

'Shrewd Sirens of Humanity': the changing shape of pro-slavery arguments in the Netherlands (1789-1814)

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Abstract: One of the puzzling questions about the formal Dutch abolition of the slave-trade in 1814 is why a state that was so committed to maintaining slavery in its Empire did not put up any open resistance to the enforced closing of the trade that fed it. The explanations that historians have given so far for this paradox focus mainly on circumstances within the Netherlands, highlighting the pre-1800 decline of the role of Dutch traders in the African slave-trade, the absence of a popular abolitionist movement, and the all-overriding focus within elite-debates on the question of economic decline. This article argues that the (often partial) advanced made by abolitionism internationally did have a pronounced influence on the course of Dutch debates. This can be seen not only from the pronouncements by a small minority that advocated abolition, but also in the arguments produced by the proponents of a continuation of slavery. Careful examination of the three key debates about the question that took place in 1789-1791, 1797 and around 1818 can show how among dominant circles within the Dutch state a new ideology gradually took hold that combined verbal concessions to abolitionist arguments and a grinding acknowledgement of the inevitability of slave-trade abolition with a long-term perspective for prolonging slave-based colonial production in the West-Indies.

Keywords: slave-trade, abolitionism, the Netherlands, colonialism

Introduction

Seymour Drescher opens his seminal article on the question of Dutch abolitionism – or to be more precise, the lack thereof – with a quotation from the Sherlock Holmes-story *Silver Blaze*, in which the master-detective solves his case by noting ‘the curious incident of the dog in the night-time’.¹ Like in the Holmes-story, the key to a riddle was a silence, a dog that did not bark. The almost complete absence of abolitionism in one of the most capitalist countries in Europe throws into sharp relief the thesis most famously put forward by Eric Williams that it was the advance of capitalism that drove the (albeit belated and reluctant) acceptance of anti-slavery arguments by the British ruling class.² The Dutch King published a decree abolishing the slave trade in 1814, and introduced a law making participation in the trade a criminal offense in 1818. However, this decision was in no way brought forward by anti-slavery campaigns inside the Netherlands. Rather, it came about as the direct result of diplomatic pressure from London, that insisted on slave-trade abolition as a precondition for the return of several of the Dutch West-Indian colonies that it had occupied in the course of the wars against Revolutionary and Napoleonic France. A small and quite elite-centered abolitionist movement that organized societies and petitioned government only emerged in the late 1840s.³ The Dutch government agreed to full abolition in the West-Indian colonies in 1863, and even then under conditions that stipulated another ten years of forced labor from the emancipated slaves as a ‘transition period’.⁴

The most puzzling question about the Dutch abolition of the slave-trade in 1814 remains why a political and economic elite so bent on preserving the institution of slavery itself, did not put up a more concerted effort to oppose the abolition of the trade in human beings that supported it. The explanations given for this silence focus

¹ DRESCHER, Seymour. The long goodbye. Dutch capitalism and antislavery in comparative perspective. In: OOSTINDIE, Gert (ed). Fifty years later. Antislavery, capitalism and modernity in the Dutch orbit. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996. p. 25-66.

² WILLIAMS, Eric. Capitalism and slavery. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944.

³ KUITENBROUWER, Maarten. The Dutch case of antislavery. Late and elitist Abolitionism. In: OOSTINDIE. Fifty years later, op. cit., p. 67-88; JANSE, Maartje. ‘Holland as a little England’? British anti-slavery missionaries and continental Abolitionist movements in the mid nineteenth century. Past and Present, Oxford. n. 229, p. 123-160, 2015.

⁴ The most thorough of the excruciatingly slow process of government reform towards abolition remains SIWERSAD, J. W. De Nederlandse regering en de afschaffing van de Surinaamse slavernij (1833-1863). Groningen: Bouma’s Boekhuis, 1979. For the earlier phase of the debate in government circles, see EMMER, P. C. Engeland, Nederland, Afrika en de slavenhandel in de negentiende eeuw. Economisch- en Sociaal-Historisch Jaarboek, n. XXXVI, p. 146-215, 1973, and n. XXXVII, p. 44-144, 1974.

almost entirely on the particular set of circumstances that allowed for a quiet abandonment of the slave-trade. Piet Emmer has been the most outspoken in providing such a contextual explanation. According to him, both the economic importance of the West-Indian colonies to the Dutch economy and the involvement of the Dutch in the international slave-trade had declined so drastically before the nineteenth century, that by the time of the abolition decree of 1814 there was no slave-trade left to defend. With characteristic overstatement, he claimed: 'The abolition of the Dutch slave trade was not necessary.'⁵ Others have been more cautious. According to Angelie Sens, who has given most attention to the small but insistent group of anti-slavery voices that did emerge in the late eighteenth-century Netherlands, a real political confrontation between abolitionists and their opponents was ruled out almost from the start because for both elite-parties the issue of slavery was permanently crowded out by their shared concern for the economic decline of the Netherlands and the preservation of its colonies.⁶

Contextual arguments like these have focused primarily on developments and debates in the Netherlands and its colonies. The fact that no active abolitionist movement of any respectable size developed is deemed enough proof for the inward-looking nature of Dutch approaches to the slave-trade and slavery. In this article, I will argue that international developments did have a pronounced impact on Dutch attitudes on the slave-trade, an impact that can be traced not only through the writings of a small but outspoken abolitionist minority, but especially through a shift in the arguments put forward by the defenders of slavery itself. Under pressure of the international advance of anti-slavery, in the three decades between the late 1780s and acceptance in Parliament of the law of 1818 the defense of the slave-trade and slavery was transformed from a classical question of protectionism versus limited free trade to a question about the best strategies for general economic development in the colonies under the guidance of the motherland, about the possibilities of increasing the slave-population through 'natural growth', and about more explicitly racialized views on the

⁵ EMMER, Pieter C. Abolition of the abolished. The illegal Dutch slave trade and the mixed courts. In: ELTIS, David Eltis; WALVIN, James (eds). The abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. Origins and effects in Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Madison / London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981. p. 177-192, v. 186.

