

The Legacy of Dutch Brazil

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Dutch Brazil and the Making of Free Trade Ideology

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The *Histoire des deux Indes*, the famous survey of European colonialism published in various versions throughout the 1770s and the 1780s by the abbé Guillaume-Thomas Raynal, contains a remarkable passage on the history of Dutch Brazil. Having narrated the rise, decline, and fall of Dutch rule in Brazil, Raynal concludes that the Dutch had to

part with a conquest that might have become the richest of all the European colonies, and would have given the republic a degree of importance it could never acquire from its own territory. But, in order to keep it, the government ought to have undertaken the administration and defence of it; and to make it prosper, it should have enjoyed full liberty. With these precautions, Brazil would have been preserved, and would have enriched the nation, instead of ruining the company. Unfortunately, it was not yet known that the only way to make lands useful in America was to clear them, and that this could not be done with success, unless a free trade were opened to all the inhabitants under the protection of government.¹

This verdict on the possible prospects of Dutch rule in Brazil is surprisingly mild in light of the harsh criticism of the Dutch in other sections of the *Histoire*, in particular those sections that can be attributed to Raynal's most important coauthor, Denis Diderot.² Yet the quoted passage is

¹ Quoted to the English translation of 1783, published as *A Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies. Revised, Augmented, and Published, in Ten Volumes, by the Abbé Raynal*, transl. J. O. Justamond (8 vols.; London, 1783), IV, book 9, p. 407. I also consulted the original French edition, *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* (10 vols.; Geneva, 1783).

² See esp. vol. I, ch. 2, pp. 391–99. Diderot's contributions to the *Histoire* are listed and analyzed in Michèle Duchelet, *Diderot et l'Histoire des deux Indes ou l'écriture fragmentaire* (Paris: Nizet, 1978). Recent scholarship has reappraised the importance of the

remarkable for a second reason: It offers an almost literal restatement of the argument brought forward in the course of the seventeenth century by Dutch opponents of the chartered monopoly of the West India Company in Brazil's colonial trade. As these critics of the West India Company argued, Dutch rule in Brazil was doomed to fail precisely because of the absence of full liberty. For them, as for Raynal, prosperity and successful colonization could only be furthered by opening up free trade to all the inhabitants under governmental protection.

Is this correspondence between the argument of the *Histoire* and that of seventeenth-century Dutch critics of the West India Company merely coincidental? Or is it possible to speak of an intellectual legacy of Dutch Brazil, of an ideological current that links the two positions? My aim in this chapter is to explore a crooked historical route that leads to such a link. I first examine the impact of the Dutch debate over colonial trade in Brazil during the late 1630s on the making of free trade ideology up to the 1660s, in particular in the work of the radical Dutch republican Pieter de la Court. I continue sketching the reception of De la Court's ideas in the enlightened circles in which the *Histoire* was conceived. The resulting story of the impact of seventeenth-century Dutch conceptions of colonial commerce makes clear that the Dutch experience in Brazil played an important role in the development of free trade ideology throughout the Enlightenment. Following recent reassessments of the relationship between commerce and conquest in the eighteenth century, I argue that this free trade ideology aimed to vindicate a specific notion of commercial colonialism.

Debating the Monopoly

In October 1630, in the wake of the Dutch seizure of Olinda and Recife from the Portuguese, the board of the West India Company decided, with the approval of the States General, on a limited and provisional release of its monopoly. To attract immigration and to boost the local economy, it decided to open the trade on the coasts of Brazil to "all inhabitants of

Histoire, focusing in particular on Diderot. For authoritative interpretations, see Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 72–121; J. G. A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion. Vol. 4: Barbarians, Savages and Empires* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 229–330; Jonathan Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights, 1750–1790* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 413–42; and Anoush Fraser Terjanian, *Commerce and Its Discontents in Eighteenth-Century French Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

the United Provinces [...] together with all Portuguese, Brazilian, and other inhabitants of Brazil," provided the traders paid taxes and dues to the West India Company and used only Company ships for their trade.³ When the edict was renewed four years later, with substantially reduced freight rates, many independent merchants started to engage in Dutch Brazil's colonial market. Yet before long, the private profits they made evoked disapproval among some shareholders of the West India Company who wanted to see the Company's monopoly reinstated in its entirety. As one pamphleteer argued in 1636, all Dutch power and prosperity were based on the "weak and changeable foundation" of trade, and only a strong Company that simultaneously pursued "conquests and commerce" could "make the foundation of our State stronger." Invoking the example of Rome's struggle against Carthage, the pamphleteer claimed that the Dutch could outdo its rival Spain by moving the war to the colonial arena, thereby forcing other nations to "seek their commerce more and more in our quarters." Moreover, the Dutch should ensure that "the poor wild Cannibals, Man-eaters, would be brought to the knowledge of the true Faith, and not by our enemies to the damned Idolatry of the Papacy." Those who supported the opening up of Brazil's trade, he argued, would only frustrate this civilizing mission of commerce and conquest. Weakened by "opulence and luxury," they forsook the prime creed of republican politics – the principle that the common good should always prevail over private interests.⁴

This argument against the participation of the independent merchants in the Brazil trade was backed by several shareholders of the West India Company, for example in Utrecht, who argued that the release of its

³ *West Indische Compagnie. Articulen, met approbatie vande Ho. Mog. Heeren Staten Generael der Vereenichde Nederlanden...* (Amsterdam, 1631) [Knuttel 4152], sig. A2: "Alle Inwoonders deser Geunieerde Provintien [...] mitsgaders alle Portugesen, Brasilianen, ende andere Inwoonders van Brasil." For more extensive discussion of the debate over free trade in Brazil, see Boxer, *Dutch in Brazil*, pp. 75–82; J. G. van Dillen, "De West-Indische Compagnie, het calvinisme en de politiek," *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 74 (1961), 145–71; and Henk den Heijer, "Het recht van de sterkste in de polder. Politieke en economische strijd tussen Amsterdam en Zeeland over de kwestie Brazilië, 1630–1654," in: Dennis Bos et al. (eds.), *Harmonie in Holland. Het poldermodel van 1500 tot nu* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2007), 72–92.

