



# A History of Classical Liberalism in the Netherlands

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[LINK TO ABSTRACT](#)

The Netherlands has a reputation as a liberty-loving, free trading country. In some respects, classical liberal ideas about the economy and personal freedom seem deeply engrained in Dutch culture, from the Frisian Freedom in the Middle Ages, to the embrace of commerce before the Dutch Republic, and, down to recent times, to gay marriage and liberal attitudes about personal choice in sex and drugs. In other respects, however, the Dutch story is one of proto-liberal leadership and great promise up through the 17th century, and then a loss of classical-liberal footing and indeed a rather sorry showing through the 20th century and up to today. This article will sketch the Dutch story over many centuries.

Liberalism as a political outlook only achieved self-conscious coherence in Europe from the 18th century onwards. For classical liberalism, however, freedom of religion, conscience, commerce, and personal lifestyle are but expressions of the basic idea of freedom from coercive restrictions imposed by government. Adam Smith spoke of “allowing every man to pursue his own interest his own way, upon the liberal plan of equality, liberty, and justice” (Smith 1976/1776, 664). Such a presumption of liberty is characteristic of classical liberalism, as understood in the present paper.

With this study, I do not mean to suggest that things told of here led by necessity to the development of classical liberalism. Following Quentin Skinner (2002) and J. G. A. Pocock (1989), I acknowledge that ideas should be seen in the context of the time and circumstances they were put forward. At the same time, some ideas are of a perennial nature, even when they are not completely stable

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1. I would like to thank Patrick van Schie, Erwin Dekker, and the anonymous referees for comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this article.

in meaning. The 17th-century idea of freedom of conscience is not the same as our modern freedom of religion. Yet the core idea has remained recognizable and fairly stable in meaning, namely the idea that an individual should be allowed to decide for his or herself about religious belief (Van de Haar 2009, 14–15; 2015, 17–18). Zooming in at the specific Dutch historical circumstances, I follow Marius Wessels’ suggestion of the existence of a ‘Dutch tradition of freedom.’ He emphasizes that before the 18th century, when liberalism became a more or less coherent doctrine, a number of developments in economics, politics, and political and moral philosophy can safely be labelled ‘proto-liberal’ (Wessels 1998). Still, thinkers who advanced ideas that appear proto-liberal may have had aims and sensibilities that differed from those of Smith and other expositors of “the liberal plan.”

Compared to other variants of liberalism, classical liberalism stands out for its realistic view of human nature, in which both reason and emotion have a place in the explanation of human behavior, but the first cannot always subdue the second. Classical liberalism entails negative individual freedom, or the entitlement of individuals to a large private domain, in particular vis-à-vis the state. Associations should be voluntary, while classical natural rights, in particular those to life, property, and liberty, are critical for the preservation of individual liberty. These natural rights entail freedom of speech, the press, religion, association, et cetera. The state only has a small number of tasks (judiciary, defense, some public goods), while societal order must depend to a large degree on spontaneous ordering processes, such as the free market. Governments are bound by the rule of law, based on constitutional limits to their power.

Another liberalism spoken about in this article is social liberalism, a 19th-century variant, which shares some affinity with classical liberalism, for example in abstaining from the endorsement of outright socialism, communism, and fascism. But it is at variance with classical liberalism in abandoning the presumption against the governmentalization of social affairs, or at least abandoning the breadth with which classical liberalism upholds that presumption. Social liberals are far less opposed to government intervention in private lives and the economy, and rather supportive of extended social welfare arrangements. Sometimes I use ‘liberalism’ to cover both variants (for more detail see Van de Haar 2015), but my focus here is on classical liberalism.

The historical development of the country now known as Kingdom of the Netherlands is central to this article. It has of course seen many geographical and border changes throughout the ages. It has been part of the German Holy Roman Empire, the lands of the House of Burgundy, and the Habsburg Empire. For long periods it included the Southern Netherlands, which now covers Belgium, Luxembourg and some parts of northern France, and between 1815 and 1830 only the current Belgium area. The northern part of the province of Brabant became

Dutch after the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, while parts of the province of Limburg were also part of the German League until its demise in 1867 (Andeweg et al. 2020, 1–8; Kennedy 2017, 3–6). It goes beyond the purposes of this article to account for all these different situations.

Proceeding chronologically, I start around the year 1000 and end in our time. The story attempts to distinguish the main economic, social, philosophical and political developments in the Netherlands related to classical liberalism and to a lesser extent social liberalism.

## Middle Ages to 1550

The foundations for Dutch political culture and economy were laid in the late Middle Ages, as Maarten Prak and Jan Luiten Van Zanden (2023) argue. An important reason for the Dutch tradition of freedom lies in the geographical fact that the country is located in the northwest of Europe, where rulers from Austria, Germany, and France could less easily exercise control. It was also swampy, sandy, and generally less attractive land to hold or occupy. Being peripheral to the centers of great power led to the growth of relatively strong local towns and regions, which would evolve into the Dutch provinces. In the center and the west of the country, an important feature was the draining of wasteland, done at first to harvest peat for heating and later to use the drained land for farming. Local rulers, including the Bishop of Utrecht, accorded rights to developers. The laws included provisions for future taxes to be paid to the rulers. Local communities emerged after the reclamation works, which set up local drainage or dike boards (*beemraden*), which still exist. In return for the duties paid, elected representatives had a say in affairs. During 1000–1350 the Netherlands saw a relatively strong civil society consisting of guilds, draining boards, and autonomous villages and cities, where regular meetings and elections were established.

Feudalism also played an important role in the development of the Netherlands. The trust-based reciprocity between lord and vassal was more flexible than one might suppose, and it fostered cooperation to grow the pie. People could adapt to changing circumstances. Feudal times saw an explosion of agricultural produce (dairy and cattle farming) and peat, which led to rapid population growth. The Church also played a role, as it ensured some European unity in norms and values and was an economic actor as well. Utrecht was the seat of the Archdiocese, which attracted luxury trade. Another factor was church construction. From the fourteenth century, the Netherlands caught up with and surpassed other European countries in the building of churches. The cities in the eastern part of the country were far more important than those in the west. Trade with German cities on

the rivers Rhine and IJssel was a source of richness in cities like Tiel, Deventer, Zutphen, Zwolle, Harderwijk, and Hattem (some of these became part of the Hanseatic League), while the North and East Seas allowed for international trade abroad (Prak and Van Zanden 2023, 14–57).

In Friesland, which included the lands north of Amsterdam, which was only a minor village at the time, there was no feudal tradition. The land was owned by ‘free farmers’ who largely governed and defended themselves, traded along the German and Baltic coasts, and had their own silver and gold coins. The arrangement and the period are known as the ‘Frisian Freedom.’ The Counts of Holland also stimulated the development of cities, by granting special rights of self-rule and autonomy, such as in Dordrecht. One effect was that the influence of the more local nobility decreased and that central political authority was weak at best. The guilds had some political influence (more so in the Southern Netherlands), although they could be a protectionist force in the economic sense. In the fourteenth century, as in other countries, when rulers needed money to wage wars, they called upon representatives of the regions (‘States’), which led to the development of the States-General, another rudimentary form of civil influence on state decision-making (Wessels 1998, 9–20).

In the late Middle Ages (1350–1566) the western part of the country—Holland and Zeeland—became more important, politically and economically, although Flanders and Brabant remained most important. This period saw a rapid urbanization, made possible by the improvement of the waterways, which enabled the growth of cities such as Amsterdam, Haarlem, Leiden, Delft, Gouda, and Rotterdam. Dairy production needed fewer people, and the products traded for wheat from France and the Baltics. The surplus of workers moved to the cities. Around 1500, 45 percent of Dutch people lived in cities, a high figure compared to other European countries. Those remaining on the land were not all small farmers, as about half of them worked as salaried workers, for example in textiles, fisheries, and digging peat. In 1514 the share of agriculture in the income of Holland decreased to less than 20 percent, produced by a quarter of the work force, while fisheries and peat cutting accounted for 15 percent of the work force. Prak and Van Zanden say that in this period “capitalism was born,” although we are of course looking at developments of a number of factors, in different paces. The capitalist development was based on trusting market relationships to continue to provide food and other primary goods, not least through trade in textiles, beer, peat, and fish. Dutch ships already dominated trade routes on the East Sea. Importantly, property rights were well protected, while capital markets functioned well, with interest rates decreasing from 12 percent in 1350 to 5–6 percent in 1450 (also see McCloskey and Nash 1984). Villages were free to develop economically, as they were largely independent from adjacent cities. Politically, there was balance

between the several cities, and all local rulers had to share power. In short, a modern market economy developed, with commercialization of production, labor, capital, and agricultural land (Prak and Van Zanden 2013, 25–76).

