Simons Schama. *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Ages*

Norman Simms

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol25/iss25/13
imitative character of the many counterrevolutions (fascism, communism, etc.) to the world-encompassing revolution of The West. I believe we cannot grasp the essence of much of the turbulence in today's world unless we interpret it in this manner. The material achievements of The West are much in demand. The "Revolution of Rising Expectations" is far from being over, yet the pervasive disruption of all other cultures which The West has accomplished is very much resented, hence the acting-out of a great emotional contradiction which is simultaneously both pro- and anti-western.

Von Laue defines The West as, essentially, France and Great Britain, but he does really seem to apply the term more broadly. Within the matrix of ideas alluded to above, considerable attention is given to the U.S.S.R. and Germany, and also to the U.S.A., China and Japan. The rest of the world is treated incidentally. For the purpose of this review I have focussed on his statement of his thesis toward the beginning of the book and his ten-page methodological and conceptual appendix at the end. Within the confines of a brief review one cannot do justice to all of the substance in what is by design a wide-ranging work.

Civilizationists can appropriately concern themselves not only with the past but also with the present, for our civilization seems to be undergoing some sort of fundamental transition ... to what? ... in what ways? Attempts at global perspectives aimed at avoiding cliched thinking and suggesting innovative perspectives—and von Laue's 380-page book is one such—are well worth our scrutiny. He provides much with which to agree or disagree.

Laurence Grambow Wolf

CULTURAL NORMS OF A NATION AT ITS ZENITH


Over seven hundred pages, three hundred and fourteen plates that include reproductions of paintings, prints, maps and photographs, Notes, Index—all there, not so much an embarrassment of riches, as the title goes, but a tantalizing sampling of Dutch culture in the seventeenth century, and thereby an exemplary glimpse of Early Modern European Civilization and a model of how to use one version of history of mentalities to focus on the "problematique" of what is a civilization.

What the book is not should also be noted. It is not a history of ideas and institutions, not a political and social biography of the Dutch people, and not a well-contextualized social history of Dutch Art. Simon Schama takes these and other approaches and mixes them together into something that is more and other than any one lined up with the others in
a cross—or interdisciplinary melange. What he creates or recreates, if you will, is one version of history of mentalities. Not the version of the Annales School founded in the 1930s with its stress on statistics and demographic graphs and tending to the left of applied marxism; nor that of the more recent studies of Robert Muchenbled, Emmanuel Le Roi LaDurie, and Philippe Aries which tends towards what Alexandru Dutu and I have called a histoire de marginalité, with its penchant for sentimentality and soft views of the down-trodden, the insane and the vulnerable. Yet, alas, at crucial moments Simon Schama does veer towards Aries and does overstress the fringes at the expense of the centre—but only ever so slightly. Mostly he is firm and balanced.

But it is time to enter into detail, first the details of his theory and methodology, and then of his product, the report on the mentalities of Netherlanders in their Golden Age and of Dutch people as part of Western Europe on the eve of its Enlightenment.

In his Introduction, Schama hints at two aspects of his theory and methodology. He says that when he is going to talk about culture he does not mean High Culture (with a capital C), and second that he has a notion of mentalities which are impressions about the bric-à-brac of culture and that somehow all this fits with Maurice Halbwachs' old notion of collective memory. At the start of Chapter I, Schama tells us he is concerned with the “mysteries” of “temperament” and the “cultural peculiarities of the Dutch.” It is not, however, until close to two-thirds of the way through his volume that he becomes clearer and gives a somewhat sustained version of what he is doing. On page 420 he tells us he is concerned to find the cultural norms, both conscious and unconscious that made the Dutch what they were and that the Dutch used to make themselves what they were.

Schama studies and presents the prints and pictures that most ordinary Dutch people hung in their houses and looked at in their leisure time; he examines the conduct books and the how to be a good mother, father and child books that circulated amongst a nation that was probably more literate, more bourgeois, and more self-consciously regular and neat in its habits than any other in Western Europe during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries; he examines the architecture and city plans to see who did what, where, what the priorities were, and how buildings were designed and designated for their particular purposes; and he asks critical questions about children, women, the poor, the criminals, the sailors and the relationship between those at the centre and those on the margins of society, how the boundaries were drawn, and what the lines of tension did to all concerned. Above all, Schama tries to find what were the obsessive ideas and images that motivated the Dutch, haunted their day and nightmares, and entered willynilly into their dreams of purity, order and contentment. He searches for the horizons of anxiety and the contents of pleasure. He looks for the underlying metaphors by which the society defined itself and for the code of rationalizations by which they avoided
fulfilling the ideals they preached, wrote about, and depicted in monumental forms. He looks, in other words, for the moral geography of the Netherlands and finds it constructed on a foundation of mud—the slippery, sliding mud of a land beneath sea level which at any moment may be reclaimed by the sea on behalf of a god jealous of this tiny nation’s sudden and meteoric climb to power and wealth after defeating the Spanish and falling, almost inadvertently, into a position where they controlled an inordinate amount of European commerce, wealth, and seapower.

