

Introduction: Republican Decline in Context

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The study of early modern republicanism has featured prominently in the development of intellectual history and the history of political thought ever since 1955, when Hans Baron published his famous book *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance*. In this pioneering study, Baron launched the concept of “civic humanism” to denote a specific philosophy of public engagement, based upon the virtuous citizen who actively participates in the government of his community and fights for its liberty to save it from impending doom. According to Baron, this ideal came to fruition in the early fifteenth century when Renaissance Florence faced and surmounted an imminent crisis and the threat of foreign invasion and tyrannical rule.¹ Baron had first coined the term *Bürgerhumanismus* as a young scholar in the Weimar Republic, and subsequently developed his thesis during his exile in the United States. As he himself acknowledged, his thinking was a reflection of the crisis of Western democracy and its eventual triumph over Nazism.²

Few historiographical interpretations have been as influential as this thesis of “civic humanism.” The details of Baron’s historical account have been disputed and revised by subsequent scholarship on the Florentine Renaissance,³ but his interpretation has been immensely significant because it laid the groundwork for later studies which essentially transposed and applied Baron’s thesis to other contexts. In this process, “civic humanism” transformed into “classical republicanism,” an intellectual tradition originating in antiquity and rising to prominence in the early modern period. Landmark publications directly or indirectly inspired by Baron, from John Pocock’s *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975) to the two volumes edited by Martin van Gelderen and Quentin Skinner, *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage* (2002), have placed this

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- 1 Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny*, 11 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955).
 - 2 Riccardo Fubini, “Renaissance Historian: The Career of Hans Baron,” *The Journal of Modern History* 64, no. 3 (1992): 541–74.
 - 3 James Hankins, “The ‘Baron Thesis’ after Forty Years and Some Recent Studies of Leonardo Bruni,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56, no. 2 (1995): 309–33; idem (ed.), *Renaissance Civic Humanism: Reappraisals and Reflections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

republican tradition firmly on the historiographical map as a crucial element in early modern European history and the history of Western thought at large.⁴

Yet as Rachel Hammersley shows in a recent comprehensive overview, the origins, contents, and limits of this republican tradition are complex and contested.⁵ Following Baron's trail, republicanism has generally been studied as a specific political language that holds that the best form of government is defined by the self-rule of citizens, rather than by a singular head of state. The study of this specific political language has, however, produced a bewildering array of specific types of early modern republican thought. Pocock's analysis put the concept of virtue in the sense of citizen participation in politics on center stage, whilst Skinner gave predominance to the concept of republican liberty in the sense of the absence of arbitrary domination. Whereas some historians point out that republican thought originated in classical (Roman or Greek) models that were taken up and adapted by future generations – most notably in Renaissance Italy but also in the eighteenth century – others have proposed that such a lineage hardly existed and that synchronic influences have been of greater importance than diachronic ones, questioning the existence of a singular “republican tradition.”⁶

In recent years, moreover, historians have increasingly questioned the dichotomy between republics and monarchies. Scholarship on thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Italy, for example, shows that the political systems of republicanism and seignorialism were not so very different.⁷ The common denominator of political thought in the city-states of the Italian Renaissance was not so much a partisan adherence to a specific political system or conception of “republican” liberty, as a shared humanist belief that citizens and rulers should cultivate virtue, irrespective of the existing form of government.⁸ Even

4 J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage*, ed. by Martin van Gelderen and Quentin Skinner, 11 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

5 Rachel Hammersley, *Republicanism: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2020).

6 For recent historiographical overviews on republicanism, see *Ibid.*, 199–203; Rachel Hammersley, “Introduction: The Historiography of Republicanism and Republican Exchanges,” *History of European Ideas* 38, no. 3 (2012): 323–37; Wyger Velema and Arthur Weststeijn, “Introduction: Classical Republicanism and Ancient Republican Models,” in *Ancient Models in the Early Modern Republican Imagination*, ed. by Wyger Velema and Arthur Weststeijn (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 1–19.

7 Fabrizio Ricciardelli, *The Myth of Republicanism in Renaissance Italy* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015).