In this context there was a growing demand for human capital. The relatively high literacy of the Dutch population was another crucial factor to its economic and political development. Important was the influence of the movement Brethren of the Common Life (also known as Modern Devotion), a religious community founded by Geert Grote in Deventer in 1374. Although the movement operated within the bounds of the Roman Catholic Church, Grote was dissatisfied with moral decline in the church. To him religion was a personal matter, which meant that individuals should be able to read the Bible and other books in the vernacular. Hence the Brethren first copied and later printed books and texts, and founded Brethren houses, schools, monasteries, and communities. It was ‘education for all,’ all over the country, and in parts of Westphalia as well. This led to increased economic development, not only in Deventer but throughout the Netherlands, which had lasting economic effects (Akçomak et al. 2016).

Jumping forward a century we must highlight the famed thinker Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (1467–1536), who spread a number of ideas now associated with liberalism. Erasmus was associated with Christian Humanism and went to the famous Latin School in Deventer. His best-known book, *The Praise of Folly* (1511), was a critique of many things—of national pride, of people who think too much of themselves, of scholastics, and of the wrongdoings of the church, the monasteries, and popes in particular (Russell 2001, 543–548). Erasmus believed in the individual’s capacity to improve herself. He wrote many pamphlets on the importance of education and in his politics called for arbitration instead of war. Humans had a talent for piety and had the moral duty and actual capacity to do good, even when their power was limited and dependent on divine grace (Rummel and MacPhail 2021). Erasmus broaches the Reformation. In the balance of authority between church hierarchy and scripture, Erasmus lightened the first with his criticisms and added heft to the second with his new Latin and Greek editions of the New Testament.

The foundations for liberal commercial society laid in this period thus consisted of a mix of ideas, practices, and customs. Political power was dispersed, which led to the development of several social institutions, with input of different groups such as the church, guilds, farmers, and laymen. Economically, trade was of major importance already, fostered by dairy farming and shipbuilding abilities. Dutch human capital also developed early, fostered by the work of Geert Grote and Erasmus, who also provided a philosophical base with a degree of liberty at its center.

## Dutch Golden Age (1550–1700)

On these proto-liberal foundations the Dutch republic became the most powerful and influential country on the globe, and remained so for about a century. Trade, empire, innovation, and, compared to other countries, large degrees of personal, societal, and religious liberty were the most important underpinnings.

In 1568 began the Dutch Revolt against the Spanish rulers, a struggle only fully resolved in 1648, at the Peace of Westphalia. The Revolt was directed against the harsh Spanish Catholicism of Philip II. His attempt to lay down strict Catholic rules met with fierce resistance, by Protestants but also by moderate Catholics. Freedom of conscience and religion was a major point in a 1579 treaty among the Dutch provinces, the Union of Utrecht, although the freedom of religious service was still a point of contention. Besides religion, the other main point of contention was a number of new taxes imposed by the Spanish, which were often used for warfare against other powers such as the Ottoman Empire. On 26 July 1581, the States General of the Northern Netherlands moved further, and declared themselves to be free from the rule of Philip II, due to his unjust rule, in the *Acte van Verlatinghe* (Act of Abjuration), nearly two centuries before the American Declaration of Independence of 1776. The Dutch sovereign state was born, and it was based on the strong desire for liberty in multiple senses of that term (Wessels 1998, 34–43).

Despite continued warfare with the Spanish, the new Republic quickly became a great success. The Dutch became an economic powerhouse for almost a century, dominating trade in Europe and in many other parts of the globe as well. Indeed the proceeds made the war possible. Amsterdam became the leading port of the Baltic Sea trade, trading specialized goods from all over for Eastern European grain and wood. In 1583, 84 percent of goods shipped out of Danzig, and 73 percent shipped into that most important Baltic trading city, were transported by Dutch ships. Atlantic coastal trade was also strong. In 1590, the Spanish themselves had to end their embargo on Dutch trade, because they were too dependent on trade in wood and grain. Dominance in the herring trade was also relevant. Hence, the Dutch Golden Age was built on free commerce: importing goods, refining or refinishing them for sale and exporting them again. Important for this success were a number of factors: immigration of labor, especially from the Southern Netherlands (Antwerp), which continued under Habsburg rule, but also Jews from Portugal and later from Germany and Scandinavia; urbanization, with Amsterdam becoming by 1670 the third-largest city in Europe after Paris and London; financial investment; a free, individualized business climate; and technological innovation, such as the wind-powered sawmill, which was crucial for the production of cheap

and easy-to-build *fluyt* merchant ships, produced by the hundreds annually (Kennedy 2017, 142–146).

The economic boom was enabled by financial innovation. Besides the first stock exchange, two Italian-inspired governmental interventions saw light in Amsterdam: a public exchange bank, called *Wisselbank* (with the municipality as guarantor), and a public credit bank (*Bank van Lening*), both forerunners of today's central banks. They were meant to combat instability arising from speculation and the manipulation of exchange rates, and also to control and stabilize the monetary and financial systems. The Dutch East India Company (VOC), from 1602 onwards, can be seen as one of the first modern companies in the world: a limited liability company, with shares traded on the stock exchange, speculation on these shares, and a division between ownership and management, which led to all kinds of conflicts (see Gelderblom and Jonker 2004). The VOC needed and attracted huge amounts of money, used for building trading posts, harbors, fortresses, infrastructure, and so on. It remained in operation for over 200 years, being a stable, well-funded global commercial enterprise. It was dominant in large parts of the trade between Asia and Europe and between Asian ports. The main traded commodities changed throughout these years: from spices to Indian textiles, followed by coffee and sugar from Java and tea from China. The major factor in the slow but certain downfall of the company, which took almost the whole of the 18th century, was that profits were no longer invested but paid out in dividends to the shareholders (Prak and Van Zanden 2023, 90–143).

However, it must be underlined that neither the VOC nor the West Indies Company were classical-liberal highlights. They used slavery in Asia, South Africa, the Caribbean, and South America, and abused and murdered many people there. So, while enjoying freedom at home, they operated on the basis of unfreedom abroad.

Compared to other places in Europe, England included, the Dutch Republic knew a relatively large freedom of opinion and expression. However, “virtually nowhere, not even in England or Holland after 1688, was full tolerance the rule and hardly anyone subscribed to the idea that the individual should be free to think and believe as he or she thought fit” (Israel 2001, 17), and the Catholic faith was now officially forbidden (although tolerated by the authorities after specific payments were made), and members of faiths other than the Dutch Reformed Church could not hold official public positions. There was less censorship than in other places, and Dutch publishers supplied northern Europe, especially France, with forbidden books that had to be smuggled in. The Dutch Republic was also the center of (French-language) learned journals, which were important carriers of cultural and intellectual change, from the late 17th century onwards. Of the nearly 30 learned journals with international standing in Europe in 1746, two were based

in France, several in Germany and Italy, one in England, and no less than 18 in the Netherlands. The Republic was also a refuge for thinkers, such as René Descartes, Pierre Bayle, and John Locke. In terms of intellectual tendency, the Netherlands became the chief source for the spread of Cartesian ideas and mechanistic thinking around northern Europe. The high prestige of Dutch universities attracted many foreign students (Israel 2001, 23–58, 104, 116–118, 149, 295–327), not least from Scotland.

