

**National Identity under Habsburg Rule**  
**A Comparison between**  
**Spain and the Low Countries**  
**(16th century)**

**European Social Science History Conference (ESSHC)**  
**Berlin, March 24, 2004**  
**(unpublished paper)**

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## **Introduction**

Around 1500, Spain and the Low Countries became part of the same composite state, that was to be ruled by Habsburg princes during most of the sixteenth century. I shall not try here to tackle the question whether this implied the coming into existence of a common identity between all the lands ruled by these same sovereigns.<sup>1</sup> However, below this level, national identities were clearly developing. The Spanish territories of the Catholic Kings and later the Habsburgs, as well as the Low Countries possessed by those same Habsburgs, came to be seen more and more as separate entities. Of course, besides an already existing variety of regional and local identities. Different levels of identity could clearly be used at the same time, by different people, or by the same person at different moments. The inhabitants of Spain and the Low Countries had multiple identities to choose from, and some of them could probably live happily with all of them at the same time.

In order to understand more about the process of developing national identities during the sixteenth century, I shall try to compare in the following the ideas on Spain and the Low Countries. Although I am aware of the fact that a great deal can be said on the terminology concerning national identities –or whether to use the term at all- I find it more interesting to look at what historians nowadays are focussing on when addressing these subjects, both in Spain and in the Netherlands; to find out whether both modern historiographies are actually posing the same questions and are looking in the same direction for their answers.

## **Erasmus and Nebrija: the humanists' vision on national identity**

When the Dutch humanist Erasmus had finally decided on the name he would use as a scholar, apart from Desiderius, he added Roterodamus to his name: Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus. A logical decision as he was born in Rotterdam, in the County of Holland. But at the same time it shows the importance to him of his city of birth, although he hardly spent time within its walls. It is certainly Erasmus' most clear statement on his identity. His relation to larger identities remains a difficult dilemma. Johan Huizinga addressed this problem in his 'Erasmus über Vaterland und Nationen',<sup>2</sup> but in 1971 another slightly less famous Dutch

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<sup>1</sup> At least at an economic level there seems to have been very little common feeling between the different territories of the Habsburg empire. Raymond Fagel, 'España y Flandes en la época de Carlos V: ¿un imperio político y económico?', Ana Crespo Solana and Manuel Herrero Sánchez, ed., *España y las 17 provincias de los Países Bajos. Una revisión historiográfica (XVI-XVIII)* (Córdoba 2002), 513-532.

<sup>2</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Verzamelde Werken* VI, 1950, 252-267.

historian, Poelhekke, continued the search. In an intriguing article, called the ‘Nameless fatherland of Erasmus’<sup>3</sup>, Poelhekke searches for information on Erasmus’ sense of identity, based on his reading of Erasmus’ letters. The author’s answer is simple in its complexity: there is no clear fatherland of Erasmus to be found. It all depends on the time and the place he writes his letters. Almost indifferently, our humanist is able to use regional identities such as Holland (in early life) and Brabant (later in life) to refer to the more larger unity of the Low Countries. This unity however hardly ever gets a name of its own, hence the title of his article: the nameless fatherland of Erasmus.

When we make a quick change of scenery and turn to Spain, we can look at identities through the eyes of another famous humanist, Antonio de Nebrija. This Italian trained scholar did not seem to have the same vague ideas on identity as Erasmus. In his Castilian grammar, published as early as 1492, he addresses the question, explaining to his queen, Isabel of Castile, the importance of language.<sup>4</sup> The Castilian language, of course to be learned from Nebrija’s booklet, could be used as a way to create an empire. The same way as the Romans had created theirs, based on a common language. Unity of language could build empires. And indeed, this is what would happen. The Castilians would extend their influence, first over the Iberian Peninsula, and then across the seas, using their language, Castilian or Spanish as it can also be called, as an important unifying weapon.

Where the Dutch humanist seems to marginalise the importance of identity, the Castilian puts it up front. Another difference we can appreciate is the fact that Erasmus’ fatherland is really nameless, while Nebrija can use with Castile, and with Spain, two already old well known images. It also shows us that national identities were not the same everywhere, that we are talking about the same terminology, but that the process does not necessarily have been the same. How can we come to a comparison?