⁴ *Reden van dat die West-Indische Compagnie...* (s.l., 1636) [Knuttel 4425], sig. A2v-B: "een zwack ende veranderlijck fondament [...] Conquesten ende Negotie [...] om het fondament van onsen Staet vaster te maken [...] overdadicheydt ende luxurie [...] op dat wy andere Nacien het oorsake geven haar Negotien meer ende meer in onse quartieren te soecken [...] so laet ons tegelijck arbeiden, dat d'arme wilde Cannibalen, Menschen-eters, totte kennisse des waren Gods-diensts, ende niet door onse vyanden totte vervloecte Afgoderye des Pausdoms mogen gebracht worden."

monopoly left the Company only with the costs of the war while the free-traders were able to make "excessively large gains."⁵ In line with these complaints, the States General eventually decided at the end of December 1636 to reinstate the original monopoly of the West India Company, and they forcefully reiterated this resolution in March and April the following year.

The rulings of the States General met with great criticism among those who favored the status quo, in particular private merchants and shareholders in Amsterdam. To a large extent, the debate over the monopoly of the West India Company confirmed or even deepened the existing ideological rift between the two seaborne provinces of Zeeland and Holland.⁶ As a true frontier province, Zeeland generally favored fervent anti-Spanish policies, and accordingly it supported a strong, militant West India Company to fight the Habsburg monarchy throughout the Atlantic, combining conquest with commerce. Yet the province of Holland, dominated by its largest city, Amsterdam, advocated a more lenient attitude, categorically championing commercial expansion over the costly uncertainties of war. Free trade in Brazil was considered to be paramount for such expansion. To make their case in the public debate, Amsterdam merchants claimed that freedom of trade entailed the best means to promote Dutch colonization. Dutch Brazil was in need of immigrants willing to cultivate the land, they argued, but these new colonists could be attracted only if they were offered comprehensive commercial liberties. Without "free men," one pamphleteer argued, conquered "lands cannot be cultivated," and without cultivation the whole Dutch colonial enterprise in Brazil would eventually fail.⁷ Claims such as these were in turn countered by advocates of the Company's monopoly, who, according to the account of Caspar Barlaeus, argued that such colonies of free men would easily develop into degenerate communities that might try to outdo the motherland, just as Tyre was once outshone by its colony in Carthage.⁸

⁵ "Stukken betreffende den vrijen handel op Brazilië, 1637," *Kroniek van het Historisch Genootschap* 25 (1869), 198: "blijvende alle de vordere excessive grote winsten voor de vrije handelaars."

⁶ See the analysis in Den Heijer, "Het recht van de sterkste."

⁷ *Vertoogh by een Lief-hebber des vaderlants vertoont* (s.l., 1637) [Knuttel 4514], sig. A2: "geen vrye lieden, soo en connen die landen niet gecultiveert worden." The author of this pamphlet was dismissed as a "groot ghepassioneert Brasilisch negotiant" by the following rebuttal, *Examen over het vertoogh teghen het onghefondeerde ende schadelijck sluyten der vryen handel in Brasil* (s.l., 1637) [Knuttel 4515], sig. A2.

⁸ Barlaeus, *Rerum per Octennium*, p. 87.

One of the most important voices in the ensuing debate was pro-pounded by a learned pamphlet that backed the argument for free trade with a range of references to classical Roman literature and contemporary legal theory. This pamphlet first invoked the authority of *jure gentium*, the law of peoples, for the statement that "free and open trade should be refused to nobody." Nature permits everyone freedom of trade, because unrestricted commerce bears out the natural design that the goods of the earth are universally distributed and that "men would live together as in one large society."⁹ With a reference to Grotius' *Mare Liberum*, the author continued to criticize the West India Company for refusing such freedom of trade to others and for attempting to usurp all commerce for itself. The Company, driven "by too large avidity and desire of profit, would like to pursue more than it can perform, begrudging someone else's profit, which the Company, given its incompetence, could never enjoy."¹⁰ The reference to Grotius in this context is significant because it shows how Grotius' argument, meant to validate the claims of the East India Company against the Portuguese at the start of Dutch colonial expansion in Asia, could also be used by individual Dutch merchants to counter the claims of the West India Company in the Atlantic.

