

Private Interests in the Policies of Slavery and Colonial Expansion

Joris van den Tol

On July 26, 1650, a petition from shareholders of the West India Company (WIC) was read in the States General. The dozens of signees stated that there was a major problem: although the WIC officially had a monopoly on the trade in enslaved Africans in Guinea, on the West African coast, in practice, the Company was “incapable” of “continuing the trade and commerce in Guinea.” As a solution, the petitioners suggested that the States General withdraw the WIC’s right to trade in Guinea and grant it to them instead. However, these shareholders were not alone in their desire to take over the WIC’s trading territory. Another group of traders in the Republic lobbied the States General in 1652 for the creation of a new company licensed to sell enslaved Africans within the trade zone of the WIC charter. Yet another petition shows that Jewish Amsterdammers argued in 1648 that Angola need not be recaptured from the Portuguese. After all, they stated, even with Angola no longer controlled by the WIC, “just as many blacks [were being shipped] to Brazil as before.” And even in the eighteenth century, when the slave trade was territorially more clearly defined and divided among European traders, the biggest private slave traders from Amsterdam successfully petitioned for a permit to “take a shipment of slaves to Suriname.” In short, private individuals regularly attempted to influence policy decisions about slavery and colonial expansion.

Private Influence on Colonial Policy

In 1639, the colonial administration of the WIC colony in Brazil (1630–1654) had to use much rhetorical flair to persuade the Company leadership in the Republic that “without slaves it is not possible to get anything done in

Brazil” and that any objections they might have were “unnecessary scruples.” But evidently, just eleven years later, there was wide support among WIC shareholders for the trade in enslaved Africans, as we can see from the fact that dozens of them signed the 1650 request submitted to the States General. The petition was circulated in The Hague, Zeeland, Leiden, Dordrecht, and elsewhere to give people in a variety of places a chance to show their support for it. The signees included women, men, a mayor, a *solliciteur-militair*,¹ painters, writers, and people about whom nothing has been recorded in the history books. Their diverse backgrounds show us that people from very different layers of society had private interests in the slave trade. From the seventeenth century, requests to the country’s political leadership were often accompanied by canvassed petitions. In the eighteenth century, this phenomenon took on increasingly bigger proportions; petitions have been discovered with hundreds and even thousands of signatures.² These petitions aligned people of different social classes, genders, ethnicities, religions, and geographies and gave groups outside the political elite more opportunities to exert influence on politics.

Research has shown that the various governmental bodies in the Republic were highly receptive to petitions; about 40 percent of the petitions in Amsterdam directly led to new legislation. Nearly everyone could exert influence by means of a petition. It was not necessary to be a burgher (resident with rights and duties) of a city, citizen of the republic, or member of a guild. Some petitions were even submitted by merchants on behalf of “friends from England,” for instance.

Aside from these written requests, there were two other important strategies for promoting private interests. The first was influencing public opinion, and ultimately decision making, through pamphlets and other publications. The second was leveraging social capital and personal relationships to lobby regents. Because it was apparently possible for so many people to co-shape slavery and colonial expansion policies in so many ways, it seems likely that those policies were not so much based upon ideals as upon private interests. As a result, political power grew increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few wealthy families and merchant regents.³ Nevertheless, people from outside those family factions continued to exert some influence on politics.

Private Interests in the Colonies

Colonies enjoyed relatively great legislative autonomy, partly because they were geographically so far removed from Europe and partly because local European elites dominated colonial administrations. It was therefore comparatively easy for them to influence policies relating to slavery and expansion. In that sense, the Dutch colonies were no different than the British or Spanish colonies, for instance.⁴ Instructions from the highest authorities in the Republic might be crystal clear, but local circumstances gave colonial administrations considerable leeway to deviate from them. That gave colonial inhabitants with vested interests the chance to put their stamp on policy.

Colonists in Asia had more autonomy than those in the Atlantic world, for the simple reason that the trip from Amsterdam to Batavia took several months, while ships from Amsterdam could reach Manhattan, Curaçao, Paramaribo, Guinea, or Recife in just weeks. This distance, combined with the States General's smaller role in the VOC, meant that most petitions were handled by the colonial administration and only rarely reached The Hague. Within the VOC offices in Asia, the Council of the Indies in Batavia (the highest administrative body in the VOC), played a leading role. However, here too, the same mechanisms of distance and local lobbying were at play. For example, when the VOC administration at Fort Zeelandia in Taiwan (1624–1662) received instructions from Batavia to grant a gambling license to the highest bidder, Taiwan-based Chinese merchants managed to persuade the local Dutch administrators in Zeelandia not to carry out the orders. The Chinese co-colonists were afraid that their representatives on the island would gamble away all of their profits. In Batavia, too, a sizeable group of Chinese co-colonists succeeded in influencing VOC policy in such a way that it coincided with their private economic interests. Although the administrators did not record all petitions and decisions, minutes taken in meetings reveal that there were many and that they were primarily submitted by the Chinese in the colony.