8 James Hankins, *Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

absolutist regimes in early modern Europe such as the Spanish monarchy or the Holy Roman Empire harbored strong traditions of communal government at local level that can be considered comparable to the kingless polities of Venice, Genoa, the Swiss Confederation or the Dutch Republic.⁹ Other studies have shown that the republican characteristics of these polities should not be overestimated, as concepts of statehood and sovereignty and practices of representation remained strongly embedded in a monarchical framework.¹⁰ Revisionist scholarship has even argued that the American Revolution, in Pocock's analysis "the last act of the civic Renaissance," was essentially an insurrection in favor of royal power.¹¹ At the same time, new sweeping interpretations of the republican tradition have forcefully argued for the existence of a "radical republicanism" from Machiavelli to Marx that is fundamentally based on popular democratic sovereignty and opposed to not only political but also economic and social structures of domination, including capitalism, imperialism, and patriarchy.¹²

The rich scholarship on republicanism has thus, paradoxically, blurred the coherence of republicanism as a specific political language, while even the distinction between republics and monarchies is often hard to draw. Yet for all their variety, recent studies on republicanism, mainly prioritizing the

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- 9 *Repúblicas y republicanismo en la Europa moderna (siglos XVI-XVII)*, ed. by Manuel Herrero Sánchez (Madrid: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2017); Thomas Weller, "Political Representation and Symbolic Communication in the Early Modern Period: The Imperial Cities of the Holy Roman Empire," in *Political Representation in the Ancien Régime*, ed. by Joaquim Albareda and Manuel Herrero Sánchez (New York: Routledge, 2019), 105–20.
- 10 Carlo Bitossi, *Il governo dei magnifici. Patriziato e politica a Genova fra Cinque e Seicento* (Genoa: ECIG, 1990); Thomas Maissen, *Die Geburt der Republic. Staatsverständnis und Repräsentation in der frühneuzeitlichen Eidgenossenschaft* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006); Helmer Helmers, *The Royalist Republic: Literature, Politics, and Religion in the Anglo-Dutch Public Sphere, 1639–1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Alessandro Metlica, "Magnificence and Atticism in Seventeenth-Century Venice," in *Magnificence in the Seventeenth Century: Performing Splendour in Catholic and Protestant Contexts*, ed. by Gijs Versteegen, Stijn Bussels, and Walter Melion (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 261–75. The dichotomy between republic and monarchy is also critically interrogated in the ongoing research project "Republics on the Stage of Kings: Representing Republican State Power in the Europe of Absolute Monarchies, late 16th – early 18th century," in the framework of which this volume is published.
- 11 Eric Nelson, *The Royalist Revolution: Monarchy and the American Founding* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017); Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, 462.
- 12 John P. McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); *Radical Republicanism: Recovering the Tradition's Popular Heritage*, ed. by Bruno Leipold, Karma Nabulsi, and Stuart White (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Annelien de Dijn, *Freedom: An Unruly History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

concept of liberty, have largely neglected a theme that in Baron's pioneering analysis emerged as one of the key aspects of the republican tradition: the concept of *decline*.¹³ For Baron, whose interpretation originated in a time and place obsessed with crisis and the prospect of decline, the essence of "civic humanism" was precisely that it seized a moment of crisis to disrupt the looming course of fate and prevent imminent decline. This notion was further expanded and problematized by Pocock, who essentially turned Baron's thesis of crisis on its head. In Pocock's account, a crucial feature of classical republicanism is the awareness that republican rule is destined to eventual decline and fall. This awareness, indeed, identifies the "Machiavellian moment" when a republic confronts, in Pocock's phrasing, "its own temporal finitude."¹⁴

Following the Renaissance rediscovery of Polybius and his cyclical theory of the rise and fall of polities, early modern republicans understood the interplay between virtue and corruption as an inevitable development towards decline, as exemplified by the ancient models of Athens and Rome. The narrative of the Roman historian Sallust in particular suggested that the main threat to the survival of republican virtue was the onset of luxury, which supposedly undermined civic engagement and equality in the exercise of citizenship on the basis of land ownership and the bearing of arms. The theme of luxury gained traction with the rise of commercialization in the eighteenth century, when new modes of historical thinking in terms of stages of development engendered new discourses of cultural reflection that criticized modern commercial society as an epoch of decadence and decline.¹⁵ Decline, then, is of central importance to the tradition of classical republicanism as it was originally

13 See for instance the recent overview by Hammersley, *Republicanism*, where the theme of decline is hardly mentioned.

14 Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, viii.

