

History and public opinion: the historical profession and the French-Dutch rejection of the EU Constitutional Treaty

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Treaty rejection: should historians worry?

The European integration project suffered a great indignity and a significant setback in May-June 2005, when the French and then the Dutch voted by substantial majorities in their referenda to reject the Constitutional Treaty as the legal basis of the European Union for the foreseeable future. The Nice Treaty still remains in force, it is true, and the Union continues to meet, to function, and to be immensely if tediously active behind the scenes, but most hope of further progress in European integration has been shelved for the moment. In horizontal terms, the enlargement negotiation rounds continue, but with very little optimism, and even countries which have now acceded, like Bulgaria and Romania, are viewed in the most begrudging way. In terms of further vertical integration, to deepen and strengthen co-operation, the juggernaut has ground to a rather ignominious halt. These events are, no doubt, of considerable interest and importance for the politics of the future in Europe and beyond, but will or should they affect the working world and agenda of the historical profession, especially in the Netherlands? Should we be concerned that a radical change in political direction in the present might significantly affect the way we study the past?

Business as usual?

On the face of it, it affects us very little. The recent spate of acclaimed blockbusters on European history, such as those by Norman Davies, Mark Mazower, Tony Judt, and Niall Ferguson,¹ is unlikely to be staunchly by the bloodletting of the French and Dutch no-votes. In terms of our teaching, the student demand for courses on the history of European integration, international relations in Europe and European Studies in general has been booming in recent years, and as yet shows few signs of declining in the Netherlands. We can still earn a crust teaching the recent history of Europe, both in terms of its integration, and of its position in a 'globalized' world.

Enthusiasm for most things in politics goes in waves; support for European integration waxes and wanes, even in heavily sceptical countries like the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Norway and Denmark. The votes cast in the referenda

¹ N. Davies, *Europe: a history* (Oxford, 1996); M. Mazower, *Dark continent* (London, 1998); T. Judt, *Postwar: a history of Europe since 1945* (London, 2005); and N. Ferguson, *The war of the world* (London, 2006; global, but the 'descent of Europe' is central to his treatment).

in France and the Netherlands were decisive, but not overwhelming: they were not landslides, many people did not vote at all, and it seems quite likely that those who did were voting more against their political elites than against European integration.² In the Dutch general election of November 2006, 'Europe' was not an issue. A significant number of countries have already ratified the treaty, whether by referendum or by parliamentary vote: there is evidently support in the EU for the treaty, and the force of the blow dealt by the Dutch and French votes is primarily symbolic. Perhaps the pendulum will swing back again quite soon. But again, what business is this of historians? Why did the editors of *BMGN* commission pieces on the subject from myself and others? Should I really, as a historian of Europe, and as a university teacher heavily involved in European Studies, be re-evaluating my professional agenda?

Debunking 'bad' history

One can think of other events, such as the Holocaust, the beginning or the end of the Cold War, or '9/11', which clearly have more impact on everyone, including historians. Nonetheless, the setbacks represented by the referenda of mid-2005 do have at least some effects on the profession, and it is worth enumerating some of them, if only because of the reflexive argument that the more we are aware of the forces acting on us as historians, the better history we shall write.

The votes in questions were political events, and politicians very often use historical arguments when they talk about such events in order to make their points, of whatever political hue. It is always one of the major public functions of the historical profession to debunk bad history, and to lay bare the 'historical' nonsense that many politicians spout. In certain debates it would actually improve the quality of the discourse and of public opinion if more, well supported, historical arguments were aired. In the discussions about the future of European integration, and about a constitutional treaty in particular, it is essential that historians should provide clear evidence about the background to and reasons for the negative votes, to ensure that no-one makes political capital out of twisting the facts. For example, the extent or borders of Europe are very much a moot point: where do Europe's borders lie? Whether Turkey, Russia, Ukraine or even Israel 'belong' to Europe and therefore, potentially, to the EU, depends heavily on historical arguments: at the very least historians should demonstrate that Europe has never been a constant, and that its geographical borders have drifted in and out, especially in the East, and that the whole notion of a continental divide between Asia and Europe is highly questionable.³ Secondly, historians are always affected by events which change the present, for history is – in an important sense – a dialogue between

² Amongst many commentaries, see P. Dekker, S. Ederveen, *Europese tijden. De publieke opinie over Europa en Arbeidstijden vergeleken en verklaard* (The Hague, 2005).