## **Dutch (proto-)classical liberal thinkers**

This boom in intellectual activities is also reflected in Dutch contributions to the development of (proto-)liberal thought. The most famous Dutch liberal thinkers, or at least those who introduced, defended, or fostered ideas that would become part of classical liberal thought, lived in and around the Golden Age. Although many more Dutchmen participated in the lively public debate in Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries, the five best known to us are Grotius, Spinoza, Bernard Mandeville, and to a lesser extent Pieter and Johan de la Court. Spinoza and Grotius were most influential, and of importance for the early modern foundations of classical liberalism (Collins 2011). All five wrote pleas for greater individual freedom, including free trade, economic liberty, and personal liberties, not least of conscience. It made them controversial, if not infamous, among contemporaries. Hence Doug Den Uyl's remark (1987), that "historically Spinoza and Mandeville have at least one thing in common: their writings caused such a furor of controversy that one would have thought the whole fabric of Western civilization was jeopardized by their work."

Generally, Dutch thought of this period was a hymn to freedom, also in the works of the lesser thinkers not discussed here. In the 17th century, the Dutch already laid out all the essential political ideas of the Enlightenment of a century later (Kossmann 2000, 128–129).

This section briefly introduces Grotius, Spinoza, Mandeville, and Pieter and Johan de la Court, with an emphasis on the liberal aspects in their writings.

### **Hugo de Groot (Grotius) (1583–1645)**

Scholar, advocate, politician, refugee, and diplomat Hugo de Groot, better known internationally by his Latin name Grotius, wrote about a number ideas central to liberal thought, not least natural rights, natural law, and free trade. His writings on international law also had a direct effect on the thought of David Hume and Adam Smith (Van de Haar 2008; 2009, 41–74; 2013a; 2013b).



Born in Delft, Grotius' extraordinary talents were discovered at young age, entering Leiden University at the age of 11. King Henry IV of France even called him "the miracle of Holland." Nowadays, Grotius is perhaps best known for his work *De Jure Bellis ac Pacis* (1625), the declared purpose of which is to treat justice between nations, but to do so Grotius first discussed justice between individuals, so the massive work covers much more than international law. He also published many treatises and books throughout his life, not least in theology. His earlier book *Mare Liberum* (1609) discusses the limits of the rights of sovereigns to restrict travel and shipping on open waters. His first years he spent as advocate-



Hugo Grotius (1583–1645)

fiscal, before he quickly became an important politician in the Dutch Republic. He was pensionary, the most influential official, in Rotterdam, and at the national level he was a staunch ally of Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, the most influential politician of the country. Both were ousted in 1618, when the Counter-Remonstrant party succeeded in getting to power. Van Oldenbarnevelt was beheaded, but Grotius was sentenced to life imprisonment and confiscation of property. In 1621 he fled from his prison, Loevestein Castle, famously hidden in a book chest, and he became an exile in Paris. This was not the happiest period of his life, although he succeeded in entering the learned circles in Paris. His hopes for a return to the Netherlands were dashed time and again, and in 1634 he became the Swedish Ambassador to Paris. He was dismissed in 1645, and died on his way back from Stockholm, in the German city of Rostock on 28 August 1645 (Lesaffer and Nijman 2021, 17–87).

It is said that "no history of the rise of individual rights can be told without Grotius" (Somos 2021, 113). David Schmitz and Jason Brennan (2010) emphasize that he saw rights as bound to a person, not to a property or a relation, such as medieval serfdom had been. Liberty was an inalienable property belonging to individual men, and people do not have the right to give up that liberty by placing themselves in bondage, hence they should not be allowed to give up freedom for slavery. Grotius built the philosophical foundation of liberalism because, as Schmitz and Brennan put it, he argued that "the legal idea of a right was also an infrastructure of moral thinking about how a person ought to be treated." By birth, an individual had rights, to life, limb, and liberty. This is the idea of natural law, to be respected by everyone, including legislators, either Christian or non-Christian. Grotius did not argue for secular natural law himself, but he laid the groundwork for that idea by extending natural law from the realm of theology to that of philosophers and lawyers. He claimed his theory would be valid "even if

we were to grant what we cannot grant without the greatest wickedness, namely that there is no God, or that human affairs are of no concern to him” (Schmidtz and Brennan 2010, 106–109). In his political theory, Grotius attempted to prove, by going back to the Batavian times, that sovereignty resides in the hands of the people, not in the king, prince, or stadtholder (Weststeijn 2013, 30).

Grotius is also famous for fostering free trade, which was a “major issue in the political and economic debate—and warfare—between England and the Dutch Republic throughout the 17th century, from Grotius’ *Mare Liberum* onwards” (Weststeijn 2012, 227–228). *Mare Liberum* (*The Free Sea*) made a splash, but it was originally a chapter of *De Jurea Praedae* (*The Law of Prize and Booty*), a book that was only discovered in the 19th century. Influenced by Spanish legal scholar Francisco de Vitoria, Grotius’ goal was to make a positive case for the Dutch being able to trade in southeast Asia, opposing the Portuguese claim that they held property of the East and thus were within their rights to exclude the Dutch from entering that area. This was a violation of the fundamental right to preserve oneself, Grotius argued (Fitzmaurice 2021; for more detail see Armitage 2004).

### Pieter (1618–1685) and Johan (1622–1660) de la Court

Pieter de la Court and his brother Johan were wealthy cloth manufacturers from Leiden. They moved in republican circles and published a number of treatises, often in the vernacular instead of Latin. They openly criticized the monarchy, fanatically calling for a republic without the House of Orange, equating monarchy with tyranny. Besides prominence in the Netherlands, they also gained international fame, influencing such diverse thinkers as Samuel von Pufendorf, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Marie De Gournay, Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, Algernon Sidney, and their fellow Dutchmen Spinoza and Mandeville. After Johan’s death in 1660, Pieter used and built upon his work, making it hard to distinguish between the ideas of one or the other (Weststeijn 2012, 65–68, 349–357).



Pieter de la Court  
(1618–1685)

The brothers De la Court argued that sovereignty in a state always originates in the people, going back to the agreement people reach when leaving the state of nature (Weststeijn 2013, 65). In 1661, Pieter de la Court published *The Interests of Holland* (it also contained two chapters by Johan de Witt, the most powerful contemporary politician, who took a keen interest in de la Court), and the book was

an immediate bestseller. But it was also very controversial, leading to disciplinary measures by church and state. One year later Pieter revised and expanded the book, changing its title to *Political Maxims of the State of Holland* (*Aannysing der heilsame politieke gronden en maximen van de republike van Holland*). The book provides a mix of religious, political, and economic arguments. For example, while writing against sovereign princes and monarchs, he argued in favor of maximum liberty for the population—although, as was custom those days, that foremost meant the educated male part of the population. The true interest of any state was the joint welfare of the governor and governed. Good leaders will aim to expand the public welfare and will recognize that their population cannot be commanded around like horses. “Where there is liberty, there will be riches and people,” de la Court said in his defense of “a free commonwealth government.” The people thrive because freedom results in the growth of commerce, manufacturing, fishing, arts, and the population. Free trade and free fisheries are related, and they were the cornerstones of Dutch prosperity, as was the prohibition or limitation of guilds, monopolies (such as the West and East Indies Companies), and protectionism in general. Referring to his brother’s *Political Discourses* (1662), Pieter argued that the economic success of Holland also depends on the number of inhabitants. To attract foreigners it was crucial to have freedom and toleration of religious service, but also freedom of occupation: “strangers without freedom of earning their bread and seeking a livelihood cannot live amongst us” (de la Court 2003).

Commerce was the means for the preservation and increase of the polity, and for it to thrive there was a need for liberty. De la Court was rather radical in this. Liberty of trade, occupation, and enterprise, and also immigration, lead to commercial greatness for a country. Trade monopolies should be abandoned, such as the Dutch East India Company (VOC), whose privileges the de la Courts tried to overturn. Humans should enjoy the greatest amount of natural liberty within the boundaries of the law, including the freedom of religion, study, trade, manufactures, arts, and citizenship. The greatest degree of freedom, including low taxes, makes a city or place attractive to immigrants with knowledge and goods, and makes the city or place competitive as a result. The concept of liberty in the thought of de la Court includes individual freedom as non-interference and independence from arbitrary domination (Weststeijn 2012, 224–237).