15 On the theme of luxury in the eighteenth century, see: Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger, "The Rise and Fall of the Luxury Debates," in *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods*, ed. by Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 7–27; Istvan Hont, "The Early Enlightenment Debate on Commerce and Luxury," in *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought*, ed. by Mark Goldie and Robert Wokler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 379–418; Till Wahnbaeck, *Luxury and Public Happiness: Political Economy in the Italian Enlightenment* (London: Clarendon Press, 2004); John Shovlin, *The Political Economy of Virtue: Luxury, Patriotism, and the Origins of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007); Urte Weeber, *Republiken als Blaupause. Venedig, die Niederlande und die Eidgenossenschaft im Reformdiskurs der Frühaufklärung* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 332–40. The rise of cultural critique in relation to modern commercial society in the eighteenth century is analyzed in Theo Jung, *Zeichen des Verfalls. Semantische Studien zur Entstehung der Kulturkritik im 18. und frühen 19. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 123–87.

theorized by Pocock and to the development of that tradition in early modernity, specifically in the eighteenth century. Yet in the more recent scholarship that approaches republicanism especially as a theory of liberty, the theme of republican decline has been overlooked by most historians – with the notable exception of Pocock himself, who has dedicated his later career to a sweeping analysis of the theme of decline and fall in European intellectual history.¹⁶

1 The Dutch Republic and the Problem of Decline

In this volume we seek to reintegrate the theme of decline into the current debates on the republican tradition, focusing in particular on the Dutch Republic during the later eighteenth century, arguably the polity that best encapsulates the topic of republican decline. While the United Provinces rose to prominence in the seventeenth century as a remarkably successful republican model surrounded by absolutist monarchies, for many eighteenth-century observers throughout Europe this once powerful polity had entered a steep path towards decline.¹⁷

Pocock has repeatedly grappled with the question how to make sense of eighteenth-century Dutch understandings of decline in light of his own account of classical republicanism. The eighteenth-century discourse of decline, for Pocock, essentially hinges on a narrative of virtue and corruption that looks back at the ancient liberty of agricultural property-holders, and that sees modern liberty in a commercial society as potentially corrupt. The case of the Dutch Republic complicates this interpretation, since it was an essentially commercial, urban state whose citizens were engaged in trade and possessed no landed property. What then did decline mean to Dutch republicans? In his most recent reflection on this question, Pocock eventually came to the conclusion that “we seem [...] to lack a study of how (whether?) [the narrative of virtue and corruption] was reformulated by Dutch thinkers of the *perrukentijd* [sic] and *patriottentijd* to explicate the problems of the declining republic.”¹⁸

16 J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, VI vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999–2016).

17 See *Dutch Decline in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, ed. by Koen Stapelbroek, *History of European Ideas* 36, no. 2 (2010). This special issue considers the theme of decline mostly from a political economy perspective.

18 J.G.A. Pocock, “The Atlantic Republican Tradition: The Republic of the Seven Provinces,” *Republics of Letters: A Journal for the Study of Knowledge, Politics, and the Arts* 2, no. 1 (2010): 1–10, quote on 9.

Our aim in this volume is to take up the invitation hidden in this statement and explore the multiple meanings of Dutch republican decline in context.

The theme of decline has in fact been central to scholarship on the eighteenth-century Dutch Republic, although the bulk of the historiographical discussion has been concerned with the extent and the causes of Dutch economic decline, and the question whether this should be seen as relative or absolute.¹⁹ Largely separate from the debates of economic historians, a smaller body of work has been devoted to Dutch eighteenth-century perceptions and understandings of decline, critically departing from Pocock's approach. When Pocock first discussed the applicability of his framework to the Dutch case, he suggested that one should make a sharp distinction between, on the one hand, the classical republican discourse of patriotism, which cherished the idea that the moral and political discipline of a civic militia and a republican form of government can offset the negative effects of a burgeoning commercial society, and, on the other hand, the Enlightenment discourse of politeness, which considered the rise of commerce an opportunity to enhance sociability. While the former discourse, in Pocock's analysis, was preoccupied with the menace of decline, the latter stressed "the progress of civilisation through the growth of commercial and cultural interchange."²⁰