### **Comparing identities in the seventies**

To begin with, the idea of comparing the creation of national identities during the Early Modern Period in different territories is not completely new, of course not. However, it seems to be rather something of the seventies. In 1976 E.D. Marcu wrote a book with the very promising title *Sixteenth century nationalism*, comparing the existing ideas in six countries: Portugal, Spain, Italy, Germany, France, and England.<sup>5</sup> The most important aim of the book is

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<sup>3</sup> J.J. Poelhekke, ‘Het naamloze vaderland van Erasmus’, *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 86 (1971), 96-102.

<sup>4</sup> Antonio de Nebrija, *Gramática de la lengua castellana* (1492).

<sup>5</sup> E.D. Marcu, *Sixteenth century nationalism* (New York 1976).

to show that the sixteenth century did know nationalism, albeit not totally comparable to the nineteenth and twentieth century, when it had become a central element in European thought. This short book starts off with an surprising list of some twenty definitions of nationalism, followed by another forty phrases from different authors commenting on its beginning. Using a quotation from E. Hettich, *A study in ancient nationalism*, published in 1933, he places nationalism as far back as the ancient Greeks. Marcu clearly makes his point, and he also makes it more than once: we can speak of nationalism in the sixteenth century. Unfortunately the author does not really get into comparing his examples.

One year before the publication of Marcu's book, Orest Ranum edited a much more influential book, called *National consciousness, history, and political culture in early modern Europe*.<sup>6</sup> This collection of again six national stories on nationalism, with an introduction by Ranum, is a much more important contribution to the debate on early modern nationalism. Again we find Italy, France, Germany, England and Spain, but in stead of Portugal, we now find Russia. Interesting to note that the early modern Low Countries are again conspicuous by their absence. However, in the first foot note of the book, Ranum explains that originally professor Rosalie Colie had been invited to talk on the Dutch.

### **The existence of a Spanish identity**

We can take the two essays on Spain in the above mentioned volumes as a starting point. Marcu's text only contains a mere six pages.<sup>7</sup> He finds nationalism both at the heart of the political world, at court, but also the lower classes showed, according to him, an intense desire for 'Spanishness'. However, the author seems to consider Spanish and Castilian as synonyms. He starts off with the well known complaints of the Castilian cities at their reunions with the king, the Cortes, that foreigners had been given official functions within the realm, the Kingdom of Castile. At the same time, the procurators of the cities complained about the naturalisation letters issued by Charles V to mainly Italians and Flemish supporters. But for Marcu this is all Spanish nationalism, a confusion not only to be found with this author.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Orest Ranum, ed., *National consciousness, history, and political culture in early modern Europe* (Baltimore 1975).

<sup>7</sup> Marcu, *Sixteenth century nationalism*, 21-27.

<sup>8</sup> On Castilian national identity: I.A.A. Thompson, 'Castile, Spain and the monarchy: the political community from *patria natural* to *patria nacional*', in: G. Parker and R. Kagan, ed., *Spain, Europe and the Atlantic world. Essays in honour of John H. Elliott* (Cambridge 1995), 125-159, 126.

Marcu also looks at historiography and finds Spanish nationalism in the works of both Sepúlveda and Mariana.<sup>9</sup> But he also finds nationalism within the Spanish Jesuit order and in the laws on purity of blood. The author then changes to language and shows us the example of Nebrija, mentioned earlier. Some examples of nationalistic expressions in literary works close the article. Though I find his evidence not very strong, the author ends his remarks on Spain with a sentence full of confidence on his findings: 'It would seem that the sixteenth century had little if anything to learn from the Romantic Age in the way of flamboyance of national pride'. We had better turn to the volume edited by Ranum.

Here the famous historian Helmut Koenigsberger is our guide.<sup>10</sup> In very clear prose, he manages to explain the rather difficult problem of Spanish national consciousness; 'complex' and 'ambivalent' are his own words. Very important is the fact that there has always existed a literary and historiographical tradition of Spanish nationalism, dating back to when Hispania formed a province of the Roman Empire. This tradition with its 'Laus Hispaniae' will continue during early modern times. However, the distracted use of the word 'Spaniard' and the idea of a Spanish nation were mostly the result of the image from the outside. According to Koenigsberger, a similar process occurred in other European countries.

Apart from this, Koenigsberger points out the religious and racial problems concerned with Spanish consciousness: Catholicism and purity of blood on the one side, but multi-religious and multi-racial on the other. These elements can help when forging a national identity, but at the same time they can undermine it.

