

The Dangers of Unscientific History: Schama and the Dutch Seventeenth-Century

Discussie over S. Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches. An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (Londen: Collins, 1987, xiii + 698 biz., ISBN 0 00 217801 X) *.

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In the preface to his first book, Schama gave a generous tribute to his mentor, J. H. Plumb, in the course of which he stated: 'From him I learned that history must at least strive to be art before it can pretend to be a science' ¹. This gnomic confession of faith could also stand as the motto for his latest book, in which he is clearly striving to create a work of literature as much as a work of history. Whether he has achieved an imaginative reconstruction of the spirit of Dutch seventeenth-century society with any value as literature, must be for others to judge, but it is very much the question whether his artistic pretensions have got in the way of his providing a successful historical account of his subject. It is not just that his style is determinedly literary, or that he is at pains throughout to try to be witty, but that his dedication to an artistic approach to history affects the contents and structure of the whole book. For example, the first chapter concerns a drowning cell said to have been used in the Amsterdam *tuchthuis*. As Schama concedes, this almost certainly never existed, but the chapter gives the book a compelling beginning. This preference for effect over truth perhaps explains some of the more bizarre interpretations which appear in the rest of the work.

On another level, it is possibly this commitment to history as art which makes Schama so aggressively hostile to theory of any sort. He dismisses out of hand all marxist and neo-marxist interpretations, in which he is more modish than original, but he is equally scathing about the ideas of Max Weber concerning calvinist economic attitudes — or at least of his version of Weber's views, which is more than somewhat oversimplified. Less expectedly he takes Huizinga to task for linking the terms 'bourgeois' and 'unheroic'; he objects to the use of 'bourgeois' as a restrictive category which does less than justice to the variety of seventeenth-century Dutch society, and he sees distinct heroic aspects in its history ². However, judging by the evidence he uses to make his point, it seems clear that he has simply misread Huizinga: the 'platitudes' Schama associates with 'bourgeois' are in his own mind and not in Huizinga's. Schama's treatment of the theories he dismisses is inadequate, but that is perhaps forgivable in the context of a book of this sort, though the suspicion remains that his knowledge of the two major historical sociologists of modern times is distinctly limited. What is more disturbing is that his treatment of Huizinga is symptomatic of a prevailing uncertainty of touch in dealing with the existing literature on his subject. If his conception of what is implied by 'bourgeois' is rather crude, his version of Calvinism is a caricature, and his discussion of social conflict in this period — or rather his denial of its importance — is superficial. Throughout Schama adopts an aggressive pose of defending the complexity and richness of the seventeenth-century Netherlands from the confining categories of previous historians; it would be easier to sympathise with him if the views he attacks were indeed widely held. Moreover, it cannot be said that the views he proceeds to expound on the nature of Dutch culture in the seventeenth century are without their own arbitrary elements.

* De discussie is voorgelegd aan dr. S. Schama, die ons geen reactie heeft gestuurd.

1 S. Schama, *Patriots and Liberators. Revolution in the Netherlands 1780-1813* (New York, 1977) xiii.

2 S. Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches. An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (New York, 1987) 588.

Schama's subject is interesting and important: not the 'high' culture of literature and art, music and intellectual life, but an attempt 'to explore the paradoxes of being Dutch in terms of social belief and behaviour' ³. His starting point is the basic assumption of a broad cultural unity within the seventeenth-century Republic, centred on the *brede middenstand*, and encompassing all but the extremes of Dutch society. This is a justifiable position, but Schama goes further by interpreting this unity as a sort of *conscience collective*, and this leads him to interpret any conflicts of opinion, or differences in attitudes as unresolved conflicts within a single collective mentality, rather than the expression of the views of various individuals and groups within Dutch society. Thus the 'embarrassment of riches' in the title is derived by Schama from the contrast between the striving for gain so characteristic of the Dutch, in this period at least, and the condemnation of too great a concern for worldly success which was almost equally characteristic of the time. He sees this as an unresolved conflict within the Dutch psyche. The authors he cites to justify this hypothesis, however, are mostly ministers of the Reformed Church and self-appointed critics of contemporary morality. Moreover, the criticisms and warnings they issue are no more than the commonplaces of Christian moral and pastoral guidance; they are neither specific to the Dutch Republic nor to the seventeenth century. To argue from this sort of evidence to a divided Dutch conscience is hardly convincing, except to the extent that almost all known societies have been divided, individually and collectively, on this issue to some extent.

The possibility that the competing viewpoints which he finds might derive from different social groups is dismissed rather too glibly. While any vulgar-marxist approach to the interpretation of Dutch culture is clearly too simplistic, it is at least a tenable hypothesis that the key to understanding the phenomena most characteristic of the seventeenth century lies in the economic and social changes which had taken place in the Northern Netherlands since the beginning of the sixteenth century. Equally, important as these changes were, it is necessary to take into account those elements within Dutch culture of a more traditional stamp and which showed considerable resistance to the dominance of what it is surely still permissible to call bourgeois values.