In brief, for Schama the mentalities of the Dutch nation are found not in any single image-structure or code of Calvinist ethics, but rather in a way of experiencing the tensions of a dialectic process of balances between antagonistic, sometimes contradictory forces. Their way of being Dutch is first a way of being Protestant like the English, but having to deal with a necessary Catholic component to the south in what we now call Belgium; of making compromises and retreating in order to protect advances and liberal progress, so that they could also draw on the French ideas of the Enlightenment. Or as Schama sums it up:

Throughout this book I have tried to show how cultural norms that the Dutch community took as their collective rule book were generated from the encounter between apparently irreconcilable imperatives. Both sets of principles: the humanist and the Calvinist, the ecclesiastical and the secular, remained conceptually separate and intact. But the unavoidable concessions that moral commands had to make to social obligations resulted in a much more flexible daily code. To be a Dutch burgher meant avoiding being godless or helpless (p. 420).

Holland is, in its depths of dreams, a “flood culture,” a nation, like Venice, ever prey to angry winds and seas, just as it is always vulnerable to predatory neighbours and large powers oblivious to the specific wishes and fears of the small country in its way to grand enterprises. But the Netherlands was not Venice, one among many Italian states, linked by language and religion to its neighbours, and small enough to crystallize around the politics of the Doge and his court.

Holland also is modern before the surrounding northern states, with all that was bad about that condition, as well as what was good. Any study of such a culture must be extremely wary of anachronistic distortions because so much is almost familiar to us in its bourgeois democracy and commercial cities and enterprises. In learning how to focus on the Dutch, Schama implies without every saying as much, we learn how to focus on England, France, Spain, and the rest of Western Europe. Dutch writers and artists were able already in the period before Enlightenment and Romanticism to depict in word and image what would be the new points of sensitivity and concern for the rest of the Continent. Yet precisely because they did so a century or more earlier and because they did so in terms and conventions that were still close to feudal and Roman Catholic
ways, we cannot hope to find in such works exact photographs of the other nations' mentalities which their own poets and portrait masters were as yet unable to see. The distorted texts and canvases that emerge in the Netherlands, nevertheless, are close to the truth which careful scholarship begins to reveal: the scholarship of demography, tax-records, law records, and so forth.

Taking one chapter as a test case, "In the Republic of Children," because I know a little about the topic of child-rearing practices and their importance through my work in Psychohistory, it is evident that for all his meticulous scholarship and wide reading, Schama has his own peculiar agenda. This is most evident in the authorities he cites for the organizational model of his view of children in the Netherlands during the Golden Century. Again and again, he comes back to Philippe Aries and Laurence Stone, but nowhere Lloyd DeMause or Nigel Davies or others who are less sanguine about the treatment of children in the past—or the present. It is not that Schama's evidence is questionable, but that his interpretation raises doubts and hides problems. On the other hand, to be fair, a reading of Schama alerts us to weaknesses in deMause's case, insofar as Schama as an art and cultural historian is able to tease apart the mannerisms and satiric tropes of pictures that most clinical psychohistorians seem unable to do. But it may also be that the error or reading satire and caricature literally may be a way of penetrating into the realms of the Dutch psyche. E. E. Beekman's account of Dutch colonial experience (in Fugitive Dreams), from the cruelty and nastiness of shipboard life to the ruthless violence and boredom of the plantation owners, factors, administrators and soldiers gives us sufficient reason to think that, at the very least, when freed from the flood-prone territory of Holland itself, the Dutch psyche could project on to its own body and the exotic other a great deal of filth, poison and self-hatred. It is doubtful that such minds are the product of the sweetly gentle childhoods Schama seems to discover.

For all that, however, I cannot too highly commend Schama's The Embarrassment of Riches as both a model of how studies of civilization ought to be undertaken and as a brilliant picture of what the Dutch were like during the Golden Age.

Norman Simms