⁶ SENS, Angelie. Dutch antislavery attitudes in a decline-ridden society, 1750-1815. In: OOSTINDIE. Op. Cit. , p. 89-104, and SENS, Angelie. La Révolution Batave et l'esclavage. Les (im)possibilités de l'abolition de la traite des noirs et de l'esclavage (1780-1814). Annales historiques de la Révolution française, no. 326, p. 65-78, 2001.

'readiness' of Africans and their descendants in the Americas for emancipation. This change included a rhetorical acceptance of a need for abolition at an unspecified future date, forced onto the defenders of slavery through a change in sentiment that seems to have been broader than the small and well-studied body of eighteenth-century anti-slavery texts suggests. The Haitian Revolution, full abolition by the French National Assembly and the gradual advances towards the abolition of the slave trade made in North America, Denmark and Britain all played a role in promulgating and solidifying this change, although of course these events were judged very differently. Beyond rhetoric, the shift also reflected the advance of new ideas on 'rational' economic policy that could be reconciled remarkably well with pro-slavery positions, or at least with a form of pragmatism that while condemning slavery in theory allowed its continuation in practice.⁷ The break between the eighteenth and the nineteenth century was not absolute. 'Modernizing' pro-slavery arguments can be found in some pre-1795 pro-slavery texts, while classically worded calls for protection emanated from the colonies in the period immediately preceding the 1814 decree. Nevertheless, careful examination of the three key debates about the question that took place in 1789-1791, 1797 and around 1818 can show how among dominant circles within the Dutch state a new ideology gradually took hold that combined verbal concessions to abolitionist arguments and a grinding acknowledgement of the inevitability of slave-trade abolition with a long-term perspective for prolonging slave-based colonial production in the West-Indies.

Between protectionism and rising abolitionist sentiments

In the short period between 1787-1794, anti-slavery arguments made important headway internationally. In Britain, the most important slave-trading nation

⁷ The growing literatures on the 'Second Slavery' and the emergence of the 'New History of Capitalism' show the general compatibility of early-nineteenth century economic liberalism with pro-slavery arguments. E.g. TOMICH, Dale. The Wealth of Empire. Francisco Arango y Parreño, Political Economy, and the Second Slavery in Cuba. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 45, no. 1, p. 4-28, 2003; BECKERT, Sven. *Empire of cotton. A global history*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014; SILVERSTEIN, Stephen. 'La relación de sus males, [y] el medio de curarlos'. *Trans-American models of slave labor organization in José Antonio Saco's Análisis de una obra sobre el Brasil*. *Dirasat Hispanicas*, n. 3, p. 79-92, 2016. On the many moral ambiguities that pervaded the international campaign against the slave-trade waged by European states, see LINDEN, Marcel van der. Introduction. In: LINDEN, Marcel van der (ed). *Humanitarian intervention and changing labor relations. The long-term consequences of the abolition of the slave trade*. Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2011. p. 1-45.

of the eighteenth century, these years saw the development of anti-slave trade campaigning into a popular mass-movement, forcing the issue onto the agenda of Parliament.⁸ In North-America, the Northwest Ordinance presented opponents of slavery with an apparent victory, which however turned out to be the foundation for the massive expansion of slavery in the American South in the years to come.⁹ Denmark, a small player in the Atlantic world, for reasons connected to its trans-imperial connections became the first European nation to formally phase-out the slave-trade, while holding on to slavery itself.¹⁰ But the most radical blow to Atlantic slavery was dealt by the slaves themselves, in the Haitian Revolution of 1791, which eventually was the decisive factor in forcing the French government to implement the first full abolition of both the slave-trade and slavery in 1794.¹¹

While the issue of slavery and the slave-trade was thus pushed to the center of legislative and constitutional debates in one country after the other, the only form in which this topic entered the deliberations of 'Their Highly Esteemed Gentlemen' of the Dutch States General was that of a discussion on economic measures to restore the slave-trade from its at that time depressed state. The debate took the usual route for deliberations on West Indian (and other commercial) interests in the Dutch Republic.¹² Merchants and ship-owners involved in the slave-trade petitioned both the States General and the provincial estates for support at several times during the 1780s.¹³ In September 1789, the States of Holland formulated 'points of advice' on the question how to stimulate the trade. In November of the same year, the States General adopted a series of concrete measures, and also promised to consult with the Admiralty Boards

⁸ DRESCHER, Seymour. *Capitalism and antislavery. British mobilization in comparative perspective.* London: Macmillan Press, 1986. p. 67-88.

⁹ LYND, Staughton. *The Compromise of 1787.* *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 81, n. 2, p. 225-250, 1966; DAVIS, David Brion. *Inhuman bondage. The rise and fall of slavery in the New World.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. p. 141-156.

¹⁰ RØGE, Pernille. *Why the Danes got there first. A trans-imperial study of the abolition of the Danish slave trade in 1792.* *Slavery & Abolition*, vol. 35, no. 4, p. 576-592, 2014.

¹¹ JAMES, C.L.R. *The Black Jacobins. Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution.* New York: Dial Press, 1938; BLACKBURN, Robin. *The overthrow of colonial slavery, 1776-1848.* London / New York: Verso, 2011 [1988]. p. 213-260.

¹² HEIJER, Henk den. *A public and private Dutch West India interest.* In: OOSTINDIE, Gert; ROITMAN, Jessica V. (eds). *Dutch Atlantic connections, 1680-1800. Linking empires, bridging borders.* Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2014. p. 159-182.

