

The Embarrassment of Greatness. J.A. Comenius and the Dutch Golden Age

In his remarkable book, Simon Schama traced how the United Provinces developed from an insignificant community of seamen, fishermen, peasants and merchants into a rich nation, if not much of a state. Schama analyzed especially the mental attitudes of the rich citizens of the “New Tyre” towards wealth and poverty. Educated by humanists and Calvinists, they had to contend with the belief that their worldly success was a test of their moral fibre. They had to live as both pious and wealthy people. But Amsterdam was not only a metropolis: it was also the heir of Venice and to a certain degree had to defend the “Swiss liberties”. The Republic of the United Provinces was the capital of an expanding and developing Empire.

How far can we presume that a similar dilemma existed in the attitude of the Regents, the mighty Amsterdam patricians, not only toward their own poor but also toward their distressed coreligionists abroad? We shall not find a reply to this question in Schama’s book nor in the works of contemporary Dutch historians. Sixty years ago, Johan Huizinga was aware of the greatness of 17th-century Dutch culture, and he used the struggle for independence against the Spanish monarchy as an allegory for Dutch resistance against German occupation. Even later, historians wrote about the Dutch “Revolution” of the 16th century. But times have changed, and today one speaks of the “Revolt” of the Netherlands (*de Opstand*) or about the “Troubles” (in German *Unruhen*). Whether we can properly speak of a revolution is a complex question, but, after

all, the attributes or titles are not all-important. The fact remains that the United Provinces represented a new, more modern model of Western society and was an important factor in European policy.

European policy of the 16th and early 17th centuries was dominated by two problems: one of them, inherited from the early Middle Ages, was the conflict between the West and the Orient, now represented by the Ottoman Empire. The other was the European conflict between the United Provinces (and eventually its allies) and Spain. The Spanish Monarchy and the “Casa de Austria” were faced with both these problems – the latter in the Mediterranean and also in Central Europe.

In the year 1592 an allegorical map of Europe was published, portraying the continent as a virgin, with Spain as her head and the hem of her robe reaching as far as the Urals and Constantinople. On her breast Virgin Europe wore a medal reminding the viewer that Bohemia was the heart of the continent and Prague was its center. This allegorical map was used as political propaganda on behalf of the policies of Bohemia’s ruler, the Emperor Rudolf II, who attempted to bring the two warring parties in the Netherlands to peace in order that he might launch his much-publicized war against the Turks. He had no success, either in the Netherlands or in the 14 years of war against the Turks. The United Provinces under their Stadholder Maurice of Orange were conducting a campaign in the south, and the Estates of Frisia were preparing for an onslaught from the still Spanish-held city of Groningen. In Moravia, Jan Amos Comenius was born, a man whose lifetime (1592-1670) made him a contemporary of three generations, from Maurice of Orange, to Oldenbarnevelt, Louis de Geer and the brothers De Witt. As we shall see, Comenius was a sympathizer of the Netherlands all his life. He made two visits there during the first period of his life, which was spent mostly in Bohemia (1592-1628), one during his middle years, which were spent mostly in eastern and central Europe (1628-1657), and he spent the last fourteen years of his life in the Netherlands (1657-1670).

What can a parallel history of the Netherlands and a representative figure of Czech history offer for the solution of our initial question: What was good about the Dutch greatness, and what was wrong with it?

First of all, we must remember that Moravia together with Bohemia and Silesia formed the core of the political unit called the Crown of Bohemia. Since 1526 it was ruled by members of the Habsburg dynasty – who were very much dependent on their Spanish cousins but at the same time jealously guarded their independent policy – together with the Estates which met in their Diets and had their own representative organs. The Moravian Estates had elaborated their own model of self-government – the old scheme of partition of powers between King and Estates.