³ See M. W. Lewis, K. E. Wigen, *The myth of continents* (Berkeley, 1997); and M. J. Wintle, 'Europe's eastern border: arbitrary beyond description?', in: M. Spiering, et al., eds, *De weerspannigheid van de feiten* (Hilversum, 2000) 255-268.

present and past, as Benedetto Croce expressed it.⁴ If the present changes, then so do the terms of the dialogue. Historians of Europe, and especially of modern Europe, will hardly be able to ignore the check to integration we have recently experienced, and their questions will alter slightly as a result. Thirdly, some of those who control intellectual and financial resources in our profession may well lean towards supporting particular areas of research in the future, because of the events of May-June 2005. It could well be that issues like migration, Turkish political culture, or relations between voters and political elites in France and the Netherlands, receive rather more attention than they have in the past.

More specifically concerning the implications of those events for the work of historians of Europe and of European integration, once again it has been made abundantly clear that there is no such thing as an undivided, single European history. Europe as an idea or a continent or a political organization is always contested and pluriform. Europe seen from France is quite different from Europe seen from Silesia (let alone from Mumbai), and indeed Europe viewed from bourgeois comfort is quite different from Europe as observed from the *banlieue*. There is no single European narrative, and there is at least as much discontinuity as there is continuity in European history.⁵ Certainly, any attempt to write European history in a teleological or ‘Whiggish’ manner as a pre-history of the European Union is almost certain to involve distortion, just as much as would the writing of Dutch history purely in terms of a pre-history of modern, romantic nationalism. A more technical point is that the large numbers of attitude surveys about Europe, most famously those conducted on behalf of the EU in the Eurobarometer series,⁶ are in need of reappraisal. They have been carried out now for well over thirty years, and are often now used as a kind of time series of feelings about being or becoming ‘European’. They are deployed to support all manner of premises about European integration, for and against, and indeed are very popular as sources for BA and MA dissertations in our universities. Attitude surveys clearly have a place as source material in the social sciences, but they are fraught with methodological difficulties. Certainly they were of little assistance in predicting the no-votes of 2005, and as yet have done little to explain them either. To avoid such surveys being relegated to the ‘garbage-in, garbage-out’ category of evidence, the historical (and political science) profession needs to be much more careful in conducting them, and in using their results.

European and national identity

A final point highlighted by the referenda of 2005 is the use of theories of state formation and particularly of nation formation in assessing the history of European integration. Beginning a generation ago with the work of Charles Tilly⁷ and others on state formation in the early modern period, and then in a

⁴ B. Croce, *History: its theory and practice* (New York, 1960 [1919]).

⁵ G. Barraclough, *History in a changing world* (Oxford, 1955) 32-53.

⁶ See http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm, consulted 28 July 2006.

⁷ E.g. C. Tilly, ed., *The formation of national states in Western Europe* (Princeton, 1975).

tidal wave of studies about the more recent formation of European nations and the nation states of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we now have a situation where the nation, the nation state and national identity are perhaps the most widely used analytical concepts across the family of historical disciplines; the 'cultural turn' in the profession has enhanced their prominence. Almost naturally, then, such analytical tools have been applied at European level too, and in many cases, to one extent or another, European integration is treated in terms of a nation state in the making. European identity is directly compared with national identity, for example,⁸ and the processes of institutionalizing the European Communities and then the Union are frequently compared with those which have underpinned the European nation states since the sixteenth century, and especially in the last two centuries. This approach has enormous limitations, and the events of 2005 have brought that home more than ever. First, nation formation, national identity and the growth of the national state in Europe were all essentially nineteenth-century phenomena, and closely linked to that period in terms of economic development in the form of industrialization: for Ernst Gellner, for example, nationalism without industrialization was unthinkable.⁹ It is therefore unhistorical, or at least anachronistic, to apply that set of concepts, unadjusted, to a process which has taken place at the end of the twentieth century, some hundred years later, when circumstances and events were completely transformed, not least by three world wars (one of them Cold).¹⁰ Second, by applying the paradigm of the nation to Europe, there is a concomitant assumption that Europe and the nation states are implicitly inimical: that if one makes progress, the other will suffer. Much nationalist rhetoric, supported by some rather essentialist but nonetheless serious academic comment, assumes a zero-sum game in which any increase in feelings of supranational identity must come necessarily at the direct expense of national identity.¹¹ Third, the nationalistic approach also ignores the interesting fact that the European Union is an utterly unique political construction, with no peers and very few even partial precedents: it is simply very unlike a nation state, or any other modern state form. It deserves analysis on its own terms, not on second-hand ones.