### **Baruch de Spinoza (1632–1677)**

Spinoza’s family were Sephardic Jews. His ancestors fled from the Spanish Inquisition and moved to Amsterdam. Aged 24, he was excommunicated for no longer observing Jewish standards, rejecting the Jewish-Christian dogmas, and, worst of all, spreading his thoughts. He was banned from the Amsterdam Jewish

Quarter, and then lived in Rijnsburg, near Leiden (making lenses for microscopes, besides his scientific activities), Voorburg, and the Hague, where he died at the age of 45. Spinoza kept a wide scientific network all over Europe, including Henry Oldenburg, the secretary of the English Royal Society, and Gottfried Leibniz. Spinoza's principal works are the *Ethics*, *The Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, and his *Theologico-Political Treatise* (Feldman 1992, 1–5; Scruton 2000, 9–28).

Spinoza was the origin of much debate and ultimately change of opinion in the period 1650–1750, and all over Europe, although Hobbes was more influential in Britain. Spinoza was widely seen as an atheist. He denied the existence of miracles—a major issue at the time—and was a radical free thinker. Spinoza believed that motion is inherent in matter and that Nature is self-moving; he rejected divine providence and the idea that a God governs man's destiny. Spinoza also argued in favor of natural liberty, which included individual freedom, liberty of thought, and radical toleration. He was the first major European thinker to embrace democratic republicanism, including political freedom for all citizens (Israel 2001, 159–294; 2007, viii–ix). He is seen as the first modern thinker (as opposed to medieval), even more so than Descartes, because Spinoza “cut the ties with religious tradition as a source of information, instead relying upon natural means to arrive at the philosophical truth,” although he was no atheist. In his view of human nature he saw the passions and reason as two more or less equal sources of human conduct, without one necessarily being superior over the other (Feldman 1992).



Baruch de Spinoza  
(1632–1677)

Spinoza's ideas on economics are not well-known, yet some point in a classical liberal direction, albeit with important exceptions. On the one hand, Spinoza saw commerce and movable wealth as benign, because they foster interests that are either interdependent or require the same means for their furtherance. On the other hand, Spinoza thought property of real estate should be in the hands of the state, to avoid unresolvable disputes and unextinguishable envy (Spinoza 2000, 67–68, 80). Spinoza's politics and economics are interdependent. Order is needed for economic prosperity, as it will foster higher productivity through cooperation, specialization, and the division of labor, certainly when compared to the anarchy of the state of nature. Money is helpful in that it is mobile and can give access to any concrete good. A money-based system is dynamic and cooperative, he held, while a land-based one is static and antagonistic. The state needs to provide security and freedom of trade and contract, while the market will pacify the natural rivalry

among people. A harmony of interests will develop in commercial society, if the citizens can achieve their income from commerce. Yet if the state overregulates property rights, this will destabilize the whole order, as Spinoza said: “he who seeks to determine everything by law will aggravate vices rather than correct them. We must necessarily permit what we cannot prevent” (Wagener 1994). Hence economic well-being depends on liberty and order.

Democracy and liberty enabled people to live together in relative peace and harmony, despite religious and other differences. The Bible should not be read literally, nor should one opinion be imposed on all. The Scriptures and the writings of the Jewish prophets were helpful to teach people faith and benevolence, but were not sources of truth, which could only be found in reason (Schmidtz and Brennan 2010, 109–111). In his politics Spinoza should be considered as an evolutionary theorist, who (perhaps paradoxically) respected the lessons from practical politicians more than the abstract ideas of philosophers, as would Mandeville after him. Human nature was ruled by the passions, although Spinoza did not exclude the possibility of a life of reason. His thought (and Mandeville’s) remains an effective rebuttal to rationalistic enthusiasm in politics and social theory (Den Uyl 1987).

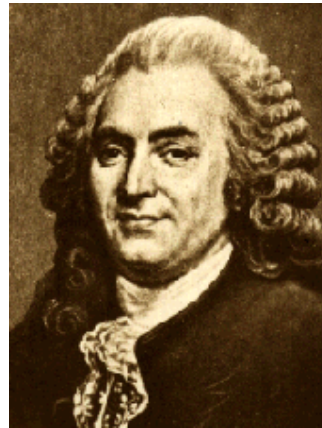
### **Bernard Mandeville (1670–1733)**

Born in Rotterdam and educated in philosophy and medicine in Leiden, Bernard Mandeville moved to London in his early twenties and would stay there for the rest of his life. A practicing medical doctor in what today we would call psychiatry, ‘The Dutch Doctor’ also published in philosophy, ethics, economics, and social, political, and religious commentary. Yet he did not build a coherent philosophical system. He became well-known, if not notorious, among contemporaries in England and the broader Anglo-Saxon world, far more than he was (and is) in his home country. Mandeville fought against hypocrisy of the clergy and the population at large, especially on topics of morality and sexuality. He even published a defense of brothels and prostitution, criticizing attempts to prohibit them and the double moral standards by lawmakers and people in the London Society for the Improvement of Morals (Mandeville 2006; Willemsen 2022, 13–66; Jansen 2006). He also famously argued that passions often regarded as negative, such as pride, selfishness, and lust, have an upside to them (Willemsen 2022, 67–96).

Mandeville is best known for his *Fable of the Bees, or Private Vices and Publick Benefits* (Mandeville 1988), published in two parts, in 1714 and 1729 respectively. It suggested spontaneous ordering mechanisms, as later developed by Adam Ferguson, David Hume, Adam Smith, and Friedrich Hayek, who praised Mandeville

exactly on this point, noting that “Mandeville did not show exactly how an order formed itself without design, but he made it abundantly clear that it did” (Hayek 1978, 249–266). Mandeville’s notion of private vices and public benefits did not mean, as Mandeville’s contemporaries argued, that everything that is vicious is also beneficial. Crimes should be punished. The only vice to be encouraged is useful vice. So, not all evil was a public benefit. The exact boundary was of course hard to establish. The growth of society and morals was gradual and evolutionary (Kaye 1988, lx, lxvi). The state originated in the desire for protection against wild animals, against protection from dangerous humans, and the gradual development of language as a basis for laws and regulations for a particular group of people (Willemsen 2022, 99–101).

Mandeville’s views on economics were well-known among contemporaries, not least because he defended luxury, which was rather uncommon. Luxury did not necessarily corrupt people nor was it the result of the waste of resources. Mandeville argued that national frugality was the result of certain economic conditions, which had nothing to do with morality. Great states and luxury were related, through production, trade, and commerce. The safeguarding and fostering of trade were prime interests of the state, and the inevitable result would be an increase in luxury. That many people objected to luxury but were fully engaged in fostering trade was a contradiction, Mandeville suggested. Luxury was another case of private vices and public benefits.



Bernard Mandeville  
(1670–1733)

The other main aspect of his economic thought was his strong defense of free trade, both domestically and internationally. Different from other English and Dutch writers on the issue who focused on state welfare, he emphasized that the selfish good of the individual would also be beneficial to the state (Kaye 1988, xciv–ciii). In his last work, *A Letter to Dion* (1732), Mandeville points at weaknesses of the market system but still is a powerful advocate of it: “to this emulation and striving to outdo one another it is owing, that... there is still a plus ultra left for the ingenious; it is this, or at least the consequence of it, that sets the poor to work, adds spurs to industry, and encourages the skillful artificer to search for further improvements” (quoted in Prendergast 2016, 121). Mandeville’s ideas fit with the classical-liberal preference for limited government and limited public institutional interference in the economy (Prendergast 2016; Van de Haar 2015). In *A Search into the Nature of Society* (1723) he described the working of the division of labor, a term he coined in his sixth dialogue. Mandeville always emphasized the economic role of

government (“a capable politician”), especially the protection of property rights. Yet he emphasized that individuals had a right to make their own (economic) choices, aiming to satisfy their self-interests and earn profits. While he was no economic theoretician, and also made a number of mercantilist remarks (for example on the balance of trade), there can be no doubt that in the main he contributed to the developing Dutch and English *laissez-faire* tradition (Willemsen 2022, 121–136).

It has been noted that Mandeville exercised influence on the ethical and economic thought of Hume (see, e.g., Mossner 1980, 49, 74; Harris 2015) and Smith (see, e.g., Schliesser 2017; Hanley 2016; Ross 2010). This is not to deny they also took pains to distance themselves from him, due to his notoriety but also because they attempted to offer a fuller moral theory. Still, they shared Mandeville’s emphasis on the importance of the selfish elements in human nature.