The prominent Dutch intellectual historian Ernst Kossmann was the first to reply to Pocock on this issue. In a series of publications, including a contribution to the landmark volume *The Dutch Republic in the Eighteenth Century: Decline, Enlightenment, and Revolution*, Kossmann essentially tried to collapse the Pocockian distinction between a republican language of decline and an Enlightenment discourse of progress. He argued that the eighteenth-century Dutch conception of *achteruitgang* meant a temporary state of "retrogression" rather than an "inexorable process of diminishing power, health, or energy that

19 Joh. de Vries, *De economische achteruitgang der Republiek in de achttiende eeuw* (Amsterdam: Van Campen, 1959); and see for instance C.R. Boxer, "The Dutch Economic Decline," in *The Economic Decline of Empires*, ed. by Carlo M. Cipolla (London: Methuen, 1970) 253–63; James C. Riley, "The Dutch Economy after 1650: Decline or Growth?" *Journal of European Economic History* 13 (1984): 521–69; Jonathan I. Israel, *Dutch Primacy in World Trade, 1585–1740* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 377–98; Arthur van Riel, "Rethinking the Economic History of the Dutch Republic: The Rise and Decline of Economic Modernity Before the Advent of Industrialized Growth," *Journal of Economic History* 56 (1996): 223–29; Jan de Vries and Ad van der Woude, *The First Modern Economy: Growth, Decline, and Perseverance of the Dutch Economy, 1500–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Cf. also Koen Stapelbroek, "Dutch Decline as a European Phenomenon," *European History of Ideas* 36, no. 2 (2010): 147.

20 J.G.A. Pocock, "The Problem of Political Thought in the Eighteenth Century: Patriotism and Politeness," *Theoretische Geschiedenis* 9, no. 1 (1982): 3–24; quote on 21.

may be stopped or slowed for a while but rarely if ever reverses itself.”²¹ Kossmann’s relative neglect of eighteenth-century uses of the concept *verval*, the Dutch word for decline that captures that second connotation, suggests that he deliberately downplayed the republican dimension of the Dutch discourse of decline. In the same volume, Wijnand Mijnhardt viewed decline through a cultural lens, focusing in particular on the quintessential Dutch spectatorial periodical, Justus van Effen’s *Hollandsche Spectator* (1731–35). Mijnhardt observed that Van Effen and his contemporaries perceived the cause of economic decline as moral, but he concluded, like Kossmann, that they were optimistic about the possibility of recovery.²² Mijnhardt and Kossmann thus approached the Dutch discourse of decline not as a republican discourse in the Pocockian sense, but rather in the Enlightenment terms of the interplay between retrogression and progress.²³

This approach, however, disregards the fact that most commentators in the eighteenth-century Dutch Republic, whatever political faction they belonged to and whether they could be considered conservatives or reformers, were proud to call themselves republicans and shared a keen sense of the vulnerability of the republican system in general and theirs in particular. The relevance of this essentially republican dimension to Dutch discussions about decline has been explored more effectively by Wyger Velema, to whom the essays in this volume are dedicated. Throughout his career, Velema has successfully demonstrated

21 E.H. Kossmann, “The Dutch Republic in the Eighteenth Century,” in *The Dutch Republic in the Eighteenth Century: Decline, Enlightenment, and Revolution*, ed. by Margaret C. Jacob and Wijnand W. Mijnhardt (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 29. See also E.H. Kossmann, “Comment on J.G.A. Pocock and Seventeenth-Century Dutch Republicanism,” *Theoretische geschiedenis* 9 (1982): 29–36; idem, “Dutch Republicanism,” in *L’età dei Lumi. Studi storici sul settecento Europeo in onore di Franco Venturi*, vol. 1 (Naples: Jovene, 1985), 453–86; idem, “1787. De ineenstorting van de Patriottenbeweging en het probleem van Nederlands verval,” in *Vergankelijkheid en continuïteit. Opstellen over geschiedenis* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 1995), 114–137.