When speaking of politics, he clearly considers the local kingdoms the most important focal points of national identity, such as Castile or Aragon. The unity of several Iberian kingdoms, from the Catholic Kings onwards, did not alter this situation. For example, during the rebellion of the Comuneros there did not arise a national revolt against the foreigners, as it remained separate movements<sup>11</sup>. Another example: only after 1590 did the idea of a Spanish kingdom work its way into the official documents of the Habsburg King; most of the time Philip II was still called king of Castile, of Leon, of Aragon, etc..

However, within the Habsburg empire the Castilians tended to dominate and they tried, unsuccessfully according to Koenigsberger, to incorporate the old Spanish national feeling into their Castilian rule. The idea of a national Spanish nation was at the same time the

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<sup>9</sup> Juan de Mariana, *Historia General de España*, 10 vols. (Barcelona 1839-1840), first published in Latin (1592), and later in Spanish (1601); Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, *Historiarum de rebus gestis Carolus V*, in: *Obras completas*, I-II (Pozoblanco 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Helmut Koenigsberger, 'Spain', in: Orest Ranum, ed., *National Consciousness*, 144-172.

result of contacts with people from outside. The author ends his article by stating that before the early nineteenth century ‘genuine Spanish nationalism, as an effective political force’ did not exist. What did exist, as I may sum up Koenigsberger’s ideas, is a national consciousness in books, in the world outside Spain, and within the Castilian political elite.

### **A recent view on Spanish identity**

More recent contributions to the debate can be found in a small volume containing five lectures on Europe and the Spanish Monarchy, held at the summer university of San Lorenzo de El Escorial in 1993.<sup>12</sup> Apart from an article by Ernest Belenguer Cebrià on the Aragonese elements within the monarchy<sup>13</sup>, we find an important essay on ‘Patriotismo y política exterior’ by Mía Rodríguez Salgado.<sup>14</sup> Following Koenigsberger, Rodríguez Salgado also stresses the importance of the international arena for the construction of national identities. She prefers to speak of patriotism in stead of nationalism, and she is well aware of the fact that people in the Early Modern Period could possess multiple identities. But ‘Hispania’ did play its part in all this. The example she gives is of the Council of Constance in the early fifteenth century, when all attendants were divided into five groups: Italians, English, Germans, French, and Spanish (including Portuguese).

The quotation of the English representative at Constance is very illusive: ‘Whether a nation be understood as a people market off from others by blood relationship and habit of unity, or by particularities of language (the most sure and positive sign and essence of a nation in divine and human law)...or whether nation be understood, as it should be, as a territory equal to that of the French nation, England is a real nation’. The English representative’s description is not completely truthfull, but all the ideas on nationalism seem present here in this early fifteenth century quotation: blood relationship, habit of unity (common history), language, and territory.

Let us return to Spain. Rodríguez Salgado agrees with John Elliott on his idea that the growth of centralisation caused people to look for their regional identities, to their particularism, in order to defend themselves from the power of the king. Interestingly, Elliott

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<sup>11</sup> The importance of Castilian national identity in the Comunero Revolt in: José Antonio Maravall, *Las Comunidades de Castilla* (Madrid 1978).

<sup>12</sup> Felipe Ruiz Martín, ed., *La proyección europea de la Monarquía Hispánica* (Madrid 1996).

<sup>13</sup> Ernest Belenguer Cebrià, ‘La monarquía hispánica vista desde la Corona de Aragón’, Ruiz Martín, ed., *La proyección*, 107-132. On identity in the lands belonging to the crowns of Aragon, much has been written. For recent contributions: Xavier Gil, ‘Aragonese constitutionalism and Habsburg rule: the varying meanings of liberty’, in: Parker and Kagan, ed., *Spain, Europe and the Atlantic world*, 160-187; James Casey, ‘Patriotism in early modern Valencia’, in: Parker and Kagan, ed., *Spain, Europe and the Atlantic world*, 188-210.

got this idea from reading J.W. Smit on the Dutch Revolt. However, Rodríguez Salgado also detects a national consciousness under the flag of Hispania, Spain, or, in plural, the Spains. As Koenigsberger, she mentions the literary tradition, kept alive by the humanists. The union of the crowns of Castile and Aragon made the identification with Spain not uncommon, and she found sources in which Ferdinand and Isabel make their appearance as the kings or princes of Spain.