¹³ FATAH-BLACK, Karwan. *A network to encourage the slave trade? Paramaribo-Middelburg-Amsterdam.* In: SIMONETTA, Cavaciocchi (ed). *Schiavitù e Servaggio Nell' economia Europea Secc. XI-XVIII*, no. 45. Florence: Firenze University Press, 2014. p. 619-630, v. 630, and National Archive, The Hague (from here NA-Ha), *Verspreide Westindische Stukken, Extract uit de Resolutien van de Heeren Staaten van Holland ende Westvriesland, 9 September 1789*, 1.05.06, no. 13.

how to further 'improve' the trade, which it considered to be 'inseparable from the flowering and prosperity of [the West Indian] Colonies'.¹⁴

Several practical measures to strengthen the slave-trade were discussed in the run up to the adoption of this resolution by the States General, a discussion that continued in the early 1790s. Karwan Fatah-Black has shown that these pulled in two different directions. Domestic interests remained focused on traditional forms of trade protection, promising tax exemptions and favoring the building and equipment of slave-ships in the Dutch Republic. When these measures proved insufficient, Zeeland merchants through the influential representative of the Zeeland Nobility Baron van Lynden van Blitterswyk asked for direct subsidies, that could be paid either to the captains and officers on the slave-vessels or to the merchants involved 'per head of the supplied male or female slave, boy or girl'.¹⁵ On the other hand, Dutch planters on the Guyana coast set up a successful lobby for opening up the importation of slaves to foreign traders, a big step away from traditional mercantilist policies that was deemed necessary given the crisis that had beset the Dutch West-Indian colonies.¹⁶ While examining all these different practical proposals with the utmost seriousness, the proponents of the slave trade felt no need at all to give second thought to the case for abolition. With characteristic candor, the States of Holland argued:

'That although it is true that in neighboring countries plans have been made for the abolition of the Negro-trade, which they want to consider as contradicting the rights of Humanity, without entering the discussion of this matter, we dare to state that ... it will remain a truth that these [West-Indian Colonies] have to be worked by Negro slaves, or else one has to renounce the privilege of maintaining Agricultural Colonies as a means of lending one's Commerce the best possible support.'¹⁷

¹⁴ NA-Ha, Verspreide Westindische Stukken, *Resolutie van de Staten Generaal, 24 November 1789*, 1.05.06, no. 13.

¹⁵ NA-Ha, Archief Algemene Staatssecretarie, Brieven aan en aantekeningen van Baron Van Lijnden van Blitterswijk over de slavenhandel, los stuk, 1788, 2.02.01, 6555. The subsidy 'per head' can be found in the proposal by Vlissingen slave-trader Louissen, sent to State Pensionary Van de Spiegel by Van Lijnden van Blitterswijk, NA-Ha, Archief Laurens Pieter van de Spiegel, Rapport van Dhr Louissen te Vlissingen over de slavenhandel, door Van de Spiegel ontvangen van dhr van Lynden van Blitterswyk op 21 augustus 1790, 3.01.26, no. 148.

¹⁶ FATAH-BLACK, Network, op. cit., p. 625-628. On the wider crisis, see OOSTINDIE, Gert. Dutch Atlantic decline during 'The Age of Revolutions'. In: OOSTINDIE; ROITMAN (eds). Op. Cit., 309-335; FATAH-BLACK, Karwan. White lies and black markets. Evading metropolitan authority in colonial Suriname, 1650-1800. Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2014. p. 163-166.

¹⁷ NA-Ha, Verspreide Westindische Stukken. Extract uit de Resolutien van de Heeren Staaten van Holland ende Westvriesland, 9 September 1789, 1.05.06, n. 13.

However, in the few years that followed important changes took place that would make it much harder for the proponents of slavery to dismiss the abolitionist case in such an offhand manner. One was a fundamental change in the relation between the state and its colonies. Throughout its existence, the Dutch Republic had 'outsourced' the management of its overseas possessions to semi-private corporations such as the East India Company, the West India Company and the Society of Suriname.¹⁸ However, by the early 1790s the idea quickly took hold that a more efficient management of the colonies could be achieved if they would fall under the direct territorial control of the state.¹⁹ In 1791, the end of the Charter of the West India Company allowed the Dutch state to hand over the Companies' powers to a 'Committee for the Affairs of the Colonies and Possessions on the coasts of Guinea and America'. For the East Indies, a similar shift between Company and state would be implemented after the fall of the old regime in 1795. This opened up colonial policy as a realm of active state intervention and 'enlightened' projects, rather than one of indirect rule.²⁰

At the same time, while no abolitionist *movement* arose that through popular pressure could force the hand of policy-makers, abolitionist *ideas* quickly spread under the influence of international examples and an aggressive publishing campaign by a vociferous anti-slavery minority. The contours of this campaign have been outlined very well.²¹ While even during the tumultuous political crisis of the mid-1780s outspoken opposition to slavery had remained scarce, by the end of the decade enlightened societies and journals started to pay serious attention to the question. International examples loomed large in these debates, such as the spirited exchange that took place between 1789-1791 between advocates and adversaries of slavery in the journal *Bijdragen tot het menschelijk geluk* ('Contributions to the Happiness of Mankind') and the articles that the radical church minister and fierce oppositionist against the old regime Bernardus Bosch wrote under the header 'It is not permitted to

¹⁸ The Society of Suriname was itself founded as a consortium between the City of Amsterdam, the WIC and the wealthy family Van Aerssen van Sommelsdijck.

¹⁹ BRANDON, Pepijn. *War, Capital, and the Dutch State (1588-1795)*. Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2015. p. 275-283.

²⁰ SENS, Angélie. *Les Indes Orientales Néerlandaises vers 1763-1830. Une pépinière idéale pour une société "en chantier"*. *Annales Historiques de la Révolution française*, n. 375, p. 161-186, 2014.