22 Wijnand W. Mijnhardt, “The Dutch Enlightenment: Humanism, Nationalism, and Decline,” in *The Dutch Republic in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Jacob and Mijnhardt, 208.

23 Over the years, Mijnhardt has repeatedly questioned the validity of the Pocockian paradigm, arguing moreover that the study of the Dutch eighteenth century has been taken hostage by a “new orthodoxy” with a “mono-disciplinary fixation” on politics, at the cost of excluding the socioeconomic and cultural dimension. See Wijnand W. Mijnhardt, “The Limits of the Present-day Historiography of Republicanism,” *De Achttiende Eeuw* 37 (2005): 75–89; idem, *Een republikeinse erfenis* (Utrecht: Universiteit Utrecht, 2019), 20; idem, “Meervoudige moderniteit en de vergeten erfenis van de Nederlandse Verlichting,” *Jaarboek De Achttiende Eeuw* 2 (2018): 21–23. Compare with this Wyger Velema, “Wijnand W. Mijnhardt on the Historiography of Republicanism: A Reply,” *De Achttiende Eeuw* 37 (2005): 193–202, and the last section of this introduction.

the rich variety of Dutch republicanism and its significance for the republican tradition at large, demonstrating inter alia that the languages of patriotism and politeness were essentially intersected in the eighteenth-century Dutch Republic and that civic humanism, economic thought, and Enlightenment were not mutually exclusive categories. Far from insisting on the republican tradition as an exclusively political language, Velema made the crucial observation that the Dutch spectatorial writers, often seen as the embodiment of Dutch Enlightenment culture, should be understood as “republican theorists” who represented the “cultural dimension” of classical republicanism.²⁴

Velema’s work, which has explored how different discourses of virtue and politeness, corruption and decline, operated simultaneously and often interacted with and against each other, therefore invites us to consider the coexistence of multiple discourses of decline as an intrinsic feature of republicanism, and to approach republicanism not only in political but also in cultural terms. By adopting this approach in this volume, we aim to provide answers to some of the key questions that Pocock has raised in his attempt to make sense of Dutch understandings of republican decline. These questions include the role of the mythical Batavian past in Dutch perceptions of decline, the narrative that eighteenth-century Dutchmen construed to understand their own history in relation to antiquity and the rise of modernity, and the paradoxical transformation of the Dutch Republic into a parliamentary monarchy in the nineteenth century.²⁵

More generally, the focus on the problem of decline allows us to interrogate the linearity that underlies much scholarship on the republican tradition. Pocock’s narrative of classical republicanism clashing with the rise of commercial society and eventually ceding to modern liberalism has been seriously challenged, particularly in the context of the French and American Revolutions.²⁶ Yet, a notion of a linear development of rise, decline, and fall remains

24 Wyger R.E. Velema, *Republicans: Essays on Eighteenth-Century Dutch Political Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), chapter 4 (77–91): “Polite Republicanism and the Problem of Decline.” This chapter draws on two earlier publications: “Beschaafde republikeinen. Burgers in de achttiende eeuw,” in *De stijl van de burger. Over Nederlandse burgerlijke cultuur vanaf de middeleeuwen*, ed. by Remieg Aerts and Henk te Velde (Kampen: Kok Agora, 1998), and “Ancient and Modern Virtue Compared: De Beaufort and Van Effen on Republican Citizenship,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 30 (1997): 437–43.

25 Pocock, “The Atlantic Republican Tradition,” 9–10.

26 See e.g. Keith M. Baker, “Transformations of Classical Republicanism in Eighteenth-Century France,” *Journal of Modern History* 73 (2001): 32–53; Andrew Jainchill, *Reimagining Politics After the Terror: The Republican Origins of French Liberalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008); Annelien de Dijn, *French Political Thought from Montesquieu to Tocqueville: Liberty in a Levelled Society?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). For the case of the United States, see Andreas Kalyvas and Ira Katznelson, *Liberal*

engrained in contemporary scholarship on republicanism. For all their bewildering variety, studies on the republican tradition overall share the conviction that the “classical” republicanism of the early modern period progressively faded away and that the ancient language of virtue and positive liberty was replaced around 1800 by the modern language of rights and negative liberty – a narrative that essentially continues in the footsteps of Benjamin Constant’s famous lecture from 1819 on the liberty of ancients compared with that of moderns. Indeed, several of these studies assert that republican liberty has itself been subjected to decline and therefore needs to be resurrected in the twenty-first century as an historical alternative for modern liberalism: in a way, scholarship on republicanism thus seems to have internalized the republican discourse of decline.²⁷