Where Koenigsberger described the union of the kingdom of Navarre to the realms of the Catholic Kings as an example of the fact that it all remained separate states, Rodríguez Salgado tells us that Nebrija, again Nebrija, considered the occupation of Navarre as a recuperation of the unity of Spain. But this was the literary tradition used in a political discourse. In practice, Navarre held its old rights and privileges. Once more contrary to Koenigsberger, she states that the kings did use Spain to describe their realms, with Charles V changing his first title to ‘Catholic King of Spain’. It was the simple use as an abbreviation that helped fomenting the use of this denomination. But it was mostly a Castilian vision of this common identity.

Charles V and Philip II would continue to use references to the ancient concept of Spain in their rhetoric. So did Charles at the Castilian Cortes, when he left the Peninsula for Germany in 1520. His son tried to raise his title above that of the English King by stating that he was King of Spain. The English successfully defended their preference by saying that no such kingdom as Spain existed, and that he was merely king of Castile, and therefore not superior to the English King.

A last element of the creation of a Spanish identity can be found, according to Rodríguez Salgado, in the dominantly negative image of the Spaniards abroad: the Black Legend. I would like not to get into detail on this point, but again we see that part of the idea of a national identity comes from the outside. Rodríguez Salgado, in an article written in English on the same subject, stresses the importance of the relation between the nation and ‘the other’. Spanish national identity was forged in contrast to European enemies and allies, and in relation to Spanish contacts with North Africa and America. She ends her article by clearly stating that there ‘can be no doubt that a distinct and powerful Spanish identity emerged in the sixteenth century’. She clearly formulates Spanish identity much more affirmative than Koenigsberger twenty-five years earlier.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> María José Rodríguez Salgado, ‘Patriotismo y política exterior en la España de Carlos V y Felipe II’, in: Ruiz Martín, ed., *La proyección*, 49-105.

<sup>15</sup> M.J. Rodríguez Salgado, ‘Christians, civilised and Spanish: multiple identities in sixteenth century Spain’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6<sup>th</sup> series, 8 (1998), 233-251.

Another slightly different view on Spanish identity comes from I.A.A. Thompson, who has looked specifically at Castile. He describes how at first the Castilians started to use Castile as a synonym for Spain, but halfway the sixteenth century its use was reversed: ‘Now the Castilians do not speak of Castile when they mean Spain; they speak of Spain when they mean Castile’.<sup>16</sup> We are now in a better situation to understand the problems Marcu, and so many others, have had with distinguishing these two denominations. Over time, and already within the sixteenth century, the significance of the words seems to have been altering.

### **Spanish identity: conclusion**

In conclusion, overseeing the different elements of Spanish national identity, we might say that there has been a fusion of different elements that influenced the forging of this identity, albeit not an exclusive identity. Firstly, there existed a classical image of Spain and a literary tradition to describe it. Secondly, the union of almost all Iberian states into one hand, created the necessity to use a more simple way of addressing the united realms of its king. These kings could use tradition to claim an ancient pedigree and to strengthen the idea of unity. Together with the king, the Castilian elite, helped forging this image. At the same time, the vision from outside, and the contrast between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’, strengthened this common identity as a Spanish nation. But it was an identity that had no direct relation with state-formation. Spain remained a unity of separate kingdoms, all along the Early Modern Period.<sup>17</sup>

### **National identity in Holland**

But how about the Low Countries? Historians present here from the Netherlands or Belgium must already realise that there are significant differences to be found between the two

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<sup>16</sup> Thompson, ‘Castile, Spain and the monarchy’, in: Parker and Kagan, ed., *Spain, Europe and the Atlantic world*, 138.

<sup>17</sup> Other major contributions to the debate on Spanish identity: José Antonio Maravall, *Estado moderno y mentalidad social* (Madrid 1972); J.A. Fernández Santamaría, *The state, war and peace. Spanish political thought in the Renaissance 1516-1559* (Cambridge 1977); José Antonio Maravall, *Carlos V y el pensamiento político del Renacimiento* (Madrid 1960); Ramón Menéndez Pidal, *Los españoles en su historia* (Buenos Aires 1959), for the first time published in 1947 as prologue to the multi volume *Historia de España*, edited by Menéndez Pidal. An english translation by Walter Starkie appeared as *The Spaniards in their history* (London 1950); Julio Caro Baroja, *El mito del carácter nacional. Meditaciones a contrapelo* (Madrid 1970); J.N. Hillgarth, *The mirror of Spain 1500-1700. The formation of a myth* (Ann Arbor 2000); H. Pietschmann, ‘El problema del “nacionalismo” en España en la edad moderna. La resistencia de Castilla contra el emperador Carlos V’, *Hispania* 180 (1992), 83-106; J.M. Jover, *Carlos V y los Españoles* (Madrid 1963); J.M. Nieto Soria, *Fundamentos ideológicos del poder real en Castilla (siglos XIII-XVI)* (Madrid 1988); Pablo Fernández Albaladejo, ‘Católicos antes que ciudadanos. Gestación de una “política española” en los comienzos de la Edad Moderna’, in: J.I. Fortea Pérez, ed., *Imágenes de la diversidad. El mundo urbano en la corona de Castilla (s.*

