

Review

Piet de Rooy:

***Ons stipje op de wereldkaart: De politieke cultuur van
modern Nederland***

Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 2014. 414 p.

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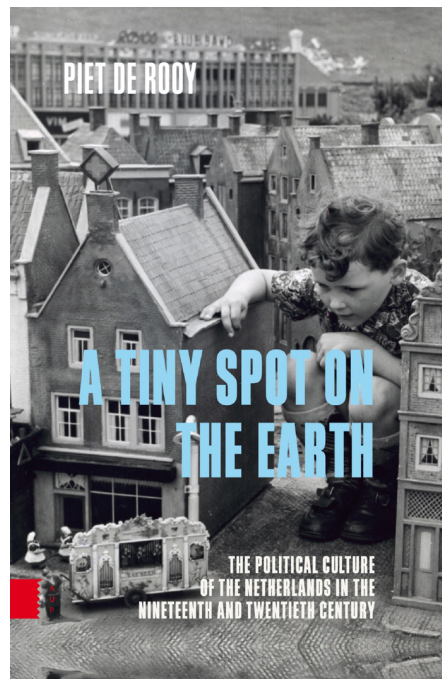
***A tiny spot on the earth: The political culture of the
Netherlands***

Vivian Collingwood (trans.)

Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015. 401 p.

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Reviewed by Edward Anthony Koning



Winner of the 2014 *Prinsjesboekenprijs* for the best book on Dutch politics, *Ons stipje op de waereldkaart* (or *A tiny spot on the earth*, in its English translation) chronicles the history of Dutch political culture since the turn of the 18th century. Acclaimed historian Piet de Rooy zooms in on key events during this time span to contest the notion that there is such a thing as a unique Dutch political culture of compromise and accommodation (the so-called *poldermodel*) that has stayed relatively unchanged over time. Instead, so he argues, the nature of Dutch politics has undergone considerable change, and in this process has been deeply influenced by foreign influences.

In eight substantive chapters, De Rooy argues that modern Dutch political culture has developed through four phases. Chapters 1 and 2 are dedicated to the first of these four: the period starting at the end of the 18th century, when the spirit of the French revolution led to the adoption of the 1798 constitution, and ushered in an understanding of politics that elevated parliament (at the time named the National Assembly) as the key body for decision-making and representation, demanded a strict separation of state and church, and offered a clearer delineation of the scope of citizenship. This new republic was of course short-lived because of the French annexation, but even after Napoleon's fall and the creation of the monarchy, this political culture, as De Rooy argues, essentially lived on without fundamental change.

Such change would come in the period surrounding the adoption of a new constitution in 1848 and the ensuing "battle for the political culture and the nature of the nation state" (87) between liberal Thorbecke and protestant Groen van Prinsterer. In this second phase of Dutch political culture, described in detail in Chapter 3, a system emerged in which constitutional rules superseded popular sovereignty, an aristocratic political elite operated "without any bond with the voter" (290), and societal associations assumed larger political prominence.

In the third phase, Dutch political culture became more divisive, mostly as a result of the actions of Abraham Kuyper, who founded the first Dutch political party in 1879. Chapter 4 describes Kuyper's political activities in detail, showing that they forced other political forces to organize themselves in groups as well and thereby made divisions among politicians, and by extension, citizens more visible. The political culture was rapidly changed from one in which people were no longer just 'citizens' (*staatsburgers*) but rather 'party supporters' (*partijgangers*). An equally important aspect of this cultural change was the renewed importance of religion in politics, considering that many of the new political divisions were formed precisely along religious lines. Chapter 5 describes the difficulties that socialists and feminists experienced in the new order in which politics was shaped by parties and ideologies. These difficulties led many socialists to abandon the pursuit of a revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and instead embrace the more

pragmatic solution of forming a social-democratic party (the SDAP). The feminists were forced to mostly pursue their political goals through associational activity, largely because they were unable to find common ground with the social democrats. Chapter 6 documents the culmination of the most fragmented phase of Dutch politics, when the divisions between different political groups were further institutionalized under the system of pillarization.

This system collapsed in the 1960s, ushering in the last phase in De Rooy's analysis. Chapter 7 argues that the culture of the '60s and the process of European integration reduced the prominence of political parties, which saw a rapid loss of members and followers, and of political ideologies, which became decreasingly relevant to people's identities. In Chapter 8, De Rooy argues that this process continued in the early 21st century. The arrival of populism (in particular, the emergence of Pim Fortuyn) created an additional blow to the position of so-called mainstream parties, and the convergence among the political elite on a wide range of issues (from European integration to the reasonable limits of the welfare state) signified the end of ideologies.