In the Atlantic colonies, too, it was not only Dutch private interests that influenced slavery and colonial expansion policy. Initially, the WIC did not intend to enslave the original population in the Brazil colony (see Chapter 19 by Erik Odegard). After all, the idea was to free the original inhabitants from the yoke of the Catholic Portuguese, and enslaving them was entirely

incompatible with this. Although plantation and sugar mill owners repeatedly sought permission to do so, the WIC directors stood their ground for a long time. That changed in 1642, when Company directors in the Republic responded more favorably to petitions from Portuguese co-colonists who found enslaved Africans too costly and therefore asked permission to enslave original Brazilian inhabitants for labor. The directors decided that as long as these Brazilians had already been taken prisoner in an internal war between Brazilian population groups, it was justifiable for the colonists to buy them "at the lowest possible price" and keep them in slavery for seven years. Slavery, the directors reasoned, was a better fate than being beaten to death, which was what would happen to them if they were not sold.

Dutch and other European colonists were not the only ones who managed to influence policy in the Dutch Atlantic colonies. In 1645, free Africans petitioned and were granted the right to form their own army company with "their own [i.e., African] captains and officers." The original inhabitants of the colonies also made use of the right to petition the leadership in an attempt to secure their own private interests. One example of this was the permission that some groups in the original Brazilian population (such as Potiguara) received to appoint their own aldermen and intermediaries instead of Dutchmen. The Brazilian, Potiguar Antônio Paraupaba, and the Congolese envoy Dom Miguel de Castro even traveled to The Hague to seek support for their private colonial interests.⁵

It is interesting to explore what role lobbying played in shaping the social stratification in the Dutch colonies. Studies of slavery and colonial policymaking in the Spanish empire have already revealed how petitions from people of various social backgrounds led to the creation of categories such as *mulatto* and *mestizo* to demarcate different racial groups.⁶ Although the Dutch colonial empire has not been investigated from this angle, it seems likely that a study into such practices and systems would yield similar findings. In the VOC colony in Java, for instance, petitions pertaining to mixed (i.e., Eurasian) relationships led to new legislation that preserved and reinforced the social hierarchy. In the VOC colony in Sri Lanka, meanwhile, the colonial laws governing social (and racial) categories and structures grew less strictly divided as a result of the influence of interactions between the Indigenous population and the European administration in the colony.⁷

Taken together, these findings make clear that Dutch policy on slavery and colonial expansion was neither a matter of lofty ideals, nor the

prerogative of a small group of regents who could pull all the strings. The policy was not even exclusively formulated in the Republic, but was in equal measure conceived, influenced, and perpetuated in the colonies. And for hundreds of years, it was private interests that dominated policymaking, from the seventeenth century, when the very first steps were taken to charter companies that would trade in enslaved people, to the nineteenth century, when there were attempts to keep slavery in place for as long as possible.⁸ The various administrative bodies—city councils, provinces, the States General, stadtholders, grand pensionaries, colonial administrations—were highly receptive to private lobbying. In other words, Dutch policy on slavery and colonialization was largely a bottom-up process in which merchants, investors, captains, innkeepers, soap makers, ivory turners, and other private stakeholders banded together by collecting signatures to promote their joint interests.



In 1642, Bartholomeus van der Helst painted this portrait of then 20-year-old Gerard Andriesz Bicker, heir to a famed Amsterdam regent dynasty. The portrait, nicknamed "Fat Bicker," shows him decked out in full garb.

Follow-up Research into Private Interests

Much of our knowledge about this subject comes from a historically developed interest in merchants; portraits like that of Gerard Andriesz Bicker (“Fat Bicker”) have conditioned us to look at merchants as the literal embodiment of the prosperity of the Dutch Republic. However, our knowledge of private stakeholders other than the merchants from Holland and Zeeland is piecemeal. Even research into regions outside of Holland and Zeeland tends to focus on the merchant elite. Further research is needed, especially in three areas.