historiographies. There is less, and it is of a different character. The best starting point for our analysis is the recent Dutch volume on patriotism, titled ‘Vaderland’, published in 1999.<sup>18</sup> Two contributions are of particular interest to us. Karin Tilmans takes on mainly historiographical sources in her search for the use of ‘patria’ and related concepts, while Simon Groenveld offers us a more general overview on the ideas of the inhabitants of the Low Countries on ‘nation’ and ‘patria’.<sup>19</sup>

The most striking feature of Tilmans’ article on the Late Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period, already becomes clear when looking at the division of her contribution. Firstly, she describes the situation in the County of Holland and the Bishopric of Utrecht, and she uses for this part more than twenty pages of the some 47 pages she has at her disposal. The second part of her text touches upon the situation in other parts of the Low Countries: Zeeland in one page, Gelre in two, Brabant in 2.5 pages, Flanders in five, Liège and Maastricht in one, Friesland and Groningen in two. All these territories together in less than 14 pages. Important provinces of the Low Countries like Artois and Hainaut are completely left out, while Liège, not a part of the Low Countries in the sixteenth century, enters into its history.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, she declared at the beginning of her article to take into account the whole of the Burgundian Low Countries. Besides the obvious conclusion that the identity of the author seems to have largely influenced her historical description, I would like to stress the fact that ‘patria’ apparently is not treated at a national level. Even more, the choice of almost only regional chronicles as her source material, also greatly influences her findings. So, are the Low Countries as a concept totally absent in her article? No, not completely.

The first work in which Tilmans comes upon ‘The Low Countries’ (Nederlanden) in the historiography of Holland and Utrecht, is a chronicle from around 1490. The 1517 *Divisiekroniek*, the subject of her Ph.D. thesis<sup>21</sup>, also uses the term Low Countries, but as she adds, never as the ‘patria’ of the author. In the 1519 Latin chronicle of Reinier Snoy, *De rebus Batavicis*, she has encountered the word ‘Belgium’ to describe the possessions of Maximilian of Habsburg in the Low Countries. In his description of the death of Philip the Handsome, Snoy shows us that he feels this Belgium to be his ‘patria’. Interesting is the fact that Snoy

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XVI-XVII) (Santander 1997), 103-127. Elements of his ideas on identity are already reflected in his *Fragmentos de monarquía* (Madrid 1992).

<sup>18</sup> N.C.F. van Sas. Ed., *Vaderland. Een geschiedenis vanaf de vijftiende eeuw tot 1940* (Amsterdam 1999).

<sup>19</sup> Karin Tilmans, ‘De ontwikkeling van een vaderland-begrip in de laat-middeleeuwse en vroeg-moderne geschiedschrijving van de Nederlanden’, Van Sas, ed., *Vaderland*, 7-53; S. Groenveld, ‘“Natie” en “Patria” bij zestiende-eeuwse Nederlanders’, Van Sas, ed., *Vaderland*, 55-81.

<sup>20</sup> Tilmans, ‘De ontwikkeling’, 11.

<sup>21</sup> Karin Tilmans, *Aurelius en de Divisiekroniek van 1517. Historiografie en humanisme in Holland in de tijd van Erasmus* (Hilversum 1988).

discusses a possible constitution under Duke Charles the Bold of a Kingdom of Frisia and another Kingdom of Burgundy, together including all the Low Countries. Another chronicle uses the normally much less general term of Tacitus' Batavia to describe the whole of the Low Countries.<sup>22</sup>