The author of the pamphlet contended that the reinstatement of the monopoly of the West India Company would not only challenge international and natural law but also jeopardize the entire colonial project in Brazil. He argued that the inhabitants of Brazil had delivered themselves in good faith to the government of the States General and the West India Company because they trusted that the promises of free trade for all would be kept. The revocation of these promises would now besmirch the reputation of the state and give rise to widespread contempt, which would only make it more difficult to expand Dutch colonial rule and commerce in the future. Indeed, negating the rights of the Portuguese and other inhabitants might easily provoke unrest and revolt, so that "the State of Brazil would be put in a lasting insecurity, such that the Enemy

⁹ *Deductie, waer by onpartijdelijck over-wogen ende bewesen wort*, . . . (The Hague, 1638) [Knuttel 4581], sig. A2: "kan naer het gemeene recht der volckeren niet anders geoordeelt worden, als dat de vrye ende open handlinghe niemant en behoort geweygert te worden [...] dat de menschen als in een groote societeyt samen leven souden." The passage includes references to Bartolus and Seneca.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23: "door te groote aviditeyt ende begeerlijckheyt van winste meer soude willen aenvanghen als men soude kunnen uyt-voeren, misgunnende een ander 't profijt 'tghene de voorsz. Compagnie, mits hare onvermogenheyt, noyt en sal kunnen genieten." The reference is to Grotius, *Mare Liberum* V.58.

should be expected from within and from without."¹¹ To counter this risk, the author deemed it necessary to follow the two prime principles of good colonial policy, promoted by Tacitus and Lucan – *mansuetudo* and *clementia* – the “required mildness and moderation” that respect the liberties and privileges of the inhabitants and diminish their burdens and expenses. The examples of ancient Rome and the English plantation in Virginia attested that such a policy made a colony grow and prosper by satisfying the population and attracting new settlers. *Firmissimum est imperium quo obedientes gaudent*, as the pamphlet quoted Livy in line with Machiavelli: “The strongest government is that which is happily obeyed.”¹² The obvious message of the pamphlet was that a colonial government that enforces an all-embracing monopoly would surely not live up to this ideal.

Significantly, then, the debate between the advocates and the opponents of the monopoly of the West India Company involved not only the extent of free trade but especially how the Dutch should pursue colonial expansion. Whereas one side pleaded for a combined mission of commerce and conquest under the exclusive direction of the Company, the other side claimed that only the promotion of private initiative would promote Dutch rule overseas. Both sides in this debate appropriated the example of the Roman Republic and its enemies, notably Carthage, to substantiate their colonial vision. Clearly, the ideological origins of Dutch colonialism in the seventeenth century were deeply rooted in the late humanist culture that took ancient Rome as the timeless measure of modern politics.

On the level of concrete, day-to-day political maneuvering in the administration of the West India Company, the advocates of free trade found powerful support in the Company’s Amsterdam chamber. In two statements sent to the States of Utrecht, the Amsterdam directors reiterated the claim that the abolition of free trade would alienate Brazil’s inhabitants from Dutch rule and discourage Dutch immigration, thus bringing both the Company and the Dutch colonies to ruin. By contrast,

¹¹ Ibid., p. 14: “de Staet van Brasilien in een geduyrige onseeckerheyt soude werden gestelt, sulcx dat men van buyten ende binnen den Vyandt soude moeten verwachten.”

¹² Ibid., pp. 12–13: “Deze ghereguleerde sachtmoedigheyt ende moderatie,” referring to Tacitus and Lucan. The quote is from Livy, *Ab urbe condita* VIII.13, also quoted in Machiavelli, *Discorsi* II.23 in the context of Florentine rule over Arezzo. The Roman example of colonization through *privilegia* and *immunitates* is also advocated in the pamphlet *Consideratien als dat de negotie op Brasil behoort open gestelt te worden* (s.l., 1638) [Knuttel 4580], p. 10.

they insisted, through the opening up of the Brazil trade “the affection of the Brazilians and the Portuguese will be gained, commerce augmented, the political state stabilized, the conquered places populated, monopoly avoided, the subjects maintained in the liberty granted by God and nature, and the welfare of these countries, in commerce and otherwise, maximally procured.”¹³ This view was supported as well in Brazil itself. A group of Portuguese *moradores* dispatched a petition in defense of their commercial privileges, which, they said, formed the basis of their submission to the Dutch.¹⁴ In addition, Governor-General Johan Maurits of Nassau-Siegen pleaded forcefully in favor of the free trade system. In a missive to the governing board of the West India Company, he argued once more that all commerce is free by international law and that maintaining free trade would be essential for the further population and cultivation of Brazil.¹⁵

In light of the continuing opposition between the two camps in the Brazil trade, depicted in one pamphlet as a party game ruined by cheating players in search of easy profits,¹⁶ the West India Company and the States General eventually opted for a compromise. At the end of April 1638, an agreement was signed that provided for free trade for all Dutch shareholders of the West India Company as well as for the *moradores*, while the Company kept a monopoly over a few key businesses, most importantly the slave trade. This compromise agreement temporarily silenced the fierce contest over the monopoly of the West India Company – but not for long.

Toward a Comprehensive Defense of Free Trade

Over the course of the 1640s and 1650s, the gradual weakening of Dutch rule in Brazil and the deteriorating prospects of the West India Company

¹³ “Stukken betreffende den vrijen handel op Brazilië,” 201: “dat daerdoor de affectie vande Brasillianen ende Portugiesen gewonnen, de commercie geaugmenteert, de politiquen staet in dien vastgesteld, de veroverde plaetsen gepopuleert, monopolie geweert, d’onderdanen inde vrijheyt, haer bij Godt ende de nature verleent, geconserveert, ende het welvaren deser landen in negotie ende andersints, ten hoochsten geprocureert sullen worden.”

¹⁴ Ibid., 203–05.

¹⁵ “Memorie van Prins Maurits van Nassau van 16 januari 1638,” *Kroniek van het Historisch Genootschap* 11 (1855), 60–70. See also the account of Johan Maurits’ views in Barlaeus, *Rerum per Octennium*, pp. 88–90.