The first of these is the role of industry. Research has shown that European industry was implicated in slavery and extractive capitalism in various ways, from glass makers, *jenever* distillers, and bakers who locally produced goods for slave traders, to the processors of colonial goods such as sugar, tobacco, and cotton. We do not know to what extent Dutch slavery and colonization policy reflects the private interests of the manufacturing and processing industries. This is a particularly important question because, for one thing, the market for the processing industry quadrupled in size between 1650 and 1770, while the general economy stagnated and even went into recession. Another reason to investigate this question is that the processing and manufacturing industries were located in inland provinces like Utrecht, Overijssel, Brabant, and Guelders, which means we can safely assume that the Dutch economic involvement in slavery was not restricted to the provinces of Holland and Zeeland. For example, in 1667, hatmakers (who depended on the supply of North American beaver pelts) co-signed a request to reconquer New York, which was ruled by the English at the time. In the period 1770–1771, sugar processors filed petitions lobbying against the merchant bankers’ stance on excise taxes. These examples show how industry, too, was able to influence the decision making regarding colonial slavery. The Dutch Research Council (NWO) recently funded a study into industry’s role in the shaping of economic and colonial expansion policy.

The second area that needs to be more closely explored is how international politics were intertwined with slavery and colonial expansion. The slave economy’s international nature suggests that policy formation played a major role in worldwide diplomacy. Research into diplomatic history has only recently begun to look beyond the work of ambassadors and examine the conduct of third parties and individuals in the ambassadorial entourage. This new diplomatic history, as it is called, has not yet made deep

inroads in colonial historiography and the historiography of slavery. That is particularly remarkable considering the fact that so many non-Dutch actors played a role in the Dutch slavery companies, and vice versa, that so many Dutch actors were active in non-Dutch enterprises with a link to slavery.

The third area that warrants closer examination is the shaping of colonial policy in the colonies. To begin with, we know virtually nothing about the formulation of policy for continental Africa (particularly in areas in present-day Angola, Ghana, and South Africa). Secondly, as we have seen in this chapter, some research has been done into the implementation of colonial legislation in Asia and the Americas, but relatively little attention is paid to its origins. Based on research into other colonial empires, it seems probable that the legislation aimed at keeping the social and racial hierarchy intact was probably partially shaped by non-European groups and groups with a mixed background who wanted to protect their own privileges. However, it is also possible that the Dutch empire was different, because it was more closely governed from Europe, although that is unlikely, given what we know about other examples of legislation such as gambling laws. Either scenario would give us important new insights into the daily social and racial realities in the colonial world.

Notes

- 1 *A solliciteur-militair* was a private financier who ensured that soldiers in the Dutch Republic received their pay, even if, as often happened, the Dutch provinces were late in paying salaries.
- 2 Joris van den Tol, *Lobbying in Company: Economic Interests and Political Decision Making in the History of Dutch Brazil, 1621–1656* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2020), 139–72; Janse, Maartje et al. “Strategies of Collectiveness: Representative Claims in Dutch Petitionary Practices, c. 1600–1940,” in *Petitions and Petitioning in Europe and North America: From the Late Medieval Period to the Present* (Proceedings of the British Academy, 262), ed. Richard Huzzey et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 142–59.
- 3 Julia Adams, *The Familial State: Ruling Families and Merchant Capitalism in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); Marjolein C. ’t Hart, *The Making of a Bourgeois State: War, Politics, and Finance during the Dutch Revolution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).
- 4 Jack P. Greene, *Negotiated Authorities: Essays in Colonial Political and Constitutional History* (Charlottesville/London: University of Virginia Press, 1994); John Leddy Phelan, “Authority and Flexibility in the Spanish Imperial Bureaucracy,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (1960): 47–65; Alejandra Irigoin and Regina Grafe, “Bargaining for Absolutism: A Spanish Path to Empire and Nation Building,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 88, no. 2 (2008): 173–209.
- 5 Mark Meuwese, *Brothers in Arms, Partners in Trade: Dutch-Indigenous Alliances in the Atlantic World, 1595–1674* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2012), 170–71, 213–16; Lodewijk Hulsman, “Brazilian Indians in the Dutch Republic:

- The Remonstrances of Antonio Paraupaba to the States General in 1654 and 1656," *Itinerario* 29, no. 1 (2005): 51–78.
- 6 Adrian Masters, "A Thousand Invisible Architects: Vassals, the Petition and Response System, and the Creation of Spanish Imperial Caste Legislation," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 98, no. 3 (2018): 377–406.
- 7 Sophie Rose and Elisabeth Heijmans, "From Impropriety to Betrayal: Policing Non-Marital Sex in the Early Modern Dutch Empire," *Journal of Social History* 55, no. 2 (2021): 315–44; Dries. Lyna and Luc Bulten, "Classifications at Work: Social Categories and Dutch Bureaucracy in Colonial Sri Lanka," *Itinerario* 45, no. 2 (2021): 252–78;
- Nira Wickramasinghe, *Slave in a Palanquin: Colonial Servitude and Resistance in Sri Lanka* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020).
- 8 C. K. Kesler, "Willem Usselincx en de oprichting van de Westindische Compagnie," *De West-Indische Gids* 3, no. 1 (1921): 65–78; Wim Klooster, *The Dutch Moment: War, Trade, and Settlement in the Seventeenth-Century Atlantic World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016); Karwan Fatah-Black, Lauren Lauret and Joris van den Tol, *Serving the Chain? De Nederlandse Bank and the Last Decades of Slavery, 1814–1863* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2023), 127–61.

Colonial Expansion and the Dutch State

The VOC and WIC are the best-known colonial companies, but not the only ones. Decades before the VOC was established, merchants from the Republic were already involved in ventures in the Americas, Africa, and Asia. Through the creation of companies, these merchants combined their capital and spread the risk. These businessmen often held important posts in local and national government, and their overseas expeditions were foundational to early Dutch colonialism. Colonial policy was jointly shaped by the States General, the provinces, and cities in the Dutch Republic.

Some of the prominent names in the mercantile and administrative elite were Claes Adriaensz van Adrichem, Elias Trip, Laurens Bicker, Daniël van der Meulen, Johan van der Veeken, Jacques de Velaer, and Balthazar de Moucheron. Operating from the port city of Middelburg, De Moucheron invested in various pre-companies, including the Company of Veere (est. 1597) and the Company of De Moucheron (1600). He was an active participant in privateering, an initiator of shipping to and from West Africa and South America, and one of the first managing directors of the VOC. On two occasions, De Moucheron even tried to conquer islands in the Gulf of Guinea and make them suitable for inhabitation at his own expense. Neither attempt led to a permanent settlement. At the peak of his career, De Moucheron owned dozens of ships, which sailed all over the globe with hundreds of his crew on board. Trade was an important goal of these voyages, but this went hand in hand with aggressive conquests. De Moucheron received support for his ventures from many investors, including Prince Maurits of Orange, stadtholder and supreme military commander of the Republic. The States General time and again gave De Moucheron permission to continue his exploits, and he acted as an advisor to both the States General and the States Provincial of Holland and Zeeland.

Other merchants were not only advisors to, but also members of, Dutch state administrative bodies. Adriaen Ten Haeff, for instance, established the Middelburgsche Compagnie in 1598, and later became a cofounder of the Compagnie van Verre and one of the first managing directors of the VOC. In the same period, he was the mayor of Middelburg and a member of the States General. No doubt this made it easier for him to secure financial and official support for his companies. These examples illustrate the deep entwinement between early imperialism, which was shouldered by the Republic's wealthy merchant elite, and city and state politics.

The national government's role is also evident in the trade with North America. From 1600 to 1614, fierce competition raged for the fur and whale trade. The merchants Lambert van Tweenhuysen, Hendrick Corneliszoon Lonck, Arnout Vogles, Hans Claeasz, and Jan Holscher all led one or more companies that were involved in this trade. The competition ultimately proved disastrous, so in 1614, these Amsterdam merchants consolidated into two larger companies: the New Netherland Company, which focused on the fur trade in the New Netherland colony and was granted the right to claim new countries, ports, and trade routes, and the Noordsche Compagnie (Northern Company) which focused on whaling and the trade in whale oil. The States General granted both companies a charter and paid the admiralties to provide naval escorts of several of their missions. The managing directors of the Northern Company were appointed by the administrators of the cities represented by a company chamber, which gave these cities a lot of power. When the New Netherland Company was created, traders with contacts in the States General were given priority access to investment opportunities in the company. This again makes clear how much influence the States General and the city administrations had. They gave the New Netherland and Northern companies the rights to conquest and trade, controlled their power through governance structures and paid for their military needs.