After 1730 no Dutchmen made any additional major philosophical contribution. This is not to deny that minor contributions were made, or that modern academics added to their fields of specialization. However, in general the Dutch transformed from thought leaders to followers of ideas and events initiated elsewhere.

## **Liberalism droops (1700–1840)**

After 100 years of richness and power, the Dutch Republic started to lose military, political, imperial, and economic power. Yet this should be seen in perspective: the Dutch remained fabulously rich, with one of the highest incomes per capita, and continually improving the quality of life of its citizens (McCloskey 2019, 228). It took other Western European countries until 1870 to catch up with Holland, measured in average income per head (McCloskey 2011, 194). Still, from 1672 onwards, the cities decreased in number of inhabitants, and the housing and art markets turned downward. Due to the expensive wars, the public debt had risen to unsustainable levels, with the Dutch state effectively going bankrupt in 1715. During the ensuing decades, political decision-making was slow, tax rates high, and social arrangements, such as publicly funded poor relief, were cut (Prak and Van Zanden 2013, 152–165). A stationary Dutch economy, as Adam Smith put it, was therefore predominant in the 18th century, even if it was on a relatively high level of wealth.

Intellectual input came from abroad now. Yet the great classical liberal thinkers were not very popular. The writings of the Scottish Enlightenment were generally welcomed, as the Dutch liked their political and moral moderation, as well as the focus on moral-philosophical questions. Yet the thinkers most famous to us

were not the most popular then. None of the writings of Francis Hutcheson, only a few writings of Hume (*The History of England* and the *Political Discourses*), and just a part of the *Wealth of Nations* were translated into Dutch, although the learned part of Dutch society would be able to read these authors in French. Most often they hardly read or spoke English (see Wilhelm 2018). Despite the influence of Grotius and Spinoza, Hume's philosophical writings were too skeptical to the Dutch taste. One might have expected that Smith's political economy fit the Dutch like a glove, but it was actually published during a protectionist time, when the Dutch were more concerned with preserving their economic conditions. If *The Wealth of Nations* was used in academic circles, it was mostly for the statistics in it. The evidence of other uses of it, such as by bankers, businessmen, or political writers, is limited. Smith received at best a sympathetic reception in the Low Countries, becoming a foreign member of two learned societies, but his fame would have to wait for later centuries. As for his moral theory, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* was largely overlooked despite several positive reviews after its publication. The dissemination of the ideas in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* depended on a few enthusiasts, but the moral theory of Hutcheson was far more prominent (Hengstmengel 2021).

The most famous 18th-century Scottish thinker in the Netherlands was James Beattie (1735–1803), a professor of moral philosophy and logic at Marischal College in Aberdeen. All his works would be translated into Dutch. In the United Kingdom, Beattie was also well-known, especially for his *Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth* (1770). He belonged to the first generation of the Scottish Common Sense school, together with Thomas Reid, George Campbell, and James Oswald. Common Sense philosophy, especially in Beattie's version, defended morality and religion against the perceived skepticism of Hume and George Berkeley which, in the Dutch view, undermined the foundation of morality. Beattie argued that there exist intuitive principles, or axioms, that are beyond reasonable doubt, whose truth can be perceived by man's faculty of common sense. It is not human reason that forms the ultimate criterion of truth, but instantaneous and instinctive feeling, which is in line with human nature and the Creator (Hengstmengel 2020). Beattie was more explicit in his moralism than Thomas Reid, and much closer to Adam Ferguson than most of his contemporaries or predecessors had been (Wood 1990).

Eighteenth-century Netherlands hardly produced classical-liberal highlights. The one exception is the Patriot Movement, because of its emphasis on political freedom. It arose against the background of the demise of the Dutch Republic, exemplified by the loss of the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780–1784). The Patriot Movement was primarily directed against the stadtholder and the rule of the House of Orange. In 1781, Baron Joan Derk van der Capellen tot den Pol wrote an anonymous pamphlet, *To the People of the Netherlands*, calling on the Dutch to defend



their rights against the stadtholder, challenging corrupt public institutions and reclaiming old local rights against the central government, including local militias, named Free Corps. The pamphlet was inspired by the American War for Independence, but as Jonathan Israel points out, in fact had its roots in the thought of 17th-century thinkers such as Grotius and De la Court, while explicitly calling on a “national feeling,” which was a relatively new phenomenon at the time. The Patriots wanted people to retake their freedom, and they fostered bottom-up democratic practices, foremost being popular participation in civic and provincial government. Militias should protect this popular freedom and take control of the state. The anti-monarchical Patriot Movement was multi-religious, including Catholics, Lutherans, Remonstrants, and other denominations (Israel 1995, 1098–1112). The Patriots became a political movement, with its main centers in Utrecht and the province of Gelderland. The appeal to the middle classes of this democratic movement was considerable, and the Patriots secured power in a number of key towns and various provinces, and through them in the States-General in The Hague. They ultimately stripped stadtholder Willem V of much of his political power. He was only restored into power in 1787, after the Prussian King had intervened, with British support. Despite their previous rhetoric the Patriots more or less vanished without a fight (Kennedy 2017, 258–260; Schama 1998).

From 1795 to 1814 the Netherlands were under French influence, first as the semi-independent Batavian Republic and then as part of Napoleon’s empire. The Batavian Republic was not very stable, but it was relatively democratic. Its founding law contained a number of classical liberal elements, making all people equal before the law regardless of their political views or their religion. It turned the federal Republic into a unitary state (Aerts 2013). After the defeat of the French, the Netherlands became a united kingdom, with King William I as its rather autocratic ruler. The southern part, now Belgium, seceded in 1830, a secession formalized in 1839.

In short, the period between 1700 and 1840 saw a stationary state, without many (classical) liberal highlights. The economy did fairly well, also due to the income from colonies, but overall much worse than before. Dutch influence on the world stage diminished and the country ended up as part of Napoleon’s empire. After 1813 Dutch independence was restored, but the new King was an authoritarian anti-liberal.

## **A so-called liberal age (1840–1918)**

The year 1848 was revolutionary in terms of constitutional developments. All over Europe, people demanded democratic reforms, and the Netherlands was no

exception. This was the result of the increased strength of the liberal movement, which had slowly commenced from the 1820s onwards. Under influence of liberal movements in France, Germany, Switzerland, and England, the Dutch liberal voice also became stronger. A central figure was the outspoken lawyer Dirk Donker Curtius, who rejected the remnants of the pre-1795 regime still visibly present, such as the influence of the old aristocracy, clientelism, and the autocratic ways of the King. He called for greater freedom of the press, greater religious freedom, direct elections for national parliament, a fully independent judiciary power, transparent public finances, and private commercial railways. Donker Curtius supported the Belgian secession, calling for public recognition of the new state by the Northern Netherlands, also demanding a new constitution, now that the structure of Kingdom of the Netherlands had fundamentally changed (Stuurman 1992, 95–134). Compared to the Patriot Movement, Donker Curtius and other liberals presented a more coherent program of economic and political liberalization, with individual freedom at its center (Van der List and Van Schie 1993, 1–4).

At the end of the 1830s, Johan Rudolf Thorbecke (1798–1872) started his ascent as the most influential liberal. Thorbecke would remain the central liberal figure in Dutch politics until the early 1870s. Yet his rise to political power took the whole 1840s. The new constitution of 1840 did not bring real change, much to liberal public dismay. It was not until early 1848 that King Willem III “turned into a revolutionary, overnight,” sacked his conservative cabinet, and gave Thorbecke orders to draft a new constitution. At the end of 1848, the new constitution was agreed to by parliament, with a leading role for Donker Curtius and his “radical liberal” friends, as Stuurman says. After a good deal of political turmoil, and much to the dismay of the King, who would continue to have bad relations with Thorbecke for the next twenty-three years, Thorbecke became prime minister in 1849 (Stuurman 1992, 135–170; Drentje 1998, 104–106).