¹⁶ *Het spel van Brasilien, vergeleken by een goetd verkeer-spel* (s.l., 1638) [Knuttel 4582].

continued to fuel the debate over the Company's monopoly. A first outburst of pamphleteering occurred when, in anticipation of the imminent end of the charter of the West India Company in 1645, a commission of the States of Holland suggested the possibility of merging the East and West India Companies so as to combine the Dutch colonial forces in the worldwide struggle against Spain.¹⁷ The reactions to this proposal included a pamphlet that argued instead for opening up the Brazil trade completely, using the same arguments for free trade as in the previous decade.¹⁸ The charter of the West India Company was finally renewed after years of discussion in 1647, but given the Company's precarious financial situation, the arguments pro and contra free trade repeatedly resurged in the center of the public debate.¹⁹

Importantly, this debate over free trade in the colonial arena was not restricted to the United Provinces. Across the North Sea, similar arguments were advanced in this period against the monopoly of companies in overseas trade. The Leveller and merchant William Walwyn, for example, strongly denounced in his 1652 *Conceptions for a Free Trade* "the restriction and Government of Forraigne Trade by Companies." According to Walwyn, chartered monopolies conflict with the "Native Right" of merchants and the "publique good" of society.²⁰ Another significant voice in the choir against monopolistic companies was that of Manuel Fernandez de Villareal, the Portuguese ambassador to Paris. In his *Le politique tres-chrestien ou discours politiques*, a eulogy of Cardinal Richelieu published in 1645 by Elzevier in Leiden, Villareal maintained that trading companies would seek only their own interest without regard for the common good. Therefore, he insisted, the establishment of such companies would "oblige everyone to live in the disorders of avarice and not in

¹⁷ See Henk den Heijer, "Plannen voor samenvoeging van VOC en WIC," *Tijdschrift voor Zeegechiedenis* 13-2 (1994), 115-30. The proposal is discussed in detail in *Claer licht ofte vertooch van 's lants welvaeren*... (s.l., s.d.) [Knuttel 5121].

¹⁸ *Consideratie over de tegenwoordige ghelegentheydt van Brasil* (Amsterdam, 1644) [Knuttel 5124].

¹⁹ See, e.g., the pamphlets *Wel-vaert van de West-Indische Compagnie* (Middelburg, 1646); *Brasilische gelt-sack* ("Recife," 1647); *Remonstrantie van de hooft-participanten ende geintresseerde van de West-Indische Compagnie*... (s.l., 1649); *Haerlems schuytpraetjen op 't redres van de West-Indische Compagnie* (s.l., 1649); *Vertoogh, over den toestant der West-Indische Compagnie* (Rotterdam, 1651); *West-Indisch discours, verhandelende de West-Indische saecken* (s.l., 1653) [Knuttel 5357, 5548, 6468, 6480, 7002, 7454].

²⁰ "W Walwins Conceptions; for a Free Trade," in: *The Writings of William Walwyn*, eds. Jack R. McMichael and Barbara Taft (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 446-52.

the freedom of abundance" – and here he mentioned the Dutch chartered companies as the prime example of this gruesome fate.²¹

It is plausible that Villareal, a *marrano* who was convicted by the Inquisition and burnt at the stake in Lisbon a few years later, made this claim with the position of the *moradores* in Brazil in mind. In any case, the loss of Dutch Brazil in 1654 and the eventual peace treaty between Portugal and the United Provinces of 1661 seemed to validate the argument of the advocates of free trade in Brazil that the colony was bound to collapse under the partial monopoly of the West India Company. In 1662, the year after the signing of the peace treaty, this argument was developed further into a full-blown attack against economic monopolization in Pieter de la Court's treatise *Interest van Holland*, the most outspoken and significant contribution to the debate over free trade in the Dutch Golden Age.

De la Court, a textile entrepreneur from Leiden, strongly advocated the independence of the province of Holland, and his key work *Interest van Holland* entirely lives up to its title, deftly defending the political and economic interests of Holland against the interference of its neighboring provinces and the House of Orange.²² Holland's main interest, for De la Court, consisted of commercial freedom, which could only flourish in the absence of any restrictive institution – be it political, embodied by the stadtholder, or economic, in the form of a chartered monopoly. De la Court was himself a shareholder of the West India Company, and in his argumentation he recapped many of the claims made by Amsterdam merchants who advanced Holland's position vis-à-vis Zeeland in the late 1630s.

Like the pamphleteers in the debate over the Brazil trade, De la Court combined arguments of natural law and reason of state with a specific view on colonial expansion to advance his position. At the roots of his argumentation lay the claim that monopolies in overseas trade, just as guilds in the Dutch Republic, curtailed the "free trade of the common inhabitants" and "their natural liberty of seeking a livelihood in their fatherland."²³ Thus, chartered companies like the East and West India

²¹ [Manuel Fernandez de Villareal], *Le politique tres-chrestien ou discours politiques* ("Paris" [Leiden], 1645), p. 146: "C'est obliger tout le monde à vivre dans les desordres de l'avarice, & non dans la liberté de l'abondance."