The competition for the right to trade and conquer territory was not unique to North America. Traders also competed against one another for patents and power in West Africa, South America, and various parts of Asia. In these areas, the admiralties supported large military expeditions, too. And again, a key role was played by Prince Maurits, the States General, and the various regional and city administrations.

To name one example, the States of Holland and the Amsterdam city council repeatedly encouraged the merger of many smaller Amsterdam companies to create a United Amsterdam Company. A similar United Zeeland Company was established under Ten Haeff's leadership. To prevent more competition from flaring up and to boost colonial power, the States General consolidated several companies into the VOC in 1602, and another cluster of companies into the WIC in 1621. The States General granted the charters that gave these two companies the sole right to trade and to rule the areas they conquered. Even after the VOC and WIC were established, many other organizations remained active in the Dutch overseas territories, with the approval of the Dutch state. An interesting example is the Provinciale Utrechtsche Geoctroyeerde Compagnie (est. 1720). This company was supported by the Utrecht city authorities who hoped to earn money from the Dutch overseas territories. The company even had its own sugar mill in Suriname.

At the same time, all kinds of businesses sprung up which were given administrative responsibilities in the colonies, and all these were closely intertwined with the power of the cities, provinces, the States General, and wealthy merchant families. Berbice, for instance, was ruled for a long time by the Van Pere family from Zeeland, and was eventually transferred to a small group of Amsterdam merchants united in the Society of Berbice. Suriname, to give another example, was ruled by the States Provincial of Zeeland from 1667 to 1682, at which point the WIC took over for just one year before the colony was turned over to the Society of Suriname, a joint venture of the WIC, the city of Amsterdam, and Cornelis van Aerssen van Sommelsdijck, a wealthy merchant. These administrative entities were only able to exert their power because they had been granted a charter by the States General.

In New Netherland, the States General sold patroonships (landownerships), which gave wealthy merchants the right to collect taxes, use land, and adjudicate the law in the areas which they bought. The patroons ruled essentially as autocrats. The Guelders-born Amsterdam diamond dealer Kiliaen van Rensselaer was probably the most successful patroon; he laid claim to an area larger than the modern-day province of North Holland. Van Rensselaer also held administrative posts in the Republic. He was a WIC managing director and, in that context, had lobbied for the introduction of patroonships. There were other patroons in the Republic who had both a vote in the national government and a foothold in the colonial companies, such as Albert Coenraads Burgh (a WIC managing director,

mayor of Amsterdam, member of the Council of State, and ambassador to Russia), Samuel Blommaert (diplomat and WIC managing director), and Samuel Godijn (managing director for both the WIC and the Northern Company). These men had a network that gave them even more power. Van Rensselaer's contacts in the Republic enabled him to appoint his nephew, Wouter van Twiller, as director of the New Netherland colony. His close contacts with Twiller and other New Netherland directors is certainly one of the reasons why Van Rensselaer became such a successful patroon.

Other prominent colonists also had family networks in the Republic with a great deal of money and power. Cornelis van Aerssen van Sommelsdijck was the grandson of a diplomat and clerk of the States General. Samuel Godijn was father-in-law to multiple scions of the famous Trip family of Amsterdam regents, and members of the Van Pere and Bicker families held posts in all the Republic's administrative bodies. These colonists' political influence in the Republic enabled them to strategically expand their power and wealth elsewhere in the world.

By extending charters and offering financial and military support, the States General, provinces, and cities granted individuals and organizations not only the opportunity to trade, but also to colonize territory. This gave "traders" the right to use violence, use land in the Americas, Africa, and Asia, and rule the colonies which they established there. These same men had decision-making powers in colonial organizations and the governmental bodies of the Republic or belonged to families and networks where many had such powers. Therefore, it is impossible to differentiate between trade, politics, and imperialism in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dutch government. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the earliest forms of Dutch colonialism, we need to examine the colonial and political mechanisms behind the Dutch trading companies.

Abstract

This chapter on early modern Curaçao focuses on the interdependence of the Dutch and local elites. In early forms of colonialism, the latter group acted as “bridgeheads” and “local” traders. In Curaçao, Sephardic Jews were given political positions to grease the wheels of trade relations on behalf of the WIC. They enjoyed religious freedom, bought animals and land, and owned enslaved people. Willemstad was an important center of commerce that expanded into a staple depot and a key port city in the seventeenth century. The seafaring “free slaves” are another group whose role is important to understand in order to grasp how the slave trade and the colonial system functioned.

Keywords: Curaçao; Willemstad; local elites; Sephardic Jews; seafaring enslaved people