Johan Rudolf Thorbecke  
(1798–1872)

Thorbecke was a Zwolle-born professor (at Ghent and Leiden) who drifted from academia into politics in the 1830s and 1840s. He was much influenced by the German Romantic view that saw individual and state as an organic unity. He thought natural rights and natural law were nonsense, and Rousseau’s social-contract theory too. As a professor in constitutional law he was advisor to parliament in the process leading to the slightly changed constitution of 1840, which was needed after the secession of Belgium. In the years following he became

more of a public figure, and he demanded a fundamental change of constitution. His moment came when the revolutionary spirit embraced Europe in 1848, and the King also concluded there was a need for a change. The popular idea that Thorbecke wrote a proposal by himself in ten days is exaggerated; he was part of a larger committee, and while he was the main author and also got his most important ideas included in the text, the draft did not include many of his insights and demands. During parliamentary approval (where he did not play an official role) even more amendments were made, much to his publicly displayed dismay. Thorbecke was completely convinced of himself and his ideas, and he never gave in. This made him unpopular to say the least, although friends and foes admired his intellect, willpower, and ability to resolve arguments in his favor. The 1848 constitution is still the basis for the current Dutch constitution, not least in the division into three public layers—national, provincial, and municipal, which is known as “Thorbecke’s House”—though the European level has been added. The most important change from a classical liberal perspective was that the King, and the government, was made subordinate to parliament, hence the executive power was controlled by directly elected politicians, as part of the fuller implementation of the division of powers. Elections for the Lower House were now direct, which decreased the power of the regional and local elites. Also, the official divide between religion and the state was made clearer, and other freedoms better protected, such as the freedom of association (Aerts 2020, 177, 261–430).

In his first government (1849–1853), Thorbecke worked out the constitutional provisions in lower legislation, aiming to restructure politics and public administration. He wanted to get rid of the old oligarchic ways of aristocratic local and regional government, while he continually fought turf wars with the King. Most of these battles, often over appointments of officials, were won by Thorbecke. Opposition to his plans, exacerbated by his rather rude and merciless political behavior (including toward former friends and allies), led to the fall of his first cabinet. Yet the liberal achievements were lasting, as the constitution would last despite some severe tests, most often about the ministerial responsibility for the King’s behavior. Although Thorbecke did not return to government until 1862–1866, he remained the most important and influential politician. In his second government he focused again on restructuring, but now literally: the construction of additional waterways and a nationwide railway network were top priorities—some commercial, some with public money. He also focused on general guidelines for health care, education, and culture, but actual implementation of these was outside the national state’s realm and had to be decided at the lowest level possible, often municipal. In the case of culture Thorbecke was stricter: the government could not have an opinion about the contents of the arts, and no budget either. Thorbecke’s third cabinet commenced in 1871, but he died while in office the next

year. At that time he was already past his political prime, and a younger generation impatiently waited to take over the helm and develop towards social liberalism, although many would also hold classical liberal views on particular points. Thorbecke's Romantic liberalism of organic societal order was no longer popular. It was characterized by a largely abstinent state, although this depended on specific circumstances, as Thorbecke did not always strictly adhere to his own liberal tendencies (Aerts 2020, 431–755).

While it was an uphill battle all along, liberals ensured that Dutch society modernized, and renewed its public institutions. Most notably they installed a parliamentary monarchy, with ministers that were accountable to parliament, open public debate, freedom of the press, direct elections for the Lower House, uniform legislation, and reduced influence of the King (Stuurman 1992, 361–367). These reforms were done with a focus on law and the constitution. The label *liberalism* was used in Dutch politics from the 1820s onwards, and it became more popular and common throughout the century (ibid., 110–112). The Dutch liberals were not often guided by books and other intellectual contributions, national or foreign, except perhaps John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*. They were jurists, who wanted a strong rule of law embedded in the constitution, to ensure that politics would remain in a domain largely separated from the private sphere (Te Velde 2008b).

Liberals were the most powerful political factor for over 70 percent of the time between 1848 and 1901, which resulted in a number of classical liberal policies in the field of economics and taxation, while an increasing number of children received an education, which was also continually improved (Van Schie 2005, 22–33). They got rid of most existing protectionist measures, lowered tariffs, eradicated export restrictions, offered less protection to the Dutch commercial fleet, and initiated the (commercial and public) construction of waterways, railroads, and other infrastructure. They also took on colonial policy, which thus far had focused on enhancing overall profits without much care for the people in particularly the Dutch East Indies (Kossmann 2012, 220–228). These profits amounted up to a fifth of the national budget in 1866. The liberals fostered increased transparency in the colonial budget. This “Liberal Offensive,” as Jan Luiten van Zanden and Arthur van Riel (2004, 168–187) call it, resulted in a reform of public finance and a change in the institutional structure of the Dutch economy, which had been unusually centralized and interventionist under the powerful King Willem I. National debt dropped and government expenditure as a percentage of national income also decreased, not least because of lower interest payments. In 1869, the mercantilist Patent Act was abolished, as was the prohibitive printing tax, while the Anglo-French Cobden-Chevalier Treaty of 1860 fostered further trade liberalization in the Netherlands.

In the last quarter of the 19th century, Dutch classical liberalism was, at

least to a large extent, replaced by several forms of social liberalism, demanding increasing governmentalization of social affairs (De Beaufort and Van Schie 2014). According to Jos de Beus (1996, 77–80), this was also due to the influence of German economists in the Verein für Sozialpolitik who wanted to find a third way between classical liberalism and Marxism. These were also the economists who were opposed by Carl Menger, Ludwig von Mises, and other Austrians. Yet the development towards social liberalism was not unique to the Netherlands; it occurred quite generally throughout Europe (Freeden 1978; Weinstein 2007). The Dutch social liberals of this period, such as Johan Kappeyne van de Capello and Samuel van Houten, introduced the first important social legislation, notably limiting child labor and the maximum working hours of women. Social liberals after them, such as Tak van Poortvliet, Nicolaas Pierson, and Goeman Borgesius, would introduce more interventionist measures, while the question of general (male) suffrage also became prominent in the 1890s. After the turn of the century the two most prominent social liberals were Treub and Cort van der Linden (Stuurman 1992, 294–318; also see de Beaufort and Van Schie 2014). The latter would be the last ‘liberal’ prime minister (1913–1918) before the current Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte took office in 2010. Recently, Rutte announced he will leave Dutch politics after a new government is formed after the November 2023 general elections. Negotiations for a new government are increasingly time-consuming in the rather fragmented Dutch political system, therefore his actual exit may be sometime late in 2024.

The last quarter of the 19th century also saw the beginning of the age of political parties. To counter religious parties, liberals also organized themselves, but it would take until the early 1920s before more or less stable liberal parties would emerge (Van Schie 2005). The first party was the Liberale Unie (1884), and most of its members embraced social liberal ideas. The more classical liberal members would leave the party in 1894, reuniting as Bond van Vrij-Liberalen in 1906. In 1921, they and most members of the Liberale Unie would merge into the Vrijheidsbond, in 1928 renamed Liberale Staatspartij De Vrijheidsbond, but mainly known as Liberale Staatspartij. At the other side of the liberal spectrum, the Radicale Bond, constituted in 1894, united the progressive liberals who leaned most towards socialism. Five years later, in 1899, many proponents of direct implementation of general male suffrage left the Liberale Unie and united with the Radicale Bond into the social-liberal Vrijzinnig Democratische Bond (VDB). They fought for immediate implementation of general male and female suffrage, and were willing to make other points subordinate to that goal (Van Putten 1995, 62–64). Until the Second World War, the VDB and Liberale Staatspartij were the two principal ostensibly liberal parties, albeit with decreasing influence and declining seats in parliament (Lipschits 1982, 33–39).

The differences among these ‘liberals’ were largely of degree, not principle. The two main dividing issues were about the degree of state intervention, with all liberals of this period favoring relatively extensive intervention, and they differed about the proper moment of implementation of general suffrage. The remaining classical liberals could be found in the *Bond van Vrij Liberalen* and a miniscule *Liberaal Partij* (Van der List and Van Schie 1993, 12–18). Male universal suffrage would be implemented in 1918, and female suffrage from 1919 onwards, with the first female participation in national elections in 1922. Lizzy van Dorp was one of the first parliamentarians, and in contrast to many of her contemporaries, she did have clear classical liberal credentials, which also showed in her contacts with Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek (De Beaufort and Van Schie 2019; Dekker and Cornax 2022b).