Here the case of calvinist teaching and preaching is relevant. While agreeing with Schama that, to put it in terms which he himself would not use, the Reformed Church embodied a vocal opposition to the values of emergent capitalism in the Dutch Republic, it remains possible to argue that this should not be interpreted as evidence of schizophrenia in the Dutch collective mind, but rather as an example of the way in which the Reformed Church represented general Christian and predominantly precapitalist values. In general, the attitudes of the protestant churches in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with regard to economic matters were profoundly conservative, and the Reformed Church in the Netherlands was no exception in this respect. As late as the 1640s, the hostility to usury of a significant body of opinion within the Dutch church was sufficient to make Salmasius's recent writings on the subject a *cause célèbre*. The Reformed Church was not isolated from the rest of protestant Europe: the values it promoted were drawn from the general Christian tradition and, more specifically, from a body of calvinist teaching which it held in common with fellow-believers in France, England, Scotland, Geneva and elsewhere. In general, the reformed churches adapted only hesitantly to capitalist values, and the Dutch church was not atypical in this respect. Contrary to Weber, it may be argued that, in so far as Calvinism did move towards a protestant ethic congruent with capitalist needs, it did so in response to social and economic

3 *Ibidem*, 3.

change and not as a consequence of anxieties arising from its specific doctrine on salvation. However, this does not mean that a conflict between capitalism and Calvinism caused a fundamental conflict in the Dutch psyche as Schama seems to suggest, partly because of the limited influence of the Reformed Church in the religiously-pluralist Republic, but largely because the fulminations of the ministers were against excess rather against profit-making as such.

The international influences on the Reformed Church remind us that one of the problems in studying Dutch culture, and not only in this period, is the openness of this society to attitudes and opinions from outside. The Dutch Republic was a small country with an international orientation, not only through trade, but through the attitudes of the educated élite in particular. A country which was becoming an intellectual as well as a mercantile entrepôt could hardly be unaffected by this rôle. In other words, it is a mistake to interpret Dutch culture in simple bourgeois terms — or indeed in any terms which refer only to internal circumstances — because it was very much part of a broader European cultural tradition which, whatever else it may have been, was neither bourgeois nor capitalist in inspiration. The literature cultivated by the educated élite is very much a case in point; this had as its ideals and models the literature of Greek and Roman antiquity and the European Renaissance, rather than anything specifically Dutch, bourgeois or otherwise. Indeed, the education of the social élite in the Republic was in general in conformity with contemporary European norms. An interesting question is whether those who had enjoyed such an education and participated in this general European culture found that they could also be wholly in tune with the values of early Dutch capitalism. However, again, if such groups were less than happy with an unrestrained striving for gain, this points to the existence of dissident social groups rather than a divided self.

To pursue the causes of dissent from bourgeois or capitalist values in the seventeenth-century Republic, it should be added that the extent of any bourgeois-capitalist domination was geographically as well as socially limited. The great economic expansion of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries was largely confined to the province of Holland, and to a lesser extent Zeeland and parts of Friesland. The question of the cultural history of the Dutch Republic outside Holland is an intriguing, but to my knowledge largely unexplored, subject; but there is more than a little doubt whether the cultural values of the bourgeoisie of the towns of Holland were wholly shared by even the socially dominant groups of Utrecht, Gelderland, Overijssel, Groningen and most of Friesland, never mind the mass of the population of these provinces. Here there had been no explosive economic growth and rapid social change such as had occurred in Holland: the towns remained much less, and the nobles much more, important, and the agricultural sector much more traditional than in Holland. Even in Holland the bourgeois triumph may have been less complete than is commonly thought; in particular, the nobles may have played a rather more important rôle than is normally allowed⁴. Whether, in that case, they too represented the survival of pre-capitalist values and exercised a restraining influence on the triumph of those of the bourgeoisie is an intriguing, but at present unanswerable question.

Such matters would repay investigation, but too many of the assertions made by Schama in the course of his book are less open to proof or disproof. His penchant for socio-psychological explanations based, it would seem, on intuition rather than evidence is more likely to

4 Cf. H. F. K. van Nierop, *Van ridders tot regenten. De Hollandse adel in de zestiende en de eerste helft van de zeventiende eeuw* (Dieren, 1984) 211-233.

evoke a similarly irrational response rather than to initiate a fruitful discussion. This is a perennial problem with studies of large topics based on a necessarily-selective use of evidence — recent works by such challenging historians as Keith Thomas and Lawrence Stone are cases in point⁵, for such works to be successful, the authors' handling of the source-material must inspire confidence, but also the theories and explanations put forward need to be capable of being supported, challenged or modified by the evidence. In contrast to this model, Schama does not inspire such confidence, not only because of the rather woolly nature of some of his ideas, but on a more mundane level because of the lack of any close fit between the evidence he presents and the interpretations he bases on this material. On some occasions the evidence is interesting — as in the section on the widespread fascination with stranded whales — but the conclusions drawn from it far outweigh anything it could reasonably bear. Here the problem is a somewhat injudicious exaggeration of the significance of the material he has found. At other times the problem lies in a mismatch between the nature of the evidence he uses and the arguments he is attempting to substantiate. Typical of his method is a bold, often paradoxical, statement followed by a plethora of quotations and instances, some relevant, some not, topped off with a restatement of the original assertion. Too often nothing is proved, and the flood of evidence merely serves to obscure what is at issue. Schama's assertion of the 'embarrassment of riches' is a case in point: he fails to consider whether his evidence comes from particularly biased sources, or, indeed, how universal this supposed dilemma was. In general, while his use of pictorial evidence is sensible and balanced, his use of literary sources inspires much less confidence. He is inclined to take such sources at their face value, forgetting that when we let the sources speak for themselves they all too often lie — or at least seriously mislead.