Anyone with an interest in Dutch political history will enjoy this book. It does not only offer a novel take, but it is also engagingly written, filled with interesting anecdotes and vivid descriptions. As such, the book is much more accessible than many academic texts that sometimes lose their punch in the weeds of academic jargon, theorization, and methodological reflections. At the same time, the choice for this style also comes with disadvantages. It leaves little space for clarification on the precise meaning of key concepts or the exact procedures by which evidence has been selected and analyzed. As a result, at times the book does not fully demonstrate its key claims or becomes a little unclear on what exactly those claims are in the first place. In short, the book is not always clear on its concepts, its methods, and its arguments. Let me briefly discuss each in turn.

To begin, the goal of the book to describe the nature of Dutch political culture is made a little difficult by the lack of a clear definition of what this term means. De Rooy eschews a definition of politics altogether – “what ‘politics’ is resists definition” (14) – and adopts a very encompassing definition of political culture, described as “the underlying layer of politics” (11), and involving “the political system, with the constitution at its heart” (14), “civil society” (14), and “the general attitude of the population” (14). Since it is difficult to imagine anything that is not captured under this definition, the precise focus of the investigation is unclear and some of the book's claims are confusing (for example, comments like “this intense change in society would have important consequences for the political culture” [232] are difficult to understand because

in De Rooy's understanding 'society' itself is part of the 'political culture' in the first place).

Relatedly, the book does not explain the methods on which the analysis depends. The author seems to invoke laws, political declarations, religious texts, campaign speeches, memos from politicians and political advisors, societal descriptions, testimonials from citizens, and even key contributions to political philosophy from non-Dutch authors to describe Dutch political culture. But the reader is not given much information why this specific evidence is invoked. It is therefore difficult to assess whether they truly convey the 'political culture' of the time, or rather present a minority view. Similarly, the book does not offer a clear justification for focusing on the specific events around which the analysis has been centred. The reader is left wondering why events such as the Great Pacification of 1917, Troelstra's mistake, or the German occupation, that many introductory textbooks to Dutch politics identify as crucial to Dutch political history, are mentioned only in passing.

Some of these issues are also reflected in the argumentation. As summarized at the beginning of this review, my understanding is that De Rooy sees the history of modern Dutch political culture as one that exhibits relatively little change most of the time but is punctuated by four turning points ushering in distinct stages (this seems to be communicated most clearly on p. 9 and pp. 290-293). At the same time, every one of the eight main chapters seems pitched as describing an important change. For example, Chapter 2 seems to be part of the same 'phase' that Chapter 1 documents but is called "A new society is being created here" and includes the transition from republic to monarchy and the secession of Flanders. Chapters 5 and 6 apparently describe the same phase as Chapter 4 but document important changes to the political culture such as the spread of socialism and feminism, and the process of pillarization, which may have been an outgrowth of party formation but surely denotes a very different type of political order. Similarly, while the link that De Rooy draws between the process of depillarization in Chapter 7 and the advent of populism in Chapter 8 is plausible, it seems a bit of a stretch to describe these as representative of a fundamentally unchanged political culture. In other words, it is not entirely clear whether the book identifies four or eight (or any other number of) stages in the history of Dutch political culture.

Something similar can be said about the central argument of the book. The introduction presents the key contribution as objecting to the view of "political scientists [who presented] the past of the Netherlands ... with too great an emphasis on continuity and too little focus on the far-reaching changes that occurred ... in the structure and conduct of politics" (8-9). Similarly, the summary on the back insists that the book's key message is that the common description of

Dutch political culture as revolving around a *poldermodel* and ‘consociational democracy’ is a “myth” and that history included “revolution..., shocks, and convulsions, rife with rivalries.” At the same time, the book at times points at precisely the type of continuity and Dutch exceptionalism that it apparently argues against. This is most clearly the case in the last two pages. Here, De Rooy first emphasizes that Dutch political culture is different (and indeed, more compromise-oriented) because “the Netherlands was a small country... [which] made it possible to maintain a democratic regime [but implied] military weakness... This weakness meant that it was very important to remain united, [which] resulted in a high level of social pressure on the political debate; an almost principled preference for moderation, if not mediocrity” (296). And the book’s very last sentence emphasizes “those things that, despite all of the changes, have remained constant in Dutch political culture over the last two centuries: a generally pragmatic mode of interaction, the weightlessness of the past, and the awareness ... of being but a ‘tiny spot on the earth’” (297).

In the end, however, these quibbles should not detract from the praise the book so deservedly has received. It offers a compelling and original account of modern Dutch political history that is bound to engage all interested readers and inform many future analyses.

About the reviewer

Edward Koning is associate professor of political science at the University of Guelph (Ontario, Canada). He received his master’s degree in political science at Leiden Universiteit (Netherlands) and his PhD at Queen’s University (Kingston, Ontario, Canada). Most of his research investigates the politics of immigration, specifically in Northwest Europe and North America. He is the author of *Immigration and the politics of welfare exclusion* (University of Toronto Press, 2019), and has published in leading academic journals (including *Comparative European Politics*, *Comparative Political Studies*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, and *Journal of Public Policy*) on a variety of related issues, including anti-immigrant politics, institutionalist theory, public opinion on immigration, and citizenship policy.