²¹ SENS, Angélie. 'Mensaap, heiden, slaaf'. *Nederlandse visies op de wereld rond 1800*. The Hague: Sdu Uitgevers, 2001. p. 97-128.

put this money in the treasury, since it is gained with blood'.²² In rapid succession, Dutch publishers brought out translated editions of key-texts that influenced international public opinion. John Newton's religiously inspired lectures against slavery held in London 1787 were published in Dutch within a year, as were the *Narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano* and the work of member of *La Société des Amis des Noirs* Benjamin Frossard.²³ Publishers consciously played into the heightened interest created by international developments, and what they perceived to be a shift in the general mood among their projected audience. J. van Cleeff advertised his Dutch edition of the work of Frossard in the *Leidse Courant* by pointing out that 'the abolition of the SLAVE TRADE is currently a general point of discussion throughout EUROPE' (capitalization in the original), and assured his readers that 'there do not exist or have ever existed worst Tyrants than can be found among the Slave-Masters or Slave-Traders, who are presented here'.²⁴ And Amsterdam publisher M. de Bruyn reminded the readers of the *Groninger Courant* to go to their local booksellers for the many works that had been published on 'that inhuman trade ... since Denmark has announced its laudable resolution to destroy the Slave-trade in its American Possessions step by step'.²⁵

By the time of the Batavian Revolution of 1795, some leading oppositionists against the Dutch old regime had added their voices to the cause. The most important among these was Pieter Paulus, who in 1796 would become the elected chair of the First National Assembly. Two years before the revolution, he had ended his influential pamphlet *On the question, in which way all human beings can be considered equal? And on the rights and obligations that result from this* with a plea against slavery. The pamphlet found a wide readership, gave Pieter Paulus the nickname 'Apostle of Humanity', and can be considered a foundational text of the Batavian Revolution.²⁶ Paulus took many of his arguments directly from his international examples, especially from Frossard whom he

²² E.g. ANONYMOUS. Korte opgave, van hetgene, in Engeland, omtrend den slaavenhandel is voorgevallen (Brief aan de Schrijvers). Bijdragen tot het Menschelijk geluk, vol. III, p. 560-572, 1790; Ibidem, vol. V, p. 526-542, 1791; [BOSCH, Bernardus]. De leerzame praat-al, vol. II: n. 46, p. 361, 16 November 1791.

²³ NEWTON, John. Redevoering, uitgesproken voor de Maatschappij tot bevoordering van kennis en godsdienstigheid onder den gemeenen man ... benevens, Gedachten over den Afrikaanschen slaavenhandel. Amsterdam: Martinus de Bruijn, 1788; FROSSARD, B.J. De zaak der negerslaaven, en der inwooneren van Guinea. The Hague: J. van Cleef, 1790; EQUIANO, Olaudah. Merkwaardige levensgevallen van Olaudah Equiano of Gustavus Vassa, den Afrikaan. Rotterdam: Pieter Holsteyn, 1790.

²⁴ Advertisement in the *Leidse Courant*, 28-07-1790 (accessed through www.delpher.nl, 11-08-2016).

²⁵ Advertisement in the *Groninger Courant*, 21-09-1792 (accessed through www.delpher.nl, 11-08-2016).

²⁶ VLES, E.J. Pieter Paulus (1753-1796). Patriot en staatsman. Amsterdam: De Bataafsche Leeuw, 2004.

quoted for pages on end. In practical terms, he spoke out for the moderate wing of international anti-slavery sentiment. In his view, ending slavery should be a long-term process, starting with a step-by-step abolition of the slave trade only. He supported this gradualist approach by pointing at the experience of the French colonies, but also by a more philosophical argument that at this time was rapidly becoming a staple of pro-slavery thought internationally; that the African slaves, whom he compared to children, while possessing equal rights to all other human beings in principle, would only be ready to use these rights responsibly after a long period of education.²⁷ Paulus' conclusion reflected both the confidence that Dutch abolitionists drew from the international advances of the movement, and the deep paternalism with which they approached the question:

'When good and enlightened men in all countries start to unite in order to embrace the just cause of humanity ... there is hope that light will finally emerge from darkness; that the works of injustice will not withstand under this light's rays, and that the perpetrators out of fear for the general sentiments will be obligated to renounce their ways.'²⁸

The stream of abolitionist publications, propelled by the international successes of the movement, managed to successfully force the defenders of slavery on the back foot. Whereas in 1789, the States of Holland could still allude to the 'supposed' contradiction between slavery and human rights in a document aimed to the strengthening of the slave trade, in the years that followed those who boldly proclaimed the incompatibility between slavery and humanity clearly could feel the wind in their sails. After the French invasion of 1795 and the installation of the revolutionary Batavian Republic, the changes in public consciousness wrought by the advent of abolitionist ideas would make themselves felt not only in the arguments of the opponents of the slave-trade, but even in the rhetoric of its defenders.

²⁷ PAULUS, Pieter. *Verhandeling over de vrage: in welken zin kunnen de menschen gezegd worden gelyk te zyn? En welke zyn de regten en pligten, die daaruit voortvloeien?* Haarlem: Christiaan Plaat, 1793. p. 205-207. The comparison between African slaves and children already formed a well-developed trope in European literature much earlier in the eighteenth century. HONDIUS, Dienke. *Blackness in Western-Europe. Racial patterns of paternalism and exclusion.* New Brunswick NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2014.

²⁸ PAULUS, op. cit., p. 212.

The Batavian constitutional debate: Dogs that did not bite

Publications from the early years of the Batavian Revolution show at least lingering expectations within enlightened circles that the advent of a new order would also ring the dead-knell for slavery.²⁹ Not much prove of active anti-slavery agitation has been found, but one hitherto unacknowledged piece of evidence of grass-roots agitation is of some significance. On 22 February 1796, the provisional government of the province of Holland discussed a request from the representatives of twelve boroughs surrounding the textile-producing center Leiden. Gathered at or near the meeting-place of the notoriously radical 'Citizens' Assembly of the Marekerk', they demanded the prohibition of the public sale of '*human beings*, under the despicable name of *Slaves*' of a coffee plantation in Berbice. Stating that the sale of slaves served 'the dishonor of humanity', they added that at the very least the auction should be held off until the National Assembly had given its verdict over the fate of 'those unhappy inhabitants of the Colonies'.³⁰ The Holland representatives sent the request through to the National Assembly, which seems not to have acted on it. However, it should be noted that it was the leading radical from Leiden Pieter Vreede who a year later raised the issue to the level of a national debate.³¹