In the description of other regions, apart from Holland and Utrecht, Tilmans sometimes comes across references to a national identity. In Zeeland, Jan van Reygersberch, declares he wanted to write a chronicle of this county, because other Low Countries of the King already had their own, mentioning Flanders, Brabant, and Holland. In Gelre, for a long time not a part of the possessions of the Habsburg princes, some writers use 'Germania' to describe their general identity, of course besides Gelre. A good example is the humanist Gerardus Geldenhouwer.<sup>23</sup> Strangely enough, there are no examples given of any national identity for the Duchy of Brabant. In the sources from the County of Flanders, the classical Belgium is used to refer to this County, or to the southern parts of the Low Countries. In the same way we find its inhabitants as 'Belgae'. However, this last use is almost completely confined to chronicles in Latin. In Frisian historiography the idea of a greater national identity, such as 'Germania' or the Low Countries, seems hardly to have existed. Nevertheless, Tilmans does mention a few exceptions to this rule. But all in all, Tilmans seems mostly interested in 'patria' and 'nation' related to the regional territories, and then by far by their presence in the regional histories of the County of Holland.<sup>24</sup> However, though seemingly interested in regional identities, in reality her main interest concerns the growth of a national identity, but this relates to the Dutch Republic, and not to the Low Countries of the sixteenth century.

The other contribution on 'nation' and 'patria' in the same volume is written by Simon Groenveld, based on an earlier article dating from 1980.<sup>25</sup> This author defends a theory of three different levels. Most people in the Low Countries did not possess more than just a local identity. A small elite also arrived at something of a regional level. But then it becomes even more difficult. Only those who succeeded in obtaining a stronger regional than a local feeling,

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<sup>22</sup> Tilmans, 'De ontwikkeling', 32-33. There exists an extensive literature on the use of Batavia. A recent bibliography on this subject can be found in Tilmans, 'De ontwikkeling', 28.

<sup>23</sup> Tilmans, 'De ontwikkeling', 36, 38.

<sup>24</sup> Tilmans, 'De ontwikkeling', 44-48.

<sup>25</sup> Simon Groenveld, 'Natie en nationaal gevoel in de zestiende-eeuwse Nederlanden', in: *Scrinium et scriptura. Opstellen betreffende de Nederlandse geschiedenis aangeboden aan J.L. van der Gouw* (Groningen 1980), 372-387. This article also appeared in: *Nederlands Archiefblad* 84 (1980), 372-387.

were able to arrive at something of a national identity, though he does not use this terminology. And this could only be found with very few people.<sup>26</sup>

Groenveld suggests that only around the prince and the high nobility the idea of a general identity has existed. They sometimes used ‘de Nederlanden’, ‘les Pays-Bas’, the ‘Low Countries’, and from around 1540 he also finds the use of ‘Nederland’, ‘le Pays-Bas’, the ‘Low Country’, in singular. The old Burgundian ‘les pays de par deça’, ‘de landen van herwaerts overe’ was also limited to this group around the prince. In a very short paragraph, Groenveld adds the bureaucrats at the central level to this group.<sup>27</sup>

Another element of national identity is also touched upon by Groenveld, but again very briefly. I mean here the importance of the confrontation between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’.<sup>28</sup> Here he focuses on the Dutch Revolt and the contrast between the Low Countries and the Spaniards. Within this context of war we can find the frequent mentioning of the Low Countries, both in singular and plural, but also of ‘the Seventeen Provinces’. Nevertheless, the author argues in his contribution that the Dutch Revolt did not lead up to the creation of a national feeling. In the end, particularism would win. He concludes that ‘the union of the rebels had temporarily possessed characteristics of a nation, but certainly not permanently’.<sup>29</sup> Again we see how the study of sixteenth century national identity in the Netherlands is mostly seen as a means to understand the character of the Dutch Republic.

### **The existence of a national identity in the Low Countries**

Both authors are distancing themselves from earlier works on national identity in the Low Countries. Tilmans firmly criticizes Johan Huizinga at the end of her article. She points out he did not make use of any regional historiographies for his research. Huizinga based most of his ideas on the official chronicles written in French and he constructed the existence of a common Burgundian identity. However, by selecting these same regional chronicles as her main source, Tilmans makes her conclusions just as vulnerable to criticism.<sup>30</sup>

Groenveld starts and finishes his article by criticizing G.J. Hoogewerff, who wrote on national identity in 1929. Hoogewerff found the idea of a national identity reflected in the way students from the Low Countries were registered at their student nation of Padua University and in the Brotherhood of Santa Maria dell’Anima in Rome. Especially between

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<sup>26</sup> Groenveld, “Natie” en “patria”, 65.

<sup>27</sup> Groenveld, “Natie” en “patria”, 63-65.

<sup>28</sup> Groenveld, “Natie” en “patria”, 67-68.

<sup>29</sup> Groenveld, “Natie” en “patria”, 79.

