

Explaining depoliticization: local civil society as an alternative to politics in the post-revolutionary Netherlands, 1800-1848

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Author: Adriejan van Veen
Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

Abstract

Political historians for a while now have fruitfully investigated politics ‘from below’: the political activities of people outside of established institutions, for example at the local level. They have also successfully broadened their view beyond formal politics and found political or ‘pre-political’ activities in societal domains such as science, the private sphere and civil society. It is only more recently, however, that political historians have discovered political abstention, apathy and silence as subjects worth exploring.

This paper contends that to understand the political and its multiple layers, depoliticization processes must be taken into account. It will propose an analytical framework to study depoliticization ‘from below’ – in civil society. It will apply this framework to the post-revolutionary Netherlands (c1800-1848), which – more than neighbouring countries – were marked by a seemingly widespread disinterest in formal political institutions and organizing activities that has befuddled historians. To explain this, the paper will investigate depoliticizing tendencies in post-revolutionary civil society at the level of the urban community.

First, it will examine how urban citizens after the revolution constructed an associational culture of consensus, reconciliation and domesticity – that left little room for political dissent. Second, it will show how associations integrated rivalrous political elites – to the exclusion of the ‘riotous’ lower middle class. Third, it will demonstrate how – in lieu of explicitly political organizations – associations functioned as informal

recruitment grounds for urban, provincial and national politicians. Lastly, it will investigate how associations, in tandem with city governments, delivered services like education, poor relief and culture. Local civil society thus formed an alternative circuit for civic participation, which helps explain why popular interest in formal political institutions remained low for so long in the Netherlands.

Author information

Adriejan van Veen is Assistant Professor of Political History at Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands. His research interest is the history of political and societal organizations and their interrelationship in different European countries in the long nineteenth century. His current research project investigates the connection between political culture and civil society in Dutch towns between about 1780 and 1860. His publications focus on political representation, political organizations and the politics of expertise.

Contact Information

a.vanveen@let.ru.nl

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Luiss
School of Government

Via di Villa Emiliani, 14
00197 Roma
T +39 06 85225052
sog@luiss.it