²² For a detailed discussion of De la Court's life and thought, see my *Commercial Republicanism in the Dutch Golden Age: The Political Thought of Johan & Pieter de la Court* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

²³ Quoted to the 1669 revised edition, *Aanwysing der heilsame politike gronden en maximen van de Republike van Holland en West-Vriesland* (Leiden and Rotterdam, 1669),

Companies obstructed an essential element of human freedom. Moreover, De la Court insisted, they also obstructed the rationale of economic expansion. Commerce and foreign consumption could increase only if all Holland merchants were able to trade with the vast territories outside of Europe. Yet according to De la Court, this public interest of society at large was thwarted by the private interest of the trading companies, which deliberately created scarcity to raise prices and make easy gains. "The true Interest of such companies," De la Court argued, "consists in seeking the most benefit for its common Participants [...] and, in short, in making the most profits with the least trade and navigation."²⁴ The policies of the East and West India Companies thus diminished, rather than increased, Dutch commerce. Moreover, their monopolistic position meant that the colonial companies were not encouraged to open up new markets. "Certain profits make them stupid and slow," De la Court asserted, and he claimed that trade would only prosper when there is competition, "for necessity makes an old wife trot, hunger makes raw beans sweet, and poverty begets ingenuity."²⁵

Both natural law and economic reasoning, then, offered De la Court the ammunition to attack the monopolies of the East and West India Companies. A third element of his ideological assault consisted of the claim that such trading companies frustrated successful colonization. Again, this claim had been made before in the debate of the late 1630s, yet De la Court gave a more specifically commercial twist to the argument. Colonies, he argued, are an essential source of mercantile power because they significantly expand the trading opportunities of the colonizing polity by opening up new markets overseas. Yet these opportunities can be fully realized only if all the inhabitants of the metropolis are granted unrestricted freedom to trade with the conquered territories. Only such freedom will attract settlers and increase colonial commerce. De la Court insisted that the policies of the West India Company had the opposite effect, because the Company "has bound the hands of particular men and made war instead of commerce," thus impoverishing the common

I.7, p. 32: "vrijen handel der gemeene Ingeseetenen." Ibid., I.16, p. 71: "haare naturelike vryheid van 's levens middelen in haar vaderland soekende, te besnoejen met geotroyeerde ofte geslootene Compagnien en Gildens."

²⁴ Ibid., I.19, pp. 85–86: "het waarhaftige Interest soodaniger Compagnien bestaat, in het meesten voordeel der gemeene Participanten te souken [...] ende in het kort gesegt met de allerminste negotie ende navigatie, de meeste winsten te doen."

²⁵ Ibid., I.16, p. 72: "soo maaken haar de seekere profijten dom en traag. Daar aan de andere zijde waarhaftig is, dat de nood een oud wijf doet draaven; ende de honger raawe boonen soet maakt; alsmede dat de armoede list zoekt."

inhabitants and jeopardizing its own conquests. The loss of Dutch Brazil was a case in point of this disastrous fate, so De la Court claimed:

Since by an open trade, and consequently well-founded colonies, not only the mighty Lands of Brazil, Guinea, Angola, São Tomé &c. could have easily been defended with small expenses against all foreign aggression, but, which is very significant, through such a policy we would have been able to carry on an unbelievably immense trade with our own Nation, without fear that any foreign Potentate would seize our ships, goods or debts, the fear to which all Dutch inhabitants who trade only in Europe are continually exposed.²⁶

For De la Court, overseas colonies offered the Dutch a peaceful stage for profitable commerce, far removed from the daily dangers of trade within conflict-ridden Europe. He conceded that such colonies could be founded only through the use of force and that the military might of the West India Company had been indispensable for their establishment. Thus the Company had been a necessary evil from the early days of the war against Spain, yet before long it had become entirely obsolete and even counterproductive.²⁷ Aggressive action was needed to establish colonies, but once conquests were made, colonial rule could survive only if military campaigns gave way to free trade.

With this claim De la Court gave shape to what might be called a mythology of a Dutch republican empire of trade – a mythology according to which well-founded colonies are based not on territorial expansion, but on the allegedly peaceful expansion of commerce. As De la Court argued, the aggressive spirit of monopoly and conquest in Dutch Brazil was not a token of such a republican empire but rather an example of "Princely Wars" and "Monarchical Conquests," pursued for the private interest of the States General and the House of Orange but not serving the commonwealth at large.²⁸ Thus De la Court once more reiterated the central claim already brought forward in the 1630s: Free trade would

²⁶ Ibid., I.19, p. 87: "de Compagnie die de handen van particulieren heeft geslooten, en geoorlogt, in plaatse van te negotieeren [...] Daarmen door eene oopene negotie, en by gevolge welgegronde colonien, niet alleen die magtige Landen Brasiliën, Guinea, Angola, Sant Thomé, &c. seer ligtelik met seer kleine onkosten teegen alle uitheems geweld soude hebben konnen beschermen; maar dat seer considerabel is, wy soudén hebben konnen eenen ongelooffelijk groten handel drijven, met onse eigene Natie, buiten vreesse dat een uitheems Potentat sijn' handen op onse scheepen, goederen, ende schulden soude leggen; gelijk nu alle Ingeseetenen van Holland, niet dan in European handelende, geduuriglik die vreesse onderworpen zijn." See also Ibid., I.26, pp. 142–60.

²⁷ Ibid., I.19, p. 84: "een noodzakelik quaad."