The National Assembly discussed the question of slavery and the slave trade in two sessions on 22 April and 22 May 1797. These deliberations formed part of the intense political conflict over the text of the Batavian Constitution, that held radicals and moderates in a deadlock for the entire year. The same party-divisions influenced the debate on the question whether or not the section on colonies of the Constitution should contain a paragraph on the abolition of slavery and the slave-trade. Pieter Vreede, who led the radical fraction in the National Assembly, was the most outspoken advocate of adopting abolition in the Constitution, while the arch-moderate Schimmelpenninck played a prominent role in opposing Vreede's call. While Vreede

²⁹ E.g. ANONYMOUS. *De Vriend des Volks*, n. 30, p. 249-256, 1796; ZILLESEN, Cornelis. *Wysgeerige verklaring der rechten en pligten van den mensch en burger, en een ontwerp van de daar uit volgende grondwetten van staat*. Leiden: Leendert Herdingh and David du Mortier, 1796. p. 65; RAEFF, A. de. *Proeve over de vernietiging der slaverny in de Bataafsche volksplantingen*. Breda: W. van Bergen, 1799.

³⁰ *DECREETEN van de provisioneele repraesentanten van het volk van Holland*, vol. VII.2. The Hague: 's Lands Drukkerij, 1800. p. 462-463.

³¹ For further prove on the close ideological and practical connections between Pieter Vreede, local Leiden radicals and the previously mentioned advocate of full abolition Bernardus Bosch, see BRANDON, Pepijn; FATAH-BLACK, Karwan. 'The supreme power of the people'. *Local autonomy and radical democracy in the Batavian Revolution (1795-1798)*. *Atlantic Studies*, vol. 13: n. 3, p. 370-388, 2016.

received much support in both sessions, in the end the session of 22 April only sanctioned the erection of a committee that should investigate whether slavery deserved any mention in the Constitution at all, and in the second session one month later a majority of the Assembly voted in line with the report of the committee, that it should not.³² However, the most remarkable fact about this debate perhaps was not its outcome, but the arguments with which Vreede's opponents defended excluding abolition from the constitution. In contrast to the blunt defense of the slave-trade of 1789, almost to a man those who spoke in the Assembly embraced the call for eventual abolition in theory, while arguing that it was inopportune in practice. At the end of the second session, the Pieter Vreede exclaimed in frustration 'that shrewd Syrens trumpet the humanity of their hearts, their tender pity, their virtue and love for Religion, but at the same time drown the certainty that the unhappy Slaves will once be free in a sea of political and commercial objections.'³³

The framework of the debate on 22 April 1797 was provided by the report of a commission under the leadership of the delegate J.H. Floh, that had investigated the place that the colonies should have in the new Constitution. The report was representative of the new form in which the state considered colonial policy. Of course, within the old Dutch Republic, the possessions in the East- and West-Indies had already been considered as constituting part of the core interests of 'patria', 'the United Provinces' or 'the Commonwealth'. However, colonial policy for the States General had always been primarily a matter of supporting the chartered companies responsible for the management of daily affairs overseas, or of the merchants who depended on the trade in colonial goods. Direct rule opened up the possibility to consider the long-term development of the colonies as the unmediated concern of the Dutch state, the profits of colonial trade as part of the national fund, and the inhabitants of the colonies – or at least the free part of the population³⁴ – as citizens with equal rights and obligations. In line with this new approach, the first article of

³² SENS. La Révolution Batave, op. cit. 67-70.

³³ DAGVERHAAL der handelingen van de Nationaale Vergadering representeerende het Volk van Nederland, vol. VI. The Hague: Swart en Comp., 1797. p. 11.

³⁴ In March 1797, Hubertus Coenman had held a longwinded speech in the Committee for West-Indian Affairs, in which he argued that treating the free colored population of the colonies as equal citizens would improve their trustworthiness for colonial defense, both against outward enemies and against the 'servants' – a consciously employed euphemism for slaves. NA-Ha, Archief West-Indisch-Comité, Propositiën, voordrachten en memoriën van het Comité tot de zaken van de koloniën en bezittingen op de Kust van Guinea en in Amerika, 1795-1797, 2.01.28.01, No. 84, 341-342.

Floh's report stated that the 'agricultural and trading Colonies in the West-Indies are Possessions of the State, ... which for that reason is obligated to apply the most tender care, to encourage their agriculture and trade in all possible ways ... for the happiness of the particular Inhabitants of the Colony itself, and for the advance of the reputation and wealth of the Commonwealth.'³⁵ The sixth article proposed to erect a committee to draft a charter listing means to increase the 'happiness, industriousness and diligence' of the colonial population.³⁶

Within this framework, the delegates proceeded to discuss the complete silence of Floh's report on slavery and the slave-trade. Pieter Vreede's statement made clear how much the different parties in the National Assembly shared, despite the concrete difference on the inclusion of a paragraph on slavery in the constitution and the market discrepancy in temperaments. He praised the general principles underlying Floh's report, and its spirit of 'moderation, prudence and healthy statecraft'.³⁷ He continued to assure the Assembly that the wording of an abolition clause should be chosen in such a way, that the 'countless disasters' that 'our French Brothers' had caused by immediate and total abandonment of slavery had caused in their colonies. Instead, a commission should formulate a long-term plan to ensure that slavery and the slave trade would 'once' come to an end.³⁸

During the remainder of the session of 22 April, one opponent of Vreede's proposition after the other started their speeches with a glowing affirmation of his abolitionist sentiments, only to insist that any hint of putting this in a concrete statement of intent would lead to another St. Domingue, and should therefore be avoided.³⁹ Schimmelpenninck's contribution was characteristic:

'It could certainly not be expected that in this Assembly, one person would open his mouth to make an apology of the Slave-state. ... As for me, no-one wishes more ardently than I, that the fate of this unhappy part of humanity in which, despite the difference in color, we recognize our fellow creatures of nature, in all ways should be relieved ... [However, L]et us anxiously

³⁵ DAGVERHAAL der handelingen van de Nationaale Vergadering representeerende het Volk van Nederland, Vol. V. The Hague: Swart en Comp., 1797. p. 725-726.