Jan Amos Comenius-Komenský was born of a middle-class family in a small town in the southeast of Moravia. One member of the noble family that owned the town fought in the armies of Prince Maurice; another tried to bring the different currents within the Utraquists or late Hussites into some kind of a Corpus Evangelicorum. But the Comenius family belonged to the Unity of Brethren, leaning more toward the Calvinist Reform. In 1605 the Hungarian rebels against Rudolf II and their Turkish and Tartar allies invaded Moravia, causing great material damage, claiming many lives and bringing thousands into captivity if not slavery. Jan, already orphaned, lost his home and his school at Strážnice, which was badly plundered, although its lord Ladislav Velen of Žerotín was practically the only Moravian nobleman who took the trouble to organize defensive measures. Only after a break of more than two years could Jan return to school, this time to the Latin School of the Unity at Přerov, where another member of the Žerotín clan, Charles the Elder, protected a school which he hoped to develop into an academy after the West European example. Charles was the spiritual and political leader of the Unity, and also of the opposition of the Estates against the Habsburg administration which backed the program of the Catholic counter-Reformation.

Ladislav Velen was a Utraquist, and politically he was much more radical than Charles, who had studied at Geneva and was acquainted with the problems of European politics. Only about twenty miles separated Přerov from Olomouc, the seat of the Prince-Bishop and of the Jesuit university college. The two types of humanist education were thus in close proximity. Similarly, the Moravian aristocracy was divided politically and confessionally. The Cardinal-Bishop Francis of Dietrichstein was born in Madrid and educated in Rome. For him the true ruler was “nuestro rey”, the King of Spain. Dietrichstein was a leader of the “Spanish” court party in Moravia, together with two renegades from the Unity of Brethren, Charles of Liechtenstein and Albert of Wallenstein.

While Jan Amos Comenius was learning Latin at Přerov, the “fratricidal war” between members of the Habsburg dynasty allowed the Estates of Bohemia to extract from Rudolf II the so-called *Letter of Majesty* (1609) granting the Estates – in their absolute majority non-Catholic – fundamental political and religious liberties. In Bohemia, the division between the Estates existed as well: the “Spaniards” on the one side and the “Netherlanders” on the other represented the radicals. In Bohemia the position of the Spanish party (*Partido español*) was much stronger than in Moravia, and its members were not willing to accept the consequences of the *Letter of Majesty*. Among these consequences was a major influence of the Calvinist-oriented Unity of Brethren and, under its protection, the establishment of a small but important Calvinist Church in the Prague Old Town.

Let us remember that at nearly the same time, in 1609, Johan van Oldenbarnevelt secured a 12 years’ truce with the Spaniards, in the face of resistance from Prince Maurice of Orange, and that the conflict between the Gomarists and the Arminians was in the offing. Young Comenius was not sent to Geneva, but to the Academy at Herborn in Nassau, with teachers mainly connected with the Netherlands. At the end of his Herborn studies, in 1613, he visited Amsterdam for the

first time and probably accompanied the newlyweds Frederick of the Palatinate and Elizabeth Stuart on their way to Heidelberg. One year later, on his way home, Comenius stopped in Prague and doubtless visited the Utraquist Caroline College, where there were masters he may well have known. He served as clergyman of the Unity at Fulnek in eastern Moravia. From there he followed attentively the political events in Bohemia and Moravia but also in the Netherlands. He was on the side of the Bohemian Estates when in 1618 they initiated a revolt which was at once a civil war and the beginning of the international conflict known as the Thirty Years' War. There is no doubt that the revolt of the Bohemians was planned as a counter-offensive against the Habsburgs. They had achieved a triumph in 1617 when, with the help of Spanish diplomacy, they pushed through the election of Ferdinand (later Ferdinand II, of the Styrian line of the Habsburg dynasty) as the future King of Bohemia. We do not know whether the Bohemian "Netherlanders" took into consideration the expiration of the Twelve Years' Truce in the spring of 1621, but one of them, Albrecht Jan Smiřický, had direct contacts with the Netherlands and even planned to marry a distant relative of the Orange dynasty. One of his advisers and messengers was a compatriot of Comenius, who later remarked that in 1618-1619 his own sympathies and those of the clergy of the Unity lay with the Gomarists and Prince Maurice rather than the Arminians and Oldenbarnevelt. At that time he wrote a pamphlet against the Jesuits and, of course, had to hide after 1620. He was on the side of the Moravian Protestant nobility which in the spring of 1619 carried out a coup d'état and, under the leadership of Ladislav Velen of Žerotín and much against the wishes of Charles the Elder, joined the Bohemians. But Smiřický had died the previous year, and the Confederation Act of 1619 stands as the most eloquent but also the last testimony of Dutch influence in Bohemian internal affairs. In the summer of 1619, when the Bohemian Estates elected Frederick of the Palatinate as their King, it meant a return to the old traditional