²⁸ Ibid., II.1, p. 217: "warelik Prinselike Oorlogen te voeren, ende die Koninglike Landconquesten van Brasil, Angola, Sant Thomée, &c. te doen, ten voordeele der Staten Generaal ende des Prinsen."

safeguard the Dutch colonies and expand Dutch overseas commerce, while the partial monopoly of the West India Company necessarily had to result in the loss of Brazil and in the demise of Dutch commercial primacy. "Now we have lost all this," De la Court lamented, "and these are the ordinary fruits or punishments of monopolies and conquests, which for want of Colonists had to be maintained at continual great expenses. May God give that the East India Company takes warning from this, before it is too late."²⁹

Dutch Commercial Lessons in the Enlightenment

De la Court's work was widely read and discussed in the Dutch Republic in the 1660s, but his acerbic warning that Dutch decline was imminent had little effect. One of the few authors who openly agreed with his views on colonial trade was Franciscus van den Enden, Spinoza's Latin teacher, who claimed with even more vitriol that "the Dutch People could not possibly subsist without the absolute destruction of both the East and West Indian cankerous Monopolies."³⁰ In line with De la Court, Van den Enden argued that the Dutch could prevail over their European competitors only by dominating the colonial market "through its still unrivalled sea power and the mass of its self-reliant Lands and peoples in the best parts of America, especially New Netherland and Brazil."³¹ Van den Enden sought to put his ideals into practice with a remarkable plea for a free Dutch settlement in New Netherland,³² yet his writings were, like De la Court's, to no avail. Even when the West India Company went bankrupt in 1674, it was immediately decided to establish a new company in its place. Until the end of the eighteenth century, the Dutch chartered companies encountered little further ideological opposition.

²⁹ Ibid., I.19, p. 88: "Nu zijn wy dit alles kuint, en 't zijn de ordinare vrugten ofte straffen der monopolien en conquesten, die men door gebrek van Coloniers met geduurige groote onkosten moet ende heeft willen behouden. God geeve de Oost-Indise Compagnie sig daar aan spiegele, eer het te laat zy."

³⁰ Franciscus van den Enden, *Vrije politieke stellingen*, ed. Wim Klever (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 1992), p. 211: "dat Hollants Volk, buiten absolute vernietigingh van deze beide Oost- en West-Indische kankerige Monopolien, onmogelijk, niet zal kunnen bestaen."

³¹ Ibid., pp. 131–32: "door zijne noch onvergelykelijke scheepmacht, enz. de meenichte van eighen dependerende Landen, en volkeren in de beste deelen van America, voornamentlijk N. Nederlandt, en Brazil."

³² See Franciscus van den Enden, *Kort verhael van Nieuw-Nederlants gelegenheit* (1662), ed. F. Mertens, from <http://users.telenet.be/fvde/WorksP/KortVerhael.pdf> [retrieved September 11, 2011].

Although the arguments for free trade that had been developed in the context of Dutch Brazil had little practical impact in the United Provinces, they received a much more favorable reception abroad. Shortly after the publication of De la Court's *Interest van Holland*, the work was already known in the circles of Jean-Baptiste Colbert for containing "the entire secret of commerce."³³ In England, too, De la Court's argumentation found adherents, most importantly the republican author Slingsby Bethel, who had been exiled in the United Provinces in the 1660s and whose writings, especially the *Interest of Princes and States* (1680), directly reproduced some of De la Court's claims.³⁴ Yet it was not until after De la Court's work had been translated into English and French, in 1702 and 1709, respectively, that his views on colonial commerce received considerable international attention.³⁵ Published erroneously under the name of Johan de Witt, De la Court's treatise enjoyed a lasting readership throughout the eighteenth century as an insider's account of the Dutch mercantile model.

In France, the Dutch example became particularly significant in the wake of the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht, which dealt a heavy blow to French commercial enterprises and colonial ambitions. Over the next decades, French theorists developed in response a "science of commerce" that sought to revitalize the prospects of the French monarchy, in particular by appropriating the commercial lessons of the United Provinces.³⁶ One of the first authors to make extensive use of De la Court in this context was the erudite dean of the Republic of Letters Pierre-Daniel Huet. His *Mémoire sur le commerce des Hollandais* from 1717, an influential survey of the remarkable rise of Dutch global commerce, employed De la Court's text as empirical evidence for its favorable discussion of Dutch trade.³⁷ Following Huet, the circles around Vincent de Gournay,

³³ Quoted in Ivo W. Wildenberg, *Johan & Pieter de la Court (1662–1660 & 1618–1685). Bibliografie en receptiegeschiedenis* (Amsterdam: APA-Holland University Press, 1986), p. 52: "un volume appelé l'Interêt de Hollande dans lequel on dit qu'est contenu tout le secret du commerce."

³⁴ Slingsby Bethel, *The Interest of Princes and States* (London, 1680), pp. 111–13.

³⁵ *The True Interest and Political Maxims of the Republick of Holland and West-Friesland. Written by John de Witt, and Other Great Men in Holland* (London, 1702); *Mémoires de Jean de Wit, Grand Pensionnaire de Hollande*, trans. M. de *** [Mme. Van Zoutelandt] (Regensburg, 1709).

³⁶ See Paul Cheney, *Revolutionary Commerce. Globalization and the French Monarchy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), esp. pp. 21–51.

³⁷ I consulted the English translation, *A View of the Dutch Trade in all the States, Empires, and Kingdoms in the World* (London, 1722), which refers on p. 24 to De la Court

intendant of commerce during the 1750s, and Anne-Robert Jacques Turgot, governmental administrator in the 1760s and 1770s, continued to read De la Court as a Dutch authority who showed the way to economic reform.³⁸ According to Turgot, Gournay classified De la Court together with the English economic theorist Josiah Child as “the legislators of commerce.”³⁹ Gournay’s disciples in the 1750s extensively quoted from De la Court’s argument against chartered monopolies to claim that “a monarchy should render its commerce republican”⁴⁰ and that free trade entails “the most fecund principle and the most infallible means to extend and augment our exportations.”⁴¹ The laissez-faire policies propagated by the Physiocrats eventually resulted in the effective abolition of the French Compagnie des Indes in 1769. Meanwhile, the French author Jacques Accarias de Sérionne published two extensive treatises on national interests and colonial commerce that again drew heavily on the writings of De la Court and that were in turn adapted by the Dutch theorist Elie Luzac in his critical analysis of Dutch economic decline.⁴² Thus the mythology of the Dutch empire of trade was continuously reshaped throughout the eighteenth century.