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 726.

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 726-727.

³⁸ Ibidem, p. 727.

³⁹ It is a sign of the rather abstract and far-removed vision of the Dutch on the realities of slavery in the Dutch colonies, that the 1795 slave revolt in Curaçao, one of the largest contemporary slave revolts, did not play any role in these debates. GEGGUS, David. Slave rebellion during the Age of Revolution. In: KLOOSTER, Wim; OOSTINDIE, Gert (eds). Curaçao in the Age of Revolutions. Leiden: KITLV Press, 2011. p. 23-56.

watch all the lamentations in which the hurry of others in this matter has plunged thousands upon thousands. The name St. Domingo alone should make you think twice.⁴⁰

Several other delegates spoke in favor of Vreede's proposal. One of the most noticeable was a representative from the region Brabant, who insisted that since the people of Brabant under the old regime had suffered conditions almost as worst as colonial slavery, they supported this cause with special ardor.⁴¹ However, even most of those who at the end of the meeting voted with Vreede pointed out that in light of the French experience, mentioning an end-date for full abolition should be avoided.

The real crunch of the debate came a month later, when Floh's committee came back with a second report that specifically dealt with the question whether or not the future Constitution should contain any mention of slavery or the slave-trade. Floh, in his opening statement, again emphasized the international aspects of abolition. Interestingly enough, he speculated that abolition of the slave-trade would be a possibility, as long as it would not be done unilaterally. However, as long as the British state did not embrace it, prohibiting the import of African slaves in the Dutch colonies would only enhance the present danger of a British take-over of the West-Indian possessions.⁴² After dwelling for a considerable time on the 'horrid' example of St. Domingue, he ended on the conclusion that 'a deliberate silence' would be the best 'middle road' between embracing practical steps towards abolition and explicitly sanctioning the inhumane institution of slavery.⁴³

Floh's strategy of not confronting the abolitionist case directly, but embracing it in principle while rejecting any immediate practical consequences proved highly effective. Faced with the salving assurances of the 'shrewd sirens', Vreede launched into a speech that was far more revolutionary than the one with which he had originally raised the issue. In direct contradiction of his own remarks of 22 April, and of the position of almost all the abolitionists from ruling class circles then and later, he argued that a St. Domingue-type of revolution would be preferable to a continuation of slavery. Although he again repeated that the Danish (gradual and highly limited) process of abolition was better than the tumultuous French one, he also warned that

⁴⁰ DAGVERHAAL, vol. V. Op. Cit., p. 729.

⁴¹ Ibidem, p. 732. In the Dutch Republic, the region of Brabant had had no representation in the States General.

⁴² DAGVERHAAL, vol. VI. Op. Cit., p. 6.

⁴³ Ibidem, p. 8.

fear of 'well-deserved retribution' of the white planters could never justify the continuation of the oppression of the far larger black slave population. He even quoted Abbey Reynal, saying that 'those who defend Slavery, deserve from the philosopher only deep contempt, and from the negro the thrust of a dagger.'⁴⁴ Unsurprisingly, this position gained not much adherence. More representative of the middle ground that emerged was the position of the influential representative Hahn, who repeated the possibility of abolishing the slave-trade only, after which a long period of education through labor should prepare the African slaves for freedom at an unspecified future date.⁴⁵ This formulation seems to have been met with widespread approval from the assembled delegates, under the sole condition that no date would be set even for the abolition of the slave-trade, and not a word would be said about it in the text of the Constitution.

While historians have rightly taken the disappointing outcome of this debate as proof of the weakness and ineffectiveness of Dutch abolitionism at the time, they have largely left the content of the debate unexamined. This is unfortunate, since the way in which the moderates of various hues withstood Vreede's charge gives us some important keys to understanding the nature of pro-slavery policies in the decades that followed. Most importantly, this was the first occasion in which Dutch policy makers showed that in the absence of considerable physical force pushing towards abolition 'from below' – such as successful slave-revolution in the French or mass popular mobilization in the British case – Atlantic ruling classes were well capable of absorbing the moral rhetoric of abolitionism in a way that remained completely unthreatening for the institution of slavery itself.

Conservatives and modernizers in a changing global context

Both as a result of the defeat suffered by the few real advocates of abolition in the National Assembly, and of international events that repeatedly cut off relations between the Dutch state and the West-Indian colonies, the question of slavery ostensibly disappeared from the political agenda after 1797. Between 1796 and 1801, all the Dutch colonies on the Guyana coast and in the Dutch Antilles were taken over

⁴⁴ Ibidem, p. 11-12.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, 21.

by the British.⁴⁶ These colonies were returned in 1802 for the duration of the short-lived Peace of Amiens, but from 1803 onwards were retaken in quick succession.⁴⁷ The Dutch slave-trade, which had seen quite a recovery in the years 1791-1793, practically collapsed, leading Emmer to conclude that by the early nineteenth century there was nothing left to abolish.⁴⁸ However, the latter view disregards the large scale importation of slaves in the Dutch colonies on non-Dutch ships. For the years 1795-1808, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database lists the arrival of 24,638 slaves on ships with Suriname as the principal destination, of which 22,531 came on non-Dutch (mostly British, but also North-American and Danish) vessels.⁴⁹ It was this complete dependence on English and American slave-traders, more than the earlier decline of

⁴⁶ Guyana coast: Demerary (1796), Berbice (1796), Essequibo (1796), Suriname (1799). Dutch Antilles: Curaçao (1800), St. Eustatius (1801), St. Martin (1801) and Saba (1801). ENTHOVEN, Victor Enthoven; HEIJER, Henk den; JORDAAN, Han. *De Nederlandse Atlantische wereld in militaire context, 1585-1800*. In ENTHOVEN, Victor; HEIJER, Henk den; JORDAAN, Han (eds). *Geweld in de West. Een militaire geschiedenis van de Nederlandse Atlantische wereld, 1600-1800*. Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2013, p. 15-42, v. 35-36.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 36-37.