policy. The influence of the middle classes and their intelligentsia was limited to foreign relations, especially those with the United Provinces: control of the Dutch subsidies rested in the hands of members of the Prague Calvinist Church. A certain republicanism remained alive among the leaders of the Caroline College. Dutch influence can be seen in the project of the university reform of 1619, prepared mainly by Jan Jessenius-Jesenský and Peter Fradelius of Štiavnica. Jessenius wrote in the spring of 1620 an eloquent defense of the people's right to resist a tyrant.

Since its beginnings the government of the Bohemian Directors maintained close contacts with the Dutch Estates General. The subsidies began to be paid after the death of Oldenbarnevelt. The amount of 100,000 florins was not especially high and unfortunately payment was sluggish and irregular. Nor did the situation improve after the election of the Winter King Frederick, who was the grandson of William of Orange. Sometimes the Bohemian agents asked Maurice of Orange to intervene – his attitude toward the Bohemian cause was more positive, but his principal interest was confined to dynastic policy, especially as proclaimed by Frederick's adviser Christian of Anhalt. As for the Estates General, they certainly felt a duty to aid their coreligionists, but Bohemia was a relatively distant country, and they preferred to strengthen their position on the Rhine and the Waal rather than on the Danube or the Moldau. A cavalry regiment and a half regiment of infantry left the Netherlands for Bohemia. The cavalry saw no action, but the infantry companies continued to defend some strongholds in southern Bohemia long after the Battle of the White Mountain near Prague.

Comenius knew of these exploits and wrote about them later in his "History of the Sufferings of the Bohemian Church" and links them to the decades-long resistance of his Moravian compatriots, the Wallachians. When he was in Berlin to visit the loyal group of émigrés headed by Ladislav Velen of Žerotín, Comenius was sent to The Hague to bring Frederick of the Palatinate into action

using the revelations, prophesying early success in the coming conflict between the members of the Hague Coalition of 1625 and the Habsburgs. During his stay in Amsterdam, Comenius had his map of Moravia published, and he dedicated it to Ladislav Velen.

He returned to Moravia just in time, before the troops of Mansfeld and Johann Ernst of Saxe-Weimar passed through eastern Moravia. Danish garrisons remained, and Ladislav Velen of Žerotín was for the next ten months or so the Captain General of Moravia. Comenius saw the main enemies in the Pope and the Spaniards. But at the same time he was an admirer of Bartolomé de las Casas and compared the sufferings of the American Indians to those of the Bohemians and Moravians.

Comenius left his homeland when he was 35 years old. From the beginning of his literary and political activity he was a “Netherlander”, that is, a sympathizer with the United Provinces and all that they stood for. Like most of his compatriots, he favoured Maurice of Orange over the Arminians. All his life he was loyal to the Palatine dynasty and also admired the resolute behaviour of Maurice’s brother Frederic Henry, who was close to the Palatine couple. His wife, Amalia of Solms, was a lady of the court of the Queen of Bohemia, and it is quite likely that she met her future husband in Prague. After 1628 Comenius lived in the Baltic area, first in Leszno in Poland, later in Prussian Elbing. Through the network of Dutch factors and English merchants Comenius, via Breslau and Danzig, remained as secretary of the Unity of Brethren in contact with Church institutions in England and the Netherlands. Among them he found members of families who once belonged to the Prague Calvinist Church, which in 1623, before its members had to leave, sent Comenius a monetary gift on the occasion of his second marriage. It was these contacts that made possible Comenius’ acquaintance and future collaboration with Samuel Hartlib and John Dury. It was through these channels that Comenius’ first magnum opus *Janua Linguarum*, became known in the West. It was based on a Spanish *Janua*, compiled by a

Jesuit author for use in the Americas but followed the method known to Czech and Dutch authors alike since the 16th century.