Are these things perhaps more acutely experienced in the Netherlands than elsewhere? After all, the Dutch themselves, along with the French, were directly responsible for pulling the plug. But even more than the French, the Dutch appear to be rather unlikely Eurosceptics.¹² Historically, they have been willing to surrender much of their decision-making (especially in foreign

⁸ E.g. A. D. Smith, 'National identity and the idea of European unity', *International Affairs*, LXVIII (1992) i, 55-76.

⁹ E. Gellner, *Nations and nationalism* (Oxford, 1983).

¹⁰ M. K. Karabalik, 'Application of national identity formation theories to European identity: a comparative historical critique' (MA thesis, European Studies, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2005).

¹¹ Smith, 'National identity'.

¹² R. Harmsen, M. Spiering, eds, *Euroscepticism: party politics, national identity and European integration* (Amsterdam, 2004), *European Studies*, vol. XX.

affairs) to their elites, and to live with the consequences. There was, it is true, a major democratization of Dutch foreign policy in the 1960s, which coincided with a more general rejection of back-room, cigar-smoke politics, but in many policy spheres the elites were able to reassert their control. Until very recently at least, there was little of that cynical and open distrust of politicians which characterizes some other countries, for example next-door neighbour Belgium, and many others further south in Europe. Most of the elite was and continues to be very much in favour of European integration: only Luxembourg has been more ready to sign away formal parts of its national sovereignty on such a scale. So the change in direction and the undermining of the elites, whether these are temporary or more long-lasting developments, may be cause for concern, and to an extent they will concern historians too, especially in their functions as teachers of students, and informers of public, political opinion. But to the extent that historians are concerned with the past rather than with the present or the future, all of these points of impact which the referenda may have are likely to play a limited role in the agenda-setting of serious historical researchers in the Netherlands, and indeed elsewhere.

What is Europe?

But that does not mean that we cannot use the occasion to the profession's advantage. The votes against 'Europe' which France and the Netherlands took had at least a whiff of xenophobia about them. Whatever happens to the European integration project in the future, historians should – and I use the tense of exhortation sparingly but consciously – do what they can to minimize that, especially where it means correcting false or distorted 'historical' assertions used in politics. In that connection there is one set of arguments to which I would like to draw particular attention, and they are those which have to do with defining Europe.

Many of the problems which appear to beset Europe, like those of the democratic deficit and enlargement, problems which presumably contributed to the no-votes of 2005, have emphasized the need for a clearer self-definition of the EU. Enlargement has demanded the formulation of membership criteria, while the 'deficit' requires that Europeans be made to feel more a part of the Union and more directly allied to its aims and processes. At various times the concept of European identity has been used to try and solve both these requirements. There have been attempts to develop and define European identity as a set of criteria with which applicant states must comply before becoming eligible for membership, and also as a means of encouraging Europeans to 'identify' more with the Union, and to express their commitment by participating in its democratic processes and supporting its leaders. Identity, then, has been seen as a panacea for these underlying problems besetting the EU.¹³

¹³ The argument here follows that in parts of M. J. Wintle, 'Looking outwards: the inclusivity of European identity', in: A. Baum-Ceisig, A. Faber, eds, *Soziales Europa?* (Wiesbaden, 2005) 63-76; and *idem*, 'Identity in the European Union: culture or citizenship?', in: L. Versteegh, et al., eds, *De veelzijdige burger* (Amsterdam, 2005) 167-174.