A prominent participant in this debate on the benefits and shortcomings of the Dutch commercial model was the former Jesuit and Enlightened man of letters Guillaume-Thomas Raynal. In 1747, Raynal published his *Histoire du Stadhouderat*, a treatise that, in reaction to the reestablishment of the Orange stadtholder that same year, provided a

as “a Dutch author who was employed by Messieurs De Witt.” On Huet, see April G. Shelford, *Transforming the Republic of Letters: Pierre-Daniel Huet and European Intellectual Life, 1650–1720* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2007).

³⁸ See the analysis in Henry C. Clark, *Compass of Society. Commerce and Absolutism in Old-Regime France* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2007), esp. pp. 62–63, 129–43, 221–28.

³⁹ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 241.

⁴⁰ Abbé Coyer, *Développement et défense du système de la noblesse commerçante* (2 vols.; Amsterdam, 1757), I, p. 72: “qu’une Monarchie doit rendre son commerce Républicain.” *Ibid.*, II, pp. 16–19.

⁴¹ [Simon Clicquot de Blervache], *Considerations sur le commerce, et en particulier sur les compagnies, sociétés et maîtrises* (Amsterdam, 1758), pp. 72–73: “voilà le principe le plus fécond, & le moyen le plus infallible d’étendre & d’augmenter nos exportations.”

⁴² Jacques Accarias de Sérionne, *Les intérêts des nations de l’Europe, développés relativement au commerce* (2 vols.; Leiden, 1766); *Idem, Le commerce de la Hollande, ou tableau du commerce des Hollandois dans les quatre parties du monde* (3 vols.; Amsterdam, 1768), which refers in vol. I, p. 56 to the original Dutch text of De la Court. On Luzac’s use of Sérionne, see Wyger Velema, *Enlightenment and Conservatism in the Dutch Republic: The Political Thought of Elie Luzac (1721–1796)* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1993), pp. 117–19.

critical survey of Dutch politics. For Raynal, the gradual decline of the United Provinces could be attributed to the influence of the House of Orange, which had continuously weakened the Dutch republican spirit by manipulating the common people and letting dynastic interests prevail over the common good. Unsurprisingly, an important source that Raynal used for this claim was the work of De la Court.⁴³

In the next decades, Raynal began to work with a team of fellow *philosophes* on the monumental *Histoire de deux Indes*. This extensive survey of European colonial history, which proved to be immensely popular throughout the late eighteenth century, included a number of passages that critically discussed Dutch commercial colonialism.⁴⁴ The work sets off with an extensive overview of European expansion in Asia and eulogizes the original constitution of the United Provinces, which “from its earliest rise, exhibits a scene of grandeur to all nations [...] and] has distinguished itself by its industry and enterprising spirit.” Thanks to their republican character, the rule of law, and “a spirit of toleration,” the Dutch soon became prosperous and powerful, expanding their commerce to the outer confines of the known world. Yet with the establishment of the East India Company, things started to change. As “a new state, erected within the state itself,” the Company at first enriched the country, yet its territorial expansion gradually weakened Dutch republican mores.⁴⁵ Moreover, the monopoly of the East India Company and its “tyrannical proceeding” against competitors soon prompted complaints that “the interest of the nation would at length be sacrificed to the interest, or even to the caprice of this formidable body.” Eventually, therefore, the decline of the Company was inevitable, and only one remedy remained for the Dutch to safeguard their colonial commerce:

Tired of maintaining a disadvantageous struggle with the free traders of other nations, they should resolve to leave the commerce [...] to private persons. This happy innovation would make their colonies richer and more powerful; and they

⁴³ I used the 1759 edition with critical notes by J. Rousset, *Histoire du Stadhouderat* (Amsterdam, 1759), which refers on p. 87 to De la Court’s work as written by “Jean de Witt.” On Raynal’s interpretation of Dutch decline, see Iain McDaniel, “Enlightened History and the Decline of Nations: Ferguson, Raynal, and the Contested Legacies of the Dutch Republic,” *History of European Ideas* 36 (2010), 203–16.

⁴⁴ On the publication history and international impact of the *Histoire*, see Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*, pp. 420–38, and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink and Manfred Tietz (eds.), *Lectures de Raynal: l’Histoire des deux Indes en Europe et en Amérique au XVIIIe siècle* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1991).

⁴⁵ Raynal, *Philosophical and Political History*, I, book 2, pp. 229, 237, 242.

would soon be filled with men of an enterprising spirit, who would diffuse their most plentiful and most valuable productions in all the markets.⁴⁶

Raynal's *Histoire*, then, condemned the Dutch monopolies in colonial trade in terms that echoed those of seventeenth-century Dutch critics of the East and West India Companies, who equally argued that only free trade could enhance Dutch colonization. A later passage in the *Histoire*, which focuses on Dutch Brazil, reiterates the same criticism. This passage again starts with a eulogy of the first generation of Dutch colonizers in the Atlantic, "who fought with unparalleled ardour, and nothing could discourage those resolute and intrepid men [...] They] were allowed to carry on a private trade which was a great encouragement, and procured a constant supply of men." Yet as in the East, the prospects of Dutch colonialism in the West soon changed, and the monopolistic Company was again to blame. In Brazil, "the agents for the monopoly" neglected their colonial duties, and they sought only their own self-interest. "This conduct had annihilated the public strength, and had induced the Portuguese to hope that they might throw off a foreign yoke." Eventually, this was exactly what happened. As Raynal concluded, the monopolistic mismanagement of the West India Company finally caused the Dutch to "part with a conquest that might have become the richest of all the European colonies," for Dutch Brazil could have been preserved only if "a free trade were opened to all the inhabitants under the protection of government."⁴⁷