Van Schie (2005, 377–435) notes that the demise of classical liberalism was not unique for the Netherlands. In most European countries classical liberalism lost influence in the period 1900–1940. Indeed, liberals of all descriptions were in decline. All Dutch liberals combined took around 37 percent of the vote in the first election of the 20th century, but only 9.9 percent in the last election before WWII. The same goes for Germany and England, with only the Belgian liberals remaining a notable force at around 16 percent of the vote. For the Netherlands, the main factors were the introduction of universal suffrage (although Dutch liberalism was by no means an elite phenomenon). Especially Dutch women voted for the liberals to a far lesser extent, thus not rewarding the liberal efforts in the previous decades. The strength and appeal of collectivist political ideologies was felt, although compared to the Socialists, the Christian parties were stronger direct competitors at the ballot box. World War I—The Great War—ended the era of liberal optimism, even in neutral Netherlands. Socio-economically, classical liberal policies were criticized, and the free market and free trade came under fire, especially after the Great Depression. Planning and other direct governmental interventions were the rage.

The first decades of the liberal age (from 1840 onwards) saw a number of classical liberal measures implemented, foremost in the constitution, in the field of personal and economic freedom. Yet the most important liberal, Thorbecke, did not prioritize individual liberty and, partly as a result of his organic world view, did not steadily resist the further governmentalizing of social affairs. From the 1870s onwards social liberalism took over. Hence, the so-called liberal age (1840–1918) saw some classical liberal measures, but cannot be counted as a classical liberal age. The Austrian influence on the economists was an exception (see below), but the influence of economists on public policy was much smaller than it would be after 1945. Around that time, the classical liberal influence among economists was over as well.

## 1945 to the present

Although some revolutionaries from the left had hoped that everything would change after World War Two, the Dutch quickly returned to established patterns (De Liagre Böhl 2013, 298–303). This also entailed the politics of pillarization and pacification. This meant that society was divided between pillars of socialists, different Christians, and to a lesser extent liberals. These groups would live almost exclusively among their own people, and had among others their own trade unions, employers federations, sports and leisure clubs, newspapers, broadcasting stations, churches, and political parties. To avoid violent fragmentation of society, the leaders of the pillars collaborated, also in coalition governments. This pacification brought stability in politics and in society. From the late 1960s onwards, this system slowly disintegrated, with many mergers between all parts of the pillars (Lijphart 1992), although remnants of it can still be seen, for example in the organization of public broadcasting.

Political decision-making was mostly a matter of consensus, prepared in collaboration with trade unions and employers federations. The employers federations have not stood up for classical-liberal principles. The unions, employers federations, and independently appointed ‘Crown Members’ formed the tripartite Socio-Economic Council. This was supported by a purported depoliticization of the main economic decisions. Expected effects of policy proposals were stated beforehand by the Central Planning Bureau (CPB), as it literally translates, the independent fiscal institute for economic policy analysis, which also creates macroeconomic analysis and forecasts that are the basis of the national budget. Uniquely, before national elections, the CPB also forecasts the economic effects of the election manifestos of most main parties, thereby setting the parameters of macroeconomic policy in Dutch politics (Van de Haar 2016; also see Dekker 2021). CPB economists and econometricians largely employ a mix of Keynesianism with neoclassical methodology. They believe in the power of macroeconomics, econometric modelling, and the need for broad welfare outcomes of policy processes, which includes accounting for all kinds of externalities and market failures. Yet they also maintain some regard for market dynamics to allocate scarce resources, while maintaining the old Dutch preference for free international trade.

In terms of social and economic policy, the marginalization of classical liberalism continued. In the first three postwar decades of pillarized society, classical liberals were not influential, although they were sometimes junior partners in governments. The principal liberal party is the VVD (People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy), founded in 1948, which originated from the prewar Liberale Staatspartij, although its immediate predecessor was the Partij van de Vrijheid

(Freedom Party, 1946–1948; currently the right-wing party of Geert Wilders has almost the same name). Most members of the prewar VDB fused into the new Labor Party (*Partij van de Arbeid*). The VVD and the liberals became more successful in the 1970s when the pillarization system slowly broke down, due to the social change initiated in the 1960s (Kennedy 1995).

In 1966, a new party, D66 or Democrats '66, was founded, which initially called for change to the party system and to institute a number of direct elective measures, such as the introduction of referenda and the direct election of the prime minister. In other fields it wanted to be pragmatic. Its greatest appeal was to the non-religious urban intelligentsia, and in its politics it leaned towards the left, not unlike the VDB in the first decades of the 20th century. Hence, both parties diverged on socio-economic issues, and the VVD was more the right-wing party of law and order, but they agreed on most questions of individual liberty, such as the right to abortion, and later also gay marriage, euthanasia, etc. Both parties have also supported the loose Dutch drugs policies, especially the toleration for the use (not the trade) of so-called soft drugs, such as marijuana and MDMA. Between 1994 and 2002, D66 and VVD formed the so-called purple coalition with Labor, which was the first coalition in over 70 years without Christian-democratic parties. They were then able to draft and implement legislation on these issues. Initially, the two liberal parties were not mass parties, but both would increase their electoral base over time, albeit that D66 saw great changes in electoral results over time (Daalder and Koole 1988). Instead of 'blowing up the political system,' as its catchphrase used to be, D66 became a regular part of the system. In the 1990s, the party adopted the label 'social liberal,' making clear it should not be seen as classical liberal (Van der Land 2003; also see Brummer and Boomsma 2019). D66 has been a partner in many coalitions, including the present one.

This leaves the question of whether the VVD should be seen as the best representative of classical liberalism in Dutch politics. The answer cannot be in the affirmative. It is a mixed picture at best. The founding principles of the party contain classical liberal ideas and principles, but these are not often put into practice. This started right away. From 1948 to 1963, under the leadership of P. J. Oud, the party strongly opposed socialism, but also defended Dutch colonialism, strongly opposing Indonesian independence and later the handover of New Guinea to the Indonesians. This was a position contrary to the anti-imperialism of many classical liberals including Hume and Smith (Van de Haar 2023). Until at least the 1970s the VVD appealed to higher income classes, farmers, and owners of small and medium-sized enterprises, which gave it an elitist and right-wing profile in Dutch politics. Contrary to classical-liberal ideas, the VVD embraced state intervention in the economy, such as macroeconomic steering of the economy, monetary policies, industrial policies, a drastic increase of governmental interfer-

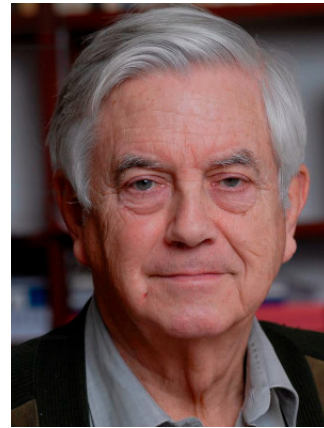


ence in social welfare and health care, education, spatial planning, and public housing. The postwar intervention state was supported by the VVD, and it hardly attempted to justify its support, not even along the lines of Ordoliberalism. In general, the VVD hardly ever discusses its theoretical foundations. Its internal culture is anti-intellectual. The party values loyalty to the leadership (especially when in government, which is often the case) and acts like a social club. Sporadic initiatives to change this status quo have come and gone since the early 1960s, without much lasting effect (De Beus 1996, 88–93).

