

René Koekkoek, Anne-Isabelle Richard and Arthur Weststeijn (eds.), *The Dutch Empire between Ideas and Practice, 1600-2000*. **Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series** (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 239 pp., ISBN 978-3-030-27515-0).

Most empires in history have seen themselves as exceptional, and the Dutch empire is no exception to this rule. The anthology *The Dutch Empire between Ideas and Practice, 1600-2000* is, in the first place, a collective study into that idea of exceptionality. Where did it originate and how could it flourish? One of the main assertions of this volume is that the idea of exceptionality was present in the Dutch empire from its very beginnings. Though the face of this imperial ideology may have been one of commercial prosperity and mercantile necessity – an ‘empire of riches’, in Arthur Weststeijn’s words – it was an imperial ideology nonetheless. This suggests ‘fundamental continuities in the ways in which the Dutch empire was envisaged and remembered between the seventeenth and twenty-first centuries’ (7). More broadly, such a focus on continuity challenges the deep-rooted historiographical notion that the fundamental break in Dutch imperial history is between the early modern company-ruled empire and its modern state-ruled successor.

The theme of Dutch empire-building in Company times is picked up first in the chapters by Cátia Antunes, Arthur Weststeijn and Benjamin Schmidt. Antunes demonstrates how the *voc* and the *wic* were never the purely private companies, focused on trade and efficiency that both contemporaries and historians thought them to be. They were in fact heavily regulated by the States General, who used them to ‘establish the institutional and jurisdictional organization of the empire’ (27). Antunes’ chapter is complemented by Weststeijn, who shows how the idea of a humanist, commercial ‘non-empire’ formed in the metropole, which, in the centuries that followed, can be seen as the major impediment to the development of more overtly imperial rhetoric. Schmidt, on the other hand, argues that the idea of the Dutch as an anti-imperial force should be seen in the light of the Republic’s newfound freedom from the Spanish Empire, but he also shows that this image does not last. By the eighteenth century it was replaced by a distinctly European vision on empire, ‘casting a generically European protagonist in the world’ (78). This point on the European character of empire is reinforced later in the volume, particularly in the chapter by Jennifer Foray, and in the epilogue by Remco Raben, who points out it was a ‘*European drive to conquest and trade*’ (222, emphasis mine), and also notes that images of rulers and ruled tended to travel between empires. Modern European overseas

empires were, in other words, not so much antagonists as participants in a joint venture.

None of the chapters in *The Dutch Empire between Ideas and Practice, 1600-2000* covers the entire four-hundred-year period of the volume. That means many of the ruptures and continuities are only implicit in comparisons between chapters, or are to be glimpsed at in chapters that cover crucial transitional periods. Alicia Schrikker provides such a glimpse in her chapter by showing institutional continuity in the way colonial officials after 1815 often referred to VOC records. These officials appear to have regarded VOC records as the natural predecessors of their own records. There is, however, no coherent periodisation throughout the volume. For example, in Chapter 7 René Koekkoek opts to see the 1790s as a turning point in which the hierarchical relation between metropole and colonies was cemented, whereas this same moment falls in the middle of Schrikker's time frame. Those dissimilar time frames may be attributed to their different subjects, but underneath the ostensible superficiality of dates there seems to hide a more fundamental issue: how 'intellectual' should intellectual history be?

The Dutch Empire between Ideas and Practice is the result of the 2016 'Visions of Empire in Dutch History' conference and the subsequent forum discussion in *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 132:2 in 2017. Conferences and forum issues are platforms for debate, and it is therefore not surprising that this ensuing volume contains some of its own critics. Throughout the volume, two threads of criticism stand out in particular. The first is the one mentioned above, and concerns the importance of not limiting intellectual history to a study of grand ideas. 'The study of Dutch intellectual imperialism', writes Remco Raben in his epilogue, 'should be much more intensively connected to the surrounding world' (225). Such connections are found particularly in the chapter by Sanne Ravensbergen on Javanese regional courts (*landraden*), in which liberal reforms were never truly implemented as they clash with a 'politics of difference' (176), and the chapter by Vincent Kuitenbrouwer on radio in colonial Indonesia from the 1930s onwards, which turned out not to have propaganda potential just for the colonial authorities, but for the nationalist movement as well.

In line with trends in global intellectual history, many contributing authors – in particular Schrikker, Ravensbergen and Kuitenbrouwer – want to replace conceptions of intellectual history as merely encompassing political thought with intellectual history as 'the history of ideas in practice' (115). The focus on imperial practice and mentalities is so strong that one could wonder if the label 'intellectual' still has any meaning. Is this not a cultural history of empire? Conversely, with the choice for the moniker of 'intellectual history', other absences are more pressing. Koekkoek's chapter argues that 'the practical realities of the age of revolutions were experienced as too demanding and risky to push for a more revolutionary imperial agenda' (152), and that

this explains the underwhelming commitment of Dutch patriots to the abolition of slavery or the extension of the rights of man to colonial subjects. While some pragmatic caution may surely have been into play, a rivalling explanation could be found in the inherent exclusionary tendencies of liberal thought – in an *intellectual* history of empire, this would perhaps have been a logical avenue for further exploration, but this road is not taken.

A second strand of criticism can be found in the idea of the importance of dissenting voices, most importantly those of the colonised. As Remco Raben reminds us, ‘Asian, African and American men and women have travelled to the Netherlands and have taken part in the intellectual formation of empire and the resistance to it’ (225). The introduction of the volume does contain a reference to the early Indonesian nationalist Soewardi Soerjaningrat, whose protest against Dutch colonial rule – and in particular against the fact that festivities for the centennial of Dutch independence in 1913 were to be held in colonial Indonesia – registered in the metropole, but one could wonder whether not more such voices should have been included, and, on a more fundamental level, whether metropolitan prominence should be a criterion to begin with. There is the risk of what Susan Legêne in her contribution to the aforementioned forum issue called ‘the reinforcement of the biases of national imperial histories’, and which is picked up in Jennifer Foray’s chapter, who refers to the risk of perpetuating colonial selection criteria as ‘methodological nationalism’ (91).

One could find fault with *The Dutch Empire between Ideas and Practice* on the issues outlined above, but its great merit is that it puts those questions on the table. The volume can be read as a plea for a history of empire that is more inclusive in its inclusion of voices and that does not reinforce national and imperial categories of thought. At the same time, as the volume’s internal critical voices point out, there is still much to be desired on this front.

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1 Susan Legêne, ‘The European character of the intellectual history of Dutch Empire’, *BMGN – Low*

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