⁴⁸ EMMER. *Abolition*, Op. Cit.; EMMER, P.C. *De Nederlandse slavenhandel 1500-1850*. Amsterdam: Arbeiders Pers, 2000. p. 190. Dutch traders brought 623 slaves to Suriname in 1790, 1331 in 1791, 2025 in 1792 and 2583 in 1793, after that year, the Dutch contribution to slave importation in Suriname dwindled. FATAH-BLACK, Network, op. cit., p. 628.

⁴⁹ The Trans Atlantic Slave Trade Database gives the following figures (www.slavevoyages.org, accessed 26-08-2016):

	Dutch ships	Non-Dutch ships	Origin of the ship unknown	Total
1795	535	93	126	754
1796		179		179
1798			266	266
1799		1263		1263
1800		3082		3082
1801		3663		3663
1802	279	1452	126	1857
1803	649	1949	126	2724
1804		3369		3369
1805		5244		5244
1806		1238		1238
1807		404		404
1808		595		595
Total 1795-1808	1463	22531	644	24638

These data of necessity are imprecise, probably containing many slaves that were destined for the Dutch colonies that became British Guyana, but the general picture of substantial non-Dutch slave imports in Suriname is confirmed by sources on slave acquisitions on Surinamese plantations in these years. STIPRIAAN, Alex van. *Surinaams contrast. Roofbouw en overleven in een Caraïbische plantagekolonie 1750-1863*. Leiden: KITLV Press, 1993. p. 106. The average number of 1895 African slaves imported in Suriname in this period according to these figures is larger than the average number of 1409 slaves transported by the entire Dutch trans-Atlantic slave-trade in the years 1780-1795. POSTMA, Johannes. *The Dutch in the Atlantic slave trade 1600-1815*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. p. 295.

the Dutch slave-trade, that made a continuation of the legal slave-trade from Africa after British and North-American abolition a pipe-dream.

The lack of realism of proposals to restore the Dutch slave trade given the new international power-relations, did not stop pro-slavery conservatives from formulating them at various points in the run up to the 1814 Royal decree. In 1801, the Batavian executive discussed several requests from slave-traders to make possible the resumption of the trade.⁵⁰ When the British parliament ratified the ban on the slave-trade, some planters and colonial administrators again raised their voice. The first secretary in Elmina on the Gold Coast sent a long treatise to the Ministry of the Colonies to argue that the slave-trade was indispensable for the maintenance of the West-Indian possessions.⁵¹ After the restoration of the Dutch monarchy in 1813, Baron Van Lijnden-Van Blitterswijk, the strong Zeeland advocate of protection of the trade during the 1789-1791 debate, wrote a long comment on the pending abolition of the trade. His apology of the trade was formulated in terms that hardly differed from those that he had entertained in the late 1780s. He further expressed great confidence, based on North-American and British precedents, that a substantial illegal trade would continue unabated after abolition.⁵²

Another group of colonial advisers, however, formulated proposals that were more in tune with the spirit of the times. These 'modernizers' accepted the inevitability of the abolition of the slave-trade and even the eventual abolition of slavery itself, but argued that in the meantime slavery should be reorganized in a way that would be profitable both for the planters in the colonies and for the mother country. In doing so, they could build on a growing literature stemming from the West Indies that discussed improvements in plantation management that could render slavery more sustainable and increase production levels.⁵³ The assumption of direct state management by the Dutch state created the preconditions for alleviating such new managerial approaches

⁵⁰ Interestingly enough, emanating from the Vlissingen slave-trading company Louissen & Sons, which in 1790 had contributed to the debate on subsidies for slave-traders. NOTULEN van het Staats-Bewind der Bataafsche Republiek, vol. I. [The Hague]: Staats-Bewind, s.d. p. 193, session of 16 November 1801.

⁵¹ This and similar proposals are discussed at length in EMMER. Engeland, Nederland II, op. cit., p. 51 ff.

⁵² NA-Ha, Archief Algemene Staatssecretarie, Consideratien omtrent de slaven-handel, August 1814, 2.02.01, no. 6555.

⁵³ STIPRIAAN, op. cit. p. 347 ff. The most important contemporary Dutch example of new managerial approaches emanating from the colonies is BLOM, Anthony. *Verhandeling over den landbouw, in de colonie Suriname*. Haarlem: Cornelis van der Aa, 1786. Similar 'innovations' took place in other slave-societies as well. E.g. ROSENTHAL, Caitlin C. From memory to mastery. Accounting for control in America, 1750-1880. *Enterprise & Society*, vol. 14: no. 4, p. 732-748, 2013.

to the level of state policy. The most influential among the modernizers were Gijsbert Karel van Hogendorp, a key figure in the restoration of the Kingdom with strong colonial antecedents, and Johannes van den Bosch, who in the late 1820s would become the Commissary-General of the Dutch West-Indies and also helped to design the forced-labor based Cultivation System for the East-Indies. Of these two, Gijsbert Karel van Hogendorp had the most favorable predisposition towards the abolition of slavery itself. In an advise on the slave trade presented by him in Parliament in December 1818, he argued that the decline of the slave trade had forced planters in Mexico, New-Granada, Venezuela and other Caribbean countries to find new and more productive ways to produce despite a declining number of slaves. He also pointed to the increases of production in Dutch Java, where no field-slaves were used. On the basis of these experiences, he argued that although many of the slave plantations in Suriname suffered from declining profitability, it would be possible to revive production by concentrating the existing slave-force in newly colonized areas along the coast. In combination with policies to discourage planters to 'work the negroes to death', he speculated that the slave population could even increase through natural growth.⁵⁴