In the 1970s the VVD assumed an anti-left posture when the young leader Hans Wiegel took the helm, supported by chairwoman Haya van Someren and senator Harm van Riel. Wiegel appealed to a broader electorate, sharply polarizing against the socialist left. After a term in government with the newly formed CDA (Christian Democratic Appeal), between 1977–1981, Wiegel left national politics. The VVD would remain the junior partner in CDA-led governments during most of the 1980s, and was also internally in turmoil for most of the decade, initially under the leadership of social-liberal-leaning Ed Nijpels (Koole 1995, 292–309). Wiegel and Nijpels were pragmatic leaders, not interested in liberal theory, let alone classical liberalism. If they did support a classical liberal idea, it was likely out of coincidence or political opportunity (see Sijpersma 2020; Nijpels 2022). Their persistent calls for financial austerity, low taxation, and a critical position towards some (certainly not all) of the ever-increasing governmental interference in Dutch society fit this picture. In the end the VVD maintained the interventionist state. Most years when the VVD was in government, the budget was actually in deficit, although this was of course also the result of coalition government, always needed in Dutch politics. Foreign policy is another example of VVD inconsistency. Without having the room to analyze all these topics (see Van de Haar 2009; 2015; 2023), the VVD always mixes classical liberal, conservative, and social liberal viewpoints. Examples are the (initial) defense of imperialism, coupled with a strong concern for defense and Dutch NATO membership. As Cold War hawks, VVD's concern for human rights abuses was mainly reserved for those in communist countries, while the VVD always supported mandatory military service. It became critical of development aid only in the 1970s, and since the 1990s it has been internally divided over the need for further European integration. Largely, the issue was whether the European Union should develop into a federation and get more tasks on an increasing number of policy domains or, alternatively, that it should shift back tasks and powers to the national member states, in particular those not related to the internal market (Van der List 1995).

The leadership of Frits Bolkestein (1989–1998) was the classical liberal exception in the history of the VVD, until this day. Bolkestein, a former Shell manager, joined the VVD in parliament in 1977, was a minister of defense in the

mid-1980s, and became the VVD leader in 1989. He differed from any VVD leader before and after him in a number of ways. First, he did have a clear classical liberal compass, and widely published on classical liberal topics, which are collected in over 20 books (see, e.g., Bolkestein 1990; 2008; 2011; 2019). Second, he was an agenda-setting politician, going against the rather cozy Dutch consensus in foreign and European affairs, and particularly on the topic of immigration and the integration of minorities. Thirdly, he was one of the architects of the so-called purple coalitions of the 1990s, which were tripartite governments of Labour, D66, and VVD. These were the first governments without Christian-democratic input in more than 70 years. Bolkestein also had wide electoral success (Koole 1995, 306–309). After his national career, he became a European Commissioner, newspaper columnist, and part-time academic.



Frits Bolkestein (1933–)  
 (Source: [Wikimedia Commons/Pieter Boersma](#))

Despite his success, Bolkestein did not leave a lasting classical liberal legacy (Te Velde 2008a). His chosen successor, Hans Dijkstal, was his opposite in many ways, including a lack of interest in classical liberal issues. More or less the same goes for Jozias van Aartsen and Gerrit Zalm, the leaders after Dijkstal. In 2006, Mark Rutte became party leader. On many accounts, he is a remarkably talented politician, who has been able to remain the undisputed leader of his party while leading four coalition cabinets, with different parties, in unusual and demanding circumstances. He is mainly pragmatic, and his record in office is dismal from a classical liberal perspective. Partly, but not solely, under influence of his coalition partners, he let governmental interference in society grow, as well the share of the state in the economy, with increased taxes. Rutte fully stands in the tradition of Dutch social liberals.

## Classical liberalism and Dutch economists, since 1880

Outside politics, classical liberalism had a more favorable reception. Indeed, for more than 50 years, between 1880 and 1930, the Austrian school was quite dominant among Dutch economists. Nicolaas Pierson (1839–1909) contributed to the socialist calculation debate, and J. G. Koopman (1900–1958) worked on

equilibrium theory and neutral money. G. A. Verrijn Stuart (1865–1947) was the most important Dutch Austrian during this era, not least due to his editorship of the main periodical *De Economist*. Like the aforementioned Lizzy van Dorp, he corresponded with Mises and Hayek. The Austrians also referred to some of the Dutch economists in their writings. For instance, Mises regarded Verrijn Stuart's *Die Grundlagen der Volkswirtschaft* (1923) as one of the best introductions to economics (Mises 1996, 195), and in 1935 an article previously published by Pierson was included in Hayek's edited book *Collectivist Economic Planning* (1963). With the exception of Pieter Hennipman (1911–1994), the Austrian influence largely waned in the 1930s, due to the dominance of collectivist thinking in the Great Depression of the 1930s (Dekker and Cornax 2022a; 2022b).

The Austrian school would never be influential again. Other classical liberal traditions, those of Chicago and Virginia, did find inroads in academic economic sciences, especially since the 1980s, but Keynesianism would remain the most influential economic theory, and Keynes also the most admired thinker among Dutch economists. Although many leading economists are publicly known as Labor Party members, the majority of economists votes D66. Most of them believe a market society is better at generating wealth and growth than a socialist society, and that tariffs and quotas decrease economic welfare. Still, the question remains how they define a market society, because they also think taxes and government expenses can be effective in stabilizing the economy, half of them think the spread of income should be more even in developed economies, and that capitalism has a built-in tendency towards crisis. A majority also rejects Milton Friedman's idea that inflation is mainly a monetary phenomenon. The political-ideological preferences of economists play an important role in their assessment and advice on public policies (Van Dalen et al. 2016).

The lack of classical-liberal presence in the Netherlands is also seen by the scantiness of the Dutch participation in the Mont Pelerin Society. There has never been a Dutch officer (Butler 2022), and there have never been many Dutch members (often below five, and at present there are three). There was no Dutch participant at the first meeting (Caldwell 2022, 35), or at incorporation, although four Dutchmen attended the second meeting in Seelisberg in 1949 (Hartwell 1995, 51, 88). Surprisingly, the third General Meeting was held in Bloemendaal in 1950, and there was a regional meeting in Amsterdam in 1977. According to the report on the Bloemendaal meeting, Dutch MPS members at the time were A. de Graaf, J. Jitta, H. Keus (who wrote an article in the report of the meeting), J. Meyer, and G. M. Verrijn Stuart. In 1977, the meeting was organized by members from Belgium (Van Nolten) and Luxemburg (Hamilius). Dutch members at the time were De Graaf, Hennipman, Renooij, Spat, Gerrit Meijer, and Arnold Heertje, at the time the best-known economist of the country but a card-carrying member of

the Labour Party (see the Mont Pèlerin Society files, Hoover Institution).

In comparison to other countries the Netherlands is also unique for the absence of any substantially privately funded political think tank. Most existing think tanks are related to political parties and also depend on them for their (public) funding. These are mostly very small outfits (around five to ten employees) and not very influential. The Telders Foundation is the think tank associated with the VVD, and it is the only Dutch think tank that publishes books and articles on classical liberalism or with classical-liberal viewpoints. Outside the political-party orbit there are only a few additional organizations or websites. Of these, there is hardly any organization with a classical-liberal profile. There is a minuscule Libertarian Party (without a think tank), that never won seats in national or regional elections, and the tiny Mises Institute is largely focused on education in Austrian economics. In short, the development of new classical-liberal ideas mostly relies on foreign sources, and those ideas are not actively brought into Dutch public debate.

## Conclusion

The Netherlands is in some respects a classical-liberal country (trade, personal freedoms), yet deeply collectivist. In the terms of Michel Albert it has been a Rhineland country, without really having had a season as an Anglo-Saxon market economy. The most important classical-liberal contributions were made before Adam Smith's time. The social and economic developments between 1000 and 1650, in particular the Dutch roots of commercial society, are the greatest heritage, together with the contributions of the big Dutch thinkers. Some of these contributions persisted over time, most notably the preference for open commerce and important aspects of personal liberty, not least of conscience. Hayek was right to note that the Dutch Republic played an important role as example of a country with great individual liberty (Hayek 2011, 232 n.1).

Johan Thorbecke, by far the most important Dutch politician of the 19th century, cannot be seen as a classical liberal, although his basic attitude of governmental constraint had important aspects in common with the classical-liberal program. Generally, classical liberals have been a rare species in the Netherlands. I have focused on the well-known figures, yet the list is limited to some 19th-century liberals, most of the prewar economists, and Frits Bolkestein. Sure enough, classical-liberal policies were sometimes implemented, yet hardly ever grounded in a classical-liberal program or strong conviction, again policies towards the expansion of personal liberties excepted. In the Netherlands, social liberalism dominates.

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