The subject Schama has chosen to tackle is a difficult, perhaps impossible, one and there is much in the content of this book to interest and intrigue the reader, but the guidance given by the author to the interpretation and understanding of this fascinating material is not only unreliable, all too often it interposes the personality of the author between the reader and the subject. Contrary to the author's presumed intentions, he does not release his subject from the restraints of over-theoretical historians, he imprisons it in his own subjectivity. Protagonists of history as literature, must beware of the danger of writing history as fiction.

⁵ L. Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (London, 1977); K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic. Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* (London, 1971); K. Thomas, *Man and the Natural World. Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800* (London, 1983).

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De geschiedwetenschap in Nederland wordt vooral beoefend door specialisten, die zelden overzichtswerken publiceren, waarin een algemene visie tot uitdrukking wordt gebracht. De reeds lang geleden bepleite samenvoeging van de kiezeltjes van het verguisde beeld wil maar niet vloten. Wel kan worden vastgesteld, dat meer dan vroeger pogingen worden gedaan om ontwikkelingen van de Nederlandse geschiedenis in een breder internationaal kader te integreren. Hier moet nog het feit aan toegevoegd worden, dat de belangstelling van de beoefenaars van het vak voor het verleden van eigen land zich steeds meer richt op de geschiedenis van de negentiende en twintigste eeuw. Het aantal Nederlandse historici, dat onderzoek doet op het gebied van de vroegmoderne geschiedenis wordt kleiner en kleiner. Opvallend is echter, dat de interesse voor de Nederlandse geschiedenis in het buitenland daarentegen vrijwel uitsluitend gericht is op de periode van het ontstaan van de Republiek (met andere woorden de Opstand) en haar culturele bloei en expansie, waarnaast ook de achttiende eeuw nog enige aandacht krijgt. Het boek van Simon Schama bevestigt deze tendens nog eens en toont bovendien hoe in het buitenland wél brede interpretaties van een belangrijk tijdvak uit onze geschiedenis tot stand komen. Interpretaties, die erop uit zijn het eigene van onze cultuur aan te geven zonder veel zorgen te tonen over de al dan niet aanwezige aansluiting bij Europese ontwikkelingen, die Nederlandse historici nu juist meer en meer bezig houden. Maar ondanks waardering voor het enorme werk dat Schama heeft verricht om zijn ruim zeshonderd bladzijden tellende boek te kunnen schrijven zijn er toch bedenkingen aan te voeren tegen de wijze waarop al dit onderzoek is gedaan en dientengevolge tegen het resultaat.

Deze lezer, die wel weet hoe fragiel het ook na uitvoerige research ontstane beeld van het verleden altijd blijft, een beeld dat bovendien door een andere interpretatie van de gegevens gewijzigd kan worden, voelt zich na de door het barokke taalgebruik niet altijd gemakkelijke lectuur eigenlijk met een kluit in het riet gestuurd. Want dit overzicht van de cultuur van ons land in de 'Golden Age', gebaseerd op archiefmateriaal en literatuur, contemporaine publicaties op allerlei gebied en — verrassend genoeg — beeldmateriaal uit de tijd zelf (van schilderijen tot embleemboeken) komt nogal eens over als traditioneel en eenzijdig. Bovendien zijn de concepties, die Schama hanteert, dikwijls zo vaag en is zijn gedachtenvlucht nogal eens dermate ijel en door gebrek aan verantwoorde gegevens moeilijk te volgen, dat het gevoel soms gaat overheersen van 'je kunt me nog meer vertellen'. Schama heeft natuurlijk het goed recht om het verhaal in de geschiedschrijving voorop te stellen en te verklaren, dat 'I have strayed a good deal from the straight and narrow of the historical method. Shameless eclecticism has been my only methodological guide' en dat hij een 'thieving-magpie approach to other disciplines' heeft toegepast (8). Het schrijven over een cultuur in het verleden, cultuur van de 'brede middenstand' (4), dus van elite én volk, zoals hij het elders formuleert, of van de 'collective mind' (7), ofwel naar M. Douglas sociaal-anthropologisch gedefinieerd als 'an array of beliefs locked together into relational patterns' (9) blijft echter een kwestie van bronneninterpretatie wil het beweerde niet tot een pure gissing worden. Schama beroept zich bij de verklaring van zijn werkwijze op het voorbeeld van de negentiende-eeuwse compendia à la G. D. J. Schotel 'which for all their methodological innocence remain a rich treasure house of arcane and intricate knowledge' (8). Maar juist omdat wij de