Whereas Van Hogendorp sought the answer to the problem of a declining slave-population within Suriname itself, Van den Bosch sought to counter it through a grand imperial vision. In his global overview of the state of the Dutch colonialism, also published in 1818, he compiled an impressive number of statistics to prove the increased importance of the colonies, including those in the Guyanas, for the Dutch state and economy.⁵⁵ Like Van Hogendorp, Van den Bosch advocated direct state-intervention to enforce less harsh treatment of the slaves. This would serve the dual purpose of stimulating 'natural growth' of the slave-population to compensate for the abolition of the slave-trade, and 'preparing' the slaves for a gradual abolition of slavery if circumstances would make this inevitable.⁵⁶ But he also advocated a more integrated approach to the Dutch colonial empire as a whole as a way to counteract the 'disadvantages' created by slave-trade abolition. One of the elements of this was to

⁵⁴ HOGENDORP, Gijsbert Karel van. *Bijdragen tot de huishouding van staat*, vol. 3-4. 2nd edition, Zaltbommel: Joh. Norman, 1854. p. 102-103.

⁵⁵ BOSCH, Johannes van den. *Nederlandsche bezittingen in Azia, Amerika en Afrika*, vol. II. The Hague / Amsterdam: Gebroeders Van Cleef, 1818. p. 240-241.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 208-213.

transplant unprofitable sectors of colonial production across the globe, from Suriname to Java. More creatively, however, he also suggested another form of transplantation in the opposite direction: the mass transportation of Javanese prisoners to work on Surinamese plantations. According to Van den Bosch, the 'natural inclination' of the Asians to theft would provide the Dutch state with about thousand people yearly, who could be forced to work on the plantations for several years on end. This would have the dual advantage of removing unruly elements from Java, while supplying hands that were 'very suitable for the sugar and coffee culture' of Suriname. The plantation regime would prevent them from returning to their former defiant behavior.⁵⁷ Even more than Van Hogendorp's position, Van den Bosch's views provide an example how visions of a restoration of the profitability of the slave colonies could be integrated within a pragmatic, modernizing, internationalist vision of colonial politics.

In their actual policies towards the implementation of slave-trade abolition, the Dutch crown and colonial ministry steered a middle course between the demands of the conservatives and the visions of the modernizers. William I published his 1814 decree without a hint of protest, but his government then continued at an excruciatingly slow pace to take the measures that should ensure that the ban on the trade became effective. Van Stipriaan calculated that between 1816 and 1827, 12.000 slaves were imported in Suriname, mostly newly captured on the African coast.⁵⁸ As far as the Dutch government and the Surinamese planters were concerned most of these slaves arrived through legal routes, because the Dutch government was very careful to keep the loophole of intra-Caribbean trade open by law as long as it could.⁵⁹ At the same time, they were increasingly won to an interventionist policy towards Surinamese planters as a way to counteract the demographic decline of the Surinamese slave-population, culminating in the appointment of Johannes van den Bosch as Commissary-General of the West-Indies.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Ibidem, p. 246.

⁵⁸ STIPRIAAN, op. cit., p. 107.

⁵⁹ Van Hogendorp argued that this in fact was one of the key intents of the treaty between Britain and the Netherlands that led to the 1818 law. HOGENDORP. Op. Cit., p. 99-100.

⁶⁰ See SIWPERSAD, op. cit., p. 125-263 and STIPRIAAN, Op. Cit., p. 347-368 for two different perspectives on the results.

Conclusions

Throughout the twists and turns created by the delaying tactics of the anti-slave trade policies pursued by the Dutch King and colonial ministry after 1814, there never was a lack of 'shrewd sirens' to sing their praises. Only five representatives voted against the abolition Law when it was finally brought to the floor in November 1818. One of those, the representative Nagelmaekers, opened his speech with the following glowing endorsement of the spirit of the time:

'C'est de coeur que j'adopte, quant au fond, le project de loi soumis aujourd'hui à nos délibérations. Je l'adopte avec un sentiment bien vif de reconnaissance envers S.M. et les autres souverains, don't la volonté est de faire cesser un traite infame, inventé per une cupidité sordide et qui fait honte à l'humanité.'⁶¹

While Dutch historians have generally recognized the lack of genuine abolitionist sentiments behind such utterances, they have so far failed to note the underlying shift that took place in the nature of pro-slavery arguments in the quarter century between the debate on slave-trade protection of 1789-1791 and the King's abolition decree of 1814. No grassroots abolitionist movement emerged in the Netherlands during those years, but the rhetoric employed in discussing the matter of slavery and the slave-trade still deeply reflected the advances made by anti-slavery campaigning internationally. This became most visible during the 1797 debates in the National Assembly, where largely anti-abolitionist representatives fully embraced the moral righteousness of the anti-slavery cause, only to emphasize the dangers of acknowledging this in even the most vague terms in the future Constitution. Dutch anti-slavery sentiments in these years thus represented not so much a dog that did not bark, but one that did not bite. Left to work out the consequences of the increasing international pressures to abolish the slave trade without 'interference' of mass protests, conservative proponents of slavery pushed their tactics to slow down and undermine the process, while modernizers thought out ways to keep the slave-colonies profitable once the trade ended.

In many ways, it was the 'modernizers' of 1818, not the colonial conservatives, who were the real heirs of the 1797 majority. They considered the question of slavery

⁶¹ NOORDZIEK, J.J.F. (ed). Verslag der handelingen van de Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, gedurende de zitting van 1818-1819, gehouden te Brussel. The Hague: Algemeene Landsdrukkerij, 1861. p. 19.

not primarily as one of protection of a narrow West-Indian interest, but as integral part of a wider colonial policy in the interest of the national economy of the mother country. They engaged intensely with international developments and carefully studied the experiences of other slave-based colonies. On this basis, they proved fully capable of combining acceptance of the paternalist humanitarianism of abolitionism from above with a practical perspective geared towards increasing the long-term viability of slavery. That under such intellectual guidance the Dutch government in the decades following the abolition of the slave-trade exhibited little interest in moving towards the abolition of slavery itself was not the result of neglect, but of intent.

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