In the years 1631 and 1632, with the advance of the Swedish armies into Germany, Comenius believed that victory over the Habsburgs was near. Thus he wrote his pamphlet, preserved only in its Dutch version, “Trumpet of the Blessed Year”. But Gustavus Adolphus, the Lion of the North, was killed in 1632 in the battle against Wallenstein’s forces, and Frederick of the Palatinate died soon afterwards. Comenius continued to believe in the ultimate victory of the Corpus Evangelicorum, even though the history of the coalition gave small cause for hope.

In 1641-1642 Comenius traveled to England, where he discovered that his Pansophy had gained a much wider importance than he had believed. The beginning Civil War forced Comenius to leave, and on his return journey he came once more to the United Provinces. He renewed and solidified his relations with the dignitaries of the Dutch and Walloon Reformed Churches. He got from them a considerable sum for the poorer members of the Unity. Through the Walloon Church he also became acquainted with Louis de Geer, of a family from Deventer, a banker and merchant who owned mines and iron works in Sweden. De Geer was the supplier of some of the armaments for the Bohemian Estates, and his projects were conceived in the interests of the whole of the Corpus Evangelicorum. De Geer was well-connected with the Swedish Chancellor Axel Oxenstierna and some of the dignitaries of the Swedish Lutheran Church who were in favour of an alliance of all Evangelicals. Comenius was invited to Stockholm because of the unclear profile of the Unity of Brethren he advised only De Geer while he was in Elbing. We do not know whom Comenius met during his stay in England – with some notable exceptions. He often visited the Walloon Church and its pastors and became acquainted with his countryman, the engraver Wenceslaus Hollar. In the Dutch republic he must have met Radslav Vchynský (Kinský), a former leader of the Bohemian revolt. He met at least some Bohemian exiles living in Am-

sterdam and he may have visited the miniature court of the Queen of Bohemia at The Hague. He probably knew that some exiles went across the Atlantic in the service of the Dutch West India Company (founded in 1621). The most remarkable of them was Augustin Herrman, who was one of the early citizens of Captain Stuyvesant in New Amsterdam. According to some witnesses, Herrman – or Heeremans as he signed before he left – died after 1664. Het was not the only Bohemian in Manhattan, but he would hardly have had the opportunity to visit the towns in Zeeland from where some of his fellow Bohemians – officers and a doctor – were hired to participate in the futile effort of the West India Company to save its Brazilian possessions.

In the year 1648 Comenius protested against the decision of the Swedish Crown and the German Protestant princes to abandon the Bohemian cause, but strangely enough he did not comment on the treaty which was signed between Spain and the United Provinces on 20 January 1648. He must have known about the struggle preceding the treaty between the Stadholder's party and the Regents, but he never mentions the conflict between William II and Amsterdam. He had, however, contacts with the Bohemian Queen: while he was in Sárospatak in Transylvania he had helped to realize the marriage between her daughter and a younger member of the princely Rákóczi family. Only when the newly-weds had died Comenius returned to Leszno in Poland and suffered there another personal tragedy: the loss of his library and most of his manuscripts (1656). In the same year the patronage offered by Lawrence de Geer brought Comenius to Amsterdam, his last home.

Comenius, a Bohemian patriot and a firm believer in the Corpus Christianorum, had survived bitter disappointments in 1627, when the grandiose plan of the anti-Habsburg Hague Coalition was brought to naught by Wallenstein and technical obstacles; in 1632, when his two idols Gustavus Adolphus and Frederick of the Palatine died; in 1635, when the Elector of Saxony abandoned his

coreligionists for the second time; in 1648 and 1654 and finally in 1656. It is a testimony to his steadfastness that he never lost faith in the final victory over the Habsburgs, with the help of the United Provinces, England and their Scandinavian allies.