1560 and 1590 students seemed to have preferred general terms like ‘Belgae’ or ‘Fiamminghi’. One of the errors Hoogewerff made, according to Groenveld, is the fact that he looked abroad in his search for a national identity. From a distance the perspective changes the images. Far away from home, people are more likely to feel related to a larger community, such as the Low Countries. Another older view on national identity in the Low Countries, based on a common language, in this case the Dutch language, is also dismissed by Groenveld. The leading historian in this line of thinking was Pieter Geyl, who saw the Netherlands and nowadays Flanders as one historical community.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, there still exists a modern historiography with an open eye for some kind of national identity during the sixteenth century. Ernst Kossmann stresses the importance of William of Orange and his collaborators, who from around 1560 tried to propagate the unity of the Seventeen Provinces in their struggle against Habsburg domination. He agrees with the popular modern vision of nationalism as a sentiment created from above.<sup>32</sup> Another important line of research is followed by Hugo de Schepper, who defends that the Low Countries were in some way going towards some kind of national identity. He focuses on the existence of a nucleus of four provinces, that were ahead in this process: Brabant, Flanders, Zeeland and Holland. The other provinces had much less to do with the central government, but in the sixteenth century some of these territories would also slowly become more related to the core state. De Schepper considers the four core provinces already as a federal state, while the relation with the others was not more than a kind of confederation.<sup>33</sup>

### **National Identity in the Low Countries: conclusion**

It is clear that modern historiography in the Netherlands tends to emphasize the strength of regional identities<sup>34</sup> in the Habsburg Low Countries. This also means that they are opposed to

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<sup>30</sup> Tilmans, ‘De ontwikkeling’, 53; Johan Huizinga, ‘Uit de voorgeschiedenis van ons nationaal besef’, *Verzamelde werken* (Haarlem 1948-1953), II, 97-160.

<sup>31</sup> Groenveld, “Natie” en “patria”, 55-57, 79-81; G.J. Hoogewerff, ‘Uit de geschiedenis van het Nederlandsch nationaal besef’, *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 44 (1929), 112-134. Léon van der Essen followed Hoogewerff in his ‘Besef van Nederlandschap bij uitgeweken Nederlanders in Italië in de XVIe, XVIIe en XVIIIe eeuw’, *Nederlandsche Historiebladen* 2 (1939), 33-42 and in L. van der Essen, ‘De historische gebondenheid der Nederlanden’, *Nederlandsche Historiebladen* 1 (1938), 153-189; P. Geyl, *Vaderlandse gemeenschap in historisch perspectief* (Santpoort 1936); P. Geyl, *De Groot-Nederlandse gedachte. Historische en politieke beschouwingen*, 2 vols. (Haarlem 1925-1930).

<sup>32</sup> Ernst H. Kossmann, *Een tuchteloos probleem. De natie in de Nederlanden* (Louvain 1994); E.H. Kossmann, ‘Enkele vragen met betrekking tot het (Noord-) Nederlandse nationale bewustzijn’, J. Craeybeckx, F. Daelemans and F.G. Scheelings, ed., *1585: Op gescheiden wegen...1585: On separate paths...* (Louvain 1988), 223-236.

<sup>33</sup> Hugo de Schepper, “*Belgium Nostrum*” 1500-1650. *Over integratie en desintegratie van het Nederland* (Antwerp 1987).

<sup>34</sup> W.P. Blockmans, ‘Regionale Identität und staatliche Integration in den Niederlanden 13.-16. Jahrhundert’, in: A. Czacharovski, ed., *Nationale, etnische Minderheiten und regionale Identitäten in Mittelalter und Neuzeit*

some of the older historians, such as Huizinga, Geyl and Hoogewerff, who, for different reasons, did see a kind of national identity during this period. Tilmans and Groenveld do not deny its existence, but minimize its importance. This view also seems related to their main objective: to understand the character of the Dutch Republic, based on the predominance of Holland. Their choice to select regional sources (Tilmans) and to dispute the importance of the international one's (Groenveld), influences their findings. However, other authors do find it still worth their while to consider the existence of a national level during the sixteenth century, albeit it as a creation by smaller groups like William of Orange and his collaborators (Kossmann), or as a process mainly centered within the core provinces (De Schepper).<sup>35</sup>

### **A new comparison**

The example of Spain has learned us that a strong national identity, as seen by Rodríguez Salgado, was possible in the sixteenth century, notwithstanding Groenveld's idea that only very few could develop such a general identity. The case of Spain also shows us that the fact that there was no actual state, did not hinder the growth of Spain as a concept. The Habsburg Low Countries, with a States General and one general High Court, had more common institutions than Spain, where all institutions remained divided between the Kingdoms. A third conclusion from the Spanish example might be that a unity of language is not necessary. However, there must be a dominant language as the vehicle of this identity. Think of Nebrija. Here we may have an important element to explain the difference between Spain and the Low Countries.

