on the American, French, Haitian and Spanish American revolutions).

The articles by Wyger Velema on the Batavian, and Urte Weeber on the Helvetic Republic for example, confirm the thesis formulated with regard to the French and American revolutions (and is steadily gaining ground), that the language of republicanism employed by revolutionaries was a mix or ‘hybrid’ form of classical-republican and more ‘modern’ elements. Another interesting result that emerges from the comparison of the sister republic’s various revolutionary cultures is the emphasis revolutionaries put on education, and more in particular, civic education. Yet this ideal of the educated citizen could also lead to more paternalistic and sometimes even exclusionary practices with regard to those who were not educated, a process that can also be observed in Thermidorian France. We also learn from Katia Visconti’s piece that, at least initially, there was more freedom of press in the Cisalpine Republic than has been generally assumed, and that Cisalpine authorities were keen to reject many of Napoleon’s censorship proposals. The Helvetic Republic also witnessed a significant increase of journals, newspapers, and other publications as a result of the 1798 constitution’s guarantee of press

freedom, even though the article on press freedom was written out of the constitution of 1802. Yet, as Andreas Würgler points out, the experience of a burgeoning public sphere and activist journalism was an important step in the long-term politicisation and popularisation of the press as well as the emergence of the notion of a critical public opinion. In sum, although this volume has its serious shortcomings, it offers interesting leads for further research and invites more systematic comparisons between political cultures of the sister republics.

René Koekkoek, University of Amsterdam