Especially the first years of Comenius's stay in Amsterdam may be considered as fortunate ones. Protected by the De Geers, who were not closely connected with any political grouping and were friendly received by the aristocracy, Comenius could publish his *Opera Didactica Omnia*, a series of works for the members of the Unity of Brethren and another series of political and religious tracts.

Comenius's initial cordial relations with the Dutch Reformed Church were cooling gradually, while his relations with the Walloon Church existed only through the De Geer family. Polemics with his former pupils (Arnold, Maresius) originated, like his attack on the Polish Brethren (Socinians) in his fear of being accused of heterodoxy. More and more he was giving to thinking over his own life; thus he remembered the discourse he had as a student in Heidelberg with the Dutch diplomat Brederode and, similarly, he remembered with some regret that he had sided with the Gomarists against the Arminians.

Although he was, at least until her death, a loyal subject of the Queen of Bohemia and dedicated one of his late works to her son, Prince Rupert (Robert) of the Palatinate and Lusatia, English admiral and first President of the Hudson Bay Company, he was now closer to Arminianism. In the end it probably did not matter too much to him whether a state was a monarchy or a republic, his ideal remaining a partition of powers between a sovereign and the estates. He probably never heard of his countrymen giving their lives in defence of the Brazilian possessions of the Dutch West India Company. Through his son Daniel he probably knew of Augustin Herrman; the persecuted Labadists found refuge in Herman's Bohemia Minor.

The Anglo-Dutch war was, to him, a tragedy because in his view England and the United Provinces ought to be allies against the Habsburgs. For this reason he wrote his work

The Angel of Peace – it probably came too late to be effective. Eloquently he tried to contribute to a peaceful solution of the conflict, the causes of which he could not understand. We do not know whether he realized that in future the Dutch Republic would seek profit and prosperity in the south-east of Asia, or whether he thought of the forlorn Bohemian exiles on the other side of the Atlantic. But what is important is the fact that he used the opportunity to explain the program of his General Consultation on the Improvement of all Things Human. The Angel of Peace remained for nearly three centuries the only source of information for Comenius's great utopian project.

Protected by the De Geers and in contact with his friends and countrymen he tried hard to finish his Czech condensed version of his magnum opus in his unfinished work *Clamores Eliae*. Perhaps he was fortunate. He did not hear about the trial and cruel execution in Pressburg (Bratislava) of his friend Nicholas Drábík, who paid for his Revelations with his life. Comenius was spared a similar fate, living in the friendly Dutch Republic. He was also spared the collapse of his beloved Dutch Republic after the coup d'état by Prince William III. He was spared the recognition that his world in which the Dutch and the Spaniards were enemies was a thing of the past. The old polarity between the Netherlands and Spain was being replaced by the conflict between the two maritime, colonial and manufactory powers, England and France. The safety of the Dutch Republic was secured by a coalition with not only the Spaniards, but even the Austrian Habsburgs as its members.

The question is whether the life and activities of Comenius are of any value for a better understanding of the uniqueness of the United Provinces in their so-called Golden Age. First of all, the term is much more apt to describe the upsurge of the Dutch arts than anything else. At the end of the 16th century the United Provinces became to a certain extent a model society or even a model civilization. Comenius grasped this, but he could hardly understand the course of Dutch foreign pol-

icy. In the end he discovered there were two aspects to it: the foreign policy of the Princes of Orange, whose aims mostly followed closely the interests of the dynasty and its relations. But as Stadholders the princes had but limited means to realize this policy. Their opponents – Regents, Arminians and others – were much more effective. To a certain degree they were willing to help their coreligionists, but they did not believe in far-flung plans of continental dimensions. The greatness of the Dutch did not lie in the field of foreign policy. Comenius and the Bohemian cause had only a slight hope to be reconciled. But the Dutch Republic, before and after 1672, remained the haven of the libertarians, even of dissenters. Comenius was able to develop his ideas in the United Provinces.