Both historiographies have in common that they focus on historical works to find proof of identities. National chronicles are clearly related to the court of the prince and show national identities, while regional chronicles are proof of regional identities. The relation between the display of a certain identity and political power seems evident. The decision whether to use international sources also has its influence on the images. In the Spanish case the importance of the international arena is stressed; the importance of the relation between the 'self' and the 'other'. The modern Dutch historians do not really introduce international

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(Torún 1994); Robert Stein, 'Nationale identiteiten in de Late Middeleeuwen. Een verkenning', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis* 28 (2002), 222-246.

<sup>35</sup> Other important works on the Low Countries: H. Kampinga, *Opvattingen over onze vaderlandsche geschiedenis bij Hollandse historici der 16<sup>e</sup> en 17<sup>e</sup> eeuw* (The Hague 1917, reprint Utrecht 1980); J.W. Muller, *Over Nederlandsch volksbesef en taalbesef* (Utrecht 1915); J.W. Muller, 'Vaderland en moedertaal', *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsche Taal- en Letterkunde* 47 (1928), 43-62; J. Stengers, 'la genèse du sentiment national belge', J. Craeybeckx, F. Daelemans and F.G. Scheelings, ed., *1585*, 237-251; P. Avonds, 'Beschouwingen over het ontstaan en de evolutie van het saamhorigheidsbesef in de Nederlanden, 14<sup>de</sup>-19<sup>de</sup> eeuw', *Cultuurgeschiedenis in*

politics to their studies. They leave aside the older Dutch historians, who did use international sources. As more identities might have existed at the same time, the choice of perspective, and of sources, is very important. Here the historian's influence is very strong. What sources does he choose? What answers does he want to get?

It has also become clear that there was neither a hierarchy nor a chronology in the different levels of identity: local, regional, and national. They could exist at the same time, and its influence could change over time. In both countries particularism can be found as a reaction against a strong national, or centralised, impulse.

Another important element of comparison can be found in the influence of the classical and humanist tradition. In Spain, the existence of 'Hispania' as an old term that could be claimed, and indeed was claimed, by the Castilians and by the King, made it easy to find a common denomination. To say it in modern business terminology: There was a well known brand name to be used, both within the territory itself as outside of it. The Low Countries did not have such an advantage. As they were created in between 'Francia' and 'Germania', they could not use these classical geographical terms to create an image of unity. The attempts to introduce traditional names like Burgundy, Frisia, Belgica, or even Batavia, all failed. Burgundy was of course not limited to the Low Countries as there also existed the French duchy, while Frisia and Batavia were regionally too limited to be used for the whole of the Low Countries. Belgica, remaining mainly a Latin description, of course had limited possibilities. Therefore, what remained were general names such as 'les pays de par deça', 'the Seventeen Provinces', and the actual 'Low Countries', or 'Low Country'. The fact that abroad most languages used Flanders, Flandes, Flandres, or Fiandra, to describe the whole of the Low Countries, did not help either to create an image of national unity. Hence the difficulties of Erasmus.

Furthermore, we have to state that the course of history also had its importance. The fact that the Low Countries only remained together for a short period, did not help to build a strong national identity, nor did it help to create a strong interest with historians for this same identity. They are more attracted to search for the roots of their own contemporary countries, such as the Dutch Republic in the case of the Netherlands. Obviously, in Spain this problem does not exist. Although nowadays we can find a substantial literature on some regional identities during the early Modern Period.

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*de Nederlanden van de Renaissance naar de Romantiek. Liber amicorum J. Andriessen S.J., A. Keersmaekers, P. Lenders S.J.* (Louvain, Amersfoort 1986), 45-58.

Finally, we have seen how Habsburg rule, with all its territories together within a large composite state, did not oppose growing national identity. On the contrary, it has become clear that both historiographies see the Habsburg court and its bureaucracy as important elements for its development, both in Spain and in the Low Countries. Remarkably, it was the failure of Habsburg rule in the Low Countries, that finally caused the breaking off of the formation of a national identity.