Ideas about a European identity, and the historical research which underpins those ideas, fall into two broad categories: those based on shared citizenship, and those based on shared culture. The first is perhaps best represented by Jürgen Habermas' 'constitutional patriotism',¹⁴ which envisages allegiance to a political culture, to a system of rights and duties as citizens, rather than the second alternative, which seeks to build or reveal a collective identity based on exclusive membership of a cultural community, sharing common origins, history, myths and even ancestry or blood.¹⁵ There is an implied debate about whether support for the EU should be encouraged and expressed in terms of citizenship or culture: is being 'European' a question of *political* culture in which individuals opt into a set of rules, rights and duties to which they subscribe as participating citizens, or does it rest on a more essentialist and exclusive culture based on shared experiences, traditions and memories? Most of the academic research which underpins the citizenship model is conducted by political scientists, though the social historian Hartmut Kaelble has contributed important work showing how European citizenship has known various phases of growth since the Second World War.¹⁶ There is a European 'public space' of sorts, with its 'Euro-experts', recurring European issues in national political and media debates, and a role for European civil society. Repeatedly in those Eurobarometer polls and surveys about half of Europeans say they have some kind of identification with Europe or the EU, alongside other allegiances. As Kaelble concludes, some progress towards European citizenship has been made. But however desirable a citizenship/constitution-based approach to European identity might be, it remains seriously underdeveloped.¹⁷ In the mean time, the culture-based, more essentialist approaches are still current, and for the moment inevitable. Most of the contribution by historians to the debate has tended to be here, on the side of European common culture, heritage and history, and this is where the dangers lie, and where vigilance in the profession, enhanced by the French and Dutch apparent denial of that common culture in their referenda, can play an important role.

A European culture?

The cultural approach to European identity and its history tends to pose questions such as the following: is European identity not based on membership of a specifically European culture or heritage? Is it possible for an immigrant Asian Muslim, for example, to be or ever become a European? Is it not impossible to be European without abandoning all other cultural allegiances and buying into the exclusive importance of an ancient, Christian, capitalist

¹⁴ E.g. J. Habermas, 'Citizenship and national identity: some reflections on the future of Europe', *Praxis International*, XII (1992) i, 1-19.

¹⁵ W. Spohn, A. Triandafyllidou, eds, *Europeanisation, national identities and migration* (London, 2003) 21f.

¹⁶ H. Kaelble, 'European symbols, 1945-2000: concept, meaning and historical change', in: L. Passerini, ed., *Figures d'Europe: images and myths of Europe* (Brussels, 2003) 47-61.

¹⁷ Kaelble, 'European symbols', 52-7.

heritage, however defined? It is clear that such culture-based concepts are fraught with injustices and dangers. Given that situation, as historians who provide many of the materials for the debate, we can ensure that a number of precautions are taken when approaching the subject of the origins and development of European identity, so central to legitimacy in the European Union.

First, there is a common but false assumption that culture, or indeed identity, is in any sense single or unified. That assumption immediately becomes exclusionary, whether or not it is intended to be. In fact there are many Europes, and always have been, long before the advent of the EU: each country has its own view of Europe, and Europe has been and continues to be used in a wide variety of ways in the process of national or regional identity formation.¹⁸

Second, respect for diversity is invariably cited as a core item in European culture, and indeed in European identity: it is then odd that so many protestations of European identity are cultural and exclusionary. Again, Europe means different things to different people: to be Spanish and European is not the same as feeling Polish and European, and for many migrants (including myself) and refugees the whole idea of nation-defined culture or state-limited identity is increasingly called into question.¹⁹ Europe is therefore in the eye of the beholder, and there have been many different eyes, now and in the past.

Perhaps we shall continue to build a European citizenship and a European constitutional *demos*; that is a political choice. However, it is as yet in its infancy, and we still have a situation where the we-feelings of community are important, and the politics of identity are still being played out in terms of all other kinds of culture, as well as the political.²⁰ Historians should be sparing with declarations of what European identity is and of where its origins lie; on the occasions that pronouncements must indeed be made we should ensure that they are inclusive rather than exclusive. Of all people, historians should recall that the only previous occasions during which Europe was substantially politically united were under Napoleon and Hitler; neither of those is remembered as a happy episode.

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¹⁸ M. af Malmberg, B. Stråth, eds, *The meaning of Europe: variety and contention with and among nations* (Oxford, 2002) 10-21.

¹⁹ A. Paasi, 'Europe as a social process and discourse', *European Urban and Regional Studies*, VIII (2001) i, 7-28.

²⁰ L-E. Cederman, ed., *Constructing Europe's identity: the external dimension* (London, 2001) 241-248.