All of these passages were already in the first edition of the *Histoire*, before Diderot expanded the work with his own distinctive criticism of colonial rule. Whereas Diderot forcefully condemned Europe's attitude toward native peoples overseas, Raynal's original argument was mainly directed against monopolistic commerce, not against colonialism per se.⁴⁸ For Raynal, as for De la Court, the Dutch colonization of Brazil was a praiseworthy venture and might have become successful and profitable – had it not been for the West India Company. And Raynal was not the only eighteenth-century reader of De la Court to pass this judgment on the loss of Dutch Brazil. De la Court's work, translated into English in 1743 and 1746 by John Campbell, continued to influence political and

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 328, 371.

⁴⁷ Ibid., IV, book 9, pp. 390, 403, 407.

⁴⁸ On Diderot's ambivalence toward commerce, cf. Sankar Muthu, "Diderot's Theory of Global (and Imperial) Commerce: An Enlightenment Account of 'Globalization,'" in Jacob T. Levy (ed.), *Colonialism and its Legacies* (Plymouth: Lexington, 2011), 1–20.

economic theorists across the Channel, in particular during the Scottish Enlightenment. Adam Anderson, whose 1764 *An Historical and Chronological Deduction of the Origin of Commerce* can be characterized as the Scottish pendant to Raynal's *Histoire*, made extensive use of De la Court's work to discuss the colonial commerce of the Dutch. He literally repeated De la Court's claims that "by those truly royal conquests in Brasil [...] the greatest part of their capital was exhausted" and that Dutch trade gradually diminished "by the erecting of this exclusive West India Company."⁴⁹ Another Scottish reader of De la Court, Adam Smith, also identified the monopoly of the West India Company as the prime reason for the "languid and slow" progress of the Dutch settlements in the Americas.⁵⁰

The voices that spoke out against the monopoly of the West India Company in Dutch Brazil in the 1630s thus echoed throughout the Enlightenment. Recapped in the work of De la Court, these ideas were adopted and adapted in eighteenth-century debates on colonial conquests, commerce, and the fate of overseas trading companies. It seems therefore justifiable to claim that the Dutch colonial experience in Brazil had an important impact on the making of "modern" free trade ideology, which is often traced to the anti-monopolistic arguments of the generation of Raynal and Smith. Yet by way of a conclusion it is arguably more pertinent to emphasize another element of the Dutch background to eighteenth-century debates on colonialism. Recent studies on the idea of empire in the Enlightenment have highlighted the importance of Raynal's *Histoire*, especially Diderot's contributions to the work, as exemplifying a radical strand of enlightened thought that vehemently reproached all forms of European imperialism.⁵¹ According to Jonathan Israel, "the origins and roots of this type of anti-colonialism" can be traced back to the opening moves of the Radical Enlightenment in the United Provinces – to the

⁴⁹ Adam Anderson, *An Historical and Chronological Deduction of the Origin of Commerce* (4 vols.; London, 1787), II, p. 430. Anderson refers throughout his work to "De Witt" as the author of the "Interest of Holland."

⁵⁰ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. Edwin Cannan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), II, ch. IV.7, p. 82. Smith owned a copy of the 1743 translation of De la Court, *Political Maxims of the State of Holland. By John de Witt, Pensionary of Holland* (London, 1743); see James Bonar, *A Catalogue of the Library of Adam Smith* (London: Macmillan, 1932), p. 197.

⁵¹ See esp. Muthu, *Enlightenment against Empire*, and Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment*. For Smith, see also Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 52–58.

republican circles around Spinoza that included De la Court and Van den Enden.⁵²

Yet if we look at the discussion of Dutch colonialism in the *Histoire* in the light of seventeenth-century Dutch views on overseas commerce, then this interpretation of the Dutch roots of the idea of empire in the Enlightenment requires serious qualification. For like his seventeenth-century Dutch predecessors, Raynal did not criticize all forms of colonial expansion, but rather expansion of a certain kind: expansion through territorial conquests and monopolies, instead of expansion through free trade. Dutch Brazil failed, according to Raynal, not because colonization as such is reproachable, but because the monopolistic spirit of the West India Company thwarted commercial growth and prosperity. The Enlightenment was a self-proclaimed progressive era obsessed with the threat of decline, and for Raynal, as for De la Court, decline set in once colonial commerce turned tyrannical.⁵³ The history of Dutch overseas expansion taught Raynal that colonialism can be justifiable and successful only if pursued by means and for the sake of commercial freedom. Like the pamphleteers who argued against the monopoly of the West India Company in the 1630s, and like De la Court and Van den Enden, Raynal claimed that an empire of trade could succeed where an empire of conquest failed. That was in the end the most important ideological legacy of the rise, decline, and fall of Dutch Brazil.

⁵² Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670–1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 594.

⁵³ On the relationship between colonial commerce and the idea of decline in the Enlightenment, cf. Sophus A. Reinert, "Lessons on the Rise and Fall of Great Powers: Conquest, Commerce, and Decline in Enlightenment Italy," *American Historical Review* 115–5 (2010), 1395–1425.