The Netherlands and Europe in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries
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IT is well known how the old idea of the order of the Christian commonwealth was gradually replaced during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by a concept of Europe as a cultural and political entity. The awareness of a common religious and cultural heritage was closely related to the conception of a European power-system, though not altogether congruent with it. But in spite of its inherent vagueness, the 'interest and balance of Europe' had become by the end of the seventeenth century a term rich in diplomatic propaganda value and an idea to which politicians could commit themselves or at least pay lip-service.¹ Before the end of the next century men had learned to speak of Europe as — in the words of Edmund Burke — 'a diplomatic Republic of Europe' in which 'no citizen could be an exile in any part', a 'society of nations' in which no single state could act without considering the peace and interest of the entire community.²

It is my purpose to examine the influence of the concept of Europe upon the foreign policy of the Dutch Republic. Rather surprisingly, we find that in the judgement of most historians that influence never really existed. No one, of course, doubts that the Republic under William III of Orange played a major part in the establishment of the European balance of power against the expansion of Louis XIV. But at the same time this European commitment is seen as a personal policy of the King-Stadholder, imposed upon a mercantile patriciate itself devoted to

profit and incapable of lofty political ideas.\(^1\) Not long ago, in a penetrating study of the influence of the over-mighty province of Holland in the shaping of general Dutch foreign policy, Professor Boogman came to the conclusion that the trading interests of Holland thrust upon the Republic a policy of neutrality and avoidance of alliances which was in striking contrast with the general expansionist maxims of seventeenth-century politics. In his view, the Republic turned its back on the Continent in order to tend the interests of its world-wide seaborne trade.\(^2\) Developing this theme, Professor Kossmann has sought to explain the European commitment in the Dutch propaganda of William III’s time as an importation from England alien to the Dutch tradition.\(^3\)

The general trend of Boogman’s argument cannot be challenged, and I shall more than once have occasion to produce evidence in support of it. His structural approach, which investigates the interest-groups behind foreign policy, is fruitful and should be pursued. On the other hand, Dutch foreign policy is as intricate a phenomenon as Dutch political institutions. Even the policy advocated by the province of Holland itself was the result of a number of interests, often conflicting, among towns of varying importance, balanced and arbitrated by politicians whose personal ideas played an important role. Holland, moreover, was not the only force in the shaping of Dutch policy: the princes of Orange and the other provinces had their own interests and ideas to defend, and they often defended them successfully.

The time for a full structural analysis of the historic trends in Dutch foreign policy has certainly not yet come. So I must use, although with a bad conscience, the traditional terminology for the agents by which it was shaped: Holland, Amsterdam, Orangists, Calvinists and so on. I will first analyse Dutch attitudes to Europe from the standpoint of ideas, of what may be called the image of the nature and interest of the Dutch community in international affairs – in modern phraseology, the image of

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