Summary

Michael Wintle, *'History and public opinion: the historical profession and the French-Dutch rejection of the EU Constitutional Treaty'*

In May-June 2005, the French and then the Dutch rejected the EU Constitutional Treaty. Were those events significant for the Dutch historical profession? Not very much: student demand for courses on Europe is booming and trade books on European history continue to sell well. However, the referenda do remind us of some opportunities for historians. This article argues that they should, more than ever, continue to lay bare the 'historical' nonsense that many politicians spout. In due course, historians will provide clear evidence about the reasons for the negative votes. They can also assist clarity of thinking by pointing out the anomaly of comparing the modern EU with nation states formed in the nineteenth century, and by insisting that there are many Europes, not just one. Historians should be sparing with declarations of what European identity is: Europe is, and always has been, in the eye of the beholder.

Recensies

Huizenga, E., *Tussen autoriteit en empirie. De Middelnederlandse chirurgieën in de veertiende en vijftiende eeuw en hun maatschappelijke context* (Artesliteratuur in de Nederlanden II; Hilversum: Verloren, 2003, 635 blz., ISBN 90 6550 768 X).

In de nalatenschap van Pieter van Foreest, stadsarts te Delft en behandelaar van onder andere Willem de Zwijger en zijn familie, bevond zich een manuscript met als titel *Vander Empiriken, Lantloeperen, ende valscher medicyns bedroch* (ca. 1590). De in Italië gepromoveerde arts voelde zich tegen het eind van zijn loopbaan geroepen al zijn bezwaren tegen helers die hun kennis in de praktijk hadden opgedaan nog eens op een rijtje te zetten. ‘Empirisch’ had vanaf de late middeleeuwen tot ver in de vroegmoderne tijd een negatieve klank. De term zelf stamde uit de oudheid toen de artsen al in verschillende scholen waren ingedeeld, naar gelang ze meer of minder theorie in hun behandeling toepasten. Toch maakt de overlevering van een grote hoeveelheid geneeskundige teksten in de volkstaal duidelijk dat de gestudeerde artsen het rijk niet bepaald alleen hadden op de zogenaamd medische markt en dat hun geschimp op genezers met een niet-universitaire achtergrond niet vrij was van beroepsnijd. Hoewel de *doctores medicinae* de neiging vertoonden empirici op één hoop te gooien met charlatans, hadden zij in de praktijk juist veel te maken met de tussencategorie van chirurgijns, die praktijkervaring paarden aan scholing. Ook Pieter van Foreest heeft in Delft anatomisch onderwijs voor chirurgijns gegeven.

Erwin Huizenga maakt niet alleen duidelijk hoe wijd verbreid en maatschappelijk belangrijk deze beroepsgroep was in de late middeleeuwen, maar tevens hoe de chirurgijns aan hun kennis kwamen en vooral hoe professioneel zij hun vak beoefenden. Daartoe baseerde hij zich op middeleeuwse *artes*-teksten die chirurgische kennis bevatten. Het door de auteur verzamelde corpus van Middelnederlandse chirurgieën in handschrift en (post)incunabel vormt dan ook het fundament van deze degelijke studie. De voorbeeldige bijlage I geeft de bewaarde teksten naar jaar van ontstaan, de overgeleverde exemplaren en hun vindplaats, edities en literatuur over de opgenomen codices. Alleen dit overzicht maakt het boek al de moeite van het verschijnen en bestuderen waard. De belangrijkste chirurgische teksten van de middeleeuwen – Willem van Saliceto, Lanfranc van Milaan en Henri de Mondeville – blijken compleet en in een vroeg stadium uit het Latijn in het Middelnederlands te zijn vertaald. Met onnoemelijk geduld moet Huizenga hebben gezocht. Hij vond namelijk niet alleen de prachtedities, maar zelfs de kleinste snippers die ooit genezers tot steun moeten zijn geweest. Het gemeentearchief van het Gelderse Hattem bezit bijvoorbeeld een pagina met het incipit ‘Hoe dat embryo gewonnen wordt’, een uittreksel van Lanfranc met betrekking tot de gynaecologie. Het fragment bewijst dat omstreeks 1500 ook vroedvrouwen niet zonder meer als medisch-theoretisch ignorant konden worden weggezet.