By steering away from liberty as the central republican concept and thematizing this very discourse of decline, our aim in this volume is to reach a new understanding of the dynamics between ancient and modern in the republican tradition. The development of republicanism, we contend, should not be seen in terms of a linear process. Instead, the complexity and multifaceted nature of republicanism asks for an approach that analyzes the intersections between different republican discourses in a variety of contexts (including monarchical polities), and that explores how these discourses develop, transect and overlap, disappear and reappear again, submerge and resurface in different moments and places in time. This approach includes, but is certainly not limited to, questions such as the ones we address in this volume: what was the significance of ancient republican models in early modern theories confronting defeat and decline? Which political and intellectual strategies were developed to forestall, transform, or overcome republican decline? How did political theorists cope with the prospect of decline in periods of sudden and rapid change such as the revolutionary era?

The essays in this volume address these questions from various angles. Ordered in a chronological and geographic sequence, they all venture beyond the traditional Pocockian focus on the Florentine Renaissance,

Beginnings: Making a Republic for the Moderns (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Cf. on the Dutch revolutionary era, Wyger R.E. Velema, “Republikeinse democratie. De politieke wereld van de Bataafse Revolutie, 1795–1798,” in *Het Bataafse experiment. Politiek en cultuur rond 1800*, ed. by Frans Grijzenhout, Niek van Sas, and Wyger Velema (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2013), 27–63; idem, “Reform, Revolution, and the Republican Tradition: The Case of the Batavian Republic,” in *Languages of Reform in the Eighteenth Century: When Europe Lost Its Fear of Change*, ed. by Susan Richter, Thomas Maissen, and Manuela Albertone (New York: Routledge, 2019), 363–83.

27 Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); De Dijn, *Freedom*.

seventeenth-century England and the nascent United States of America, and also leave aside the well-studied case of Revolutionary France. Instead, they place the eighteenth-century Dutch Republic at the heart of the debate. The first three chapters survey Dutch intellectual developments from the early seventeenth until the late eighteenth century. They discuss reflections on the commercial and imperialist nature of the Dutch Republic and zoom in on key authors and texts, including the philosopher Baruch Spinoza who, in the influential thesis of Jonathan Israel, has been characterized as the foundational figure of modern democratic republicanism.²⁸ The tension between aristocratic and democratic tendencies again became a central theme in republican debate during the Dutch revolutionary era around 1800, which forms the core of this volume. Chapters five to nine provide fresh perspectives on the intense ideological conflict of this era, when Patriot revolutionaries strongly criticized the oligarchical nature of the traditional Dutch republican government. Fueled by internal political struggle and international developments, particularly the American and French Revolutions, a debate on the nature of republicanism was waged with profound consequences for the ideological and institutional arrangements of the Dutch Republic, culminating in the eventual transition of the republic into a monarchy and the subsequent demise of republican thought in the Netherlands.

To situate the Dutch Republic within a broader international perspective, the last five chapters of the volume explore connections with other contexts, republican and monarchical, that have been much less studied within scholarship on the history of republicanism: the Spanish monarchy, the polity from which the Dutch gained their independence, the German lands, which culturally and intellectually are most strongly connected to the Netherlands, and the Republic of Venice, which shares with the Dutch Republic a narrative of decline and fall. While the volume at large takes a transnational perspective in analyzing how ideas and writings travelled across borders and were picked up, adapted, and disseminated internationally, these final chapters particularly allow for a comparative approach that reminds us of similarities and differences, not only between different republics but also between republics and monarchies. For example, the myth of noble and virtuous Batavian ancestors that played such an important part in Dutch republican narratives, took on a surprising dimension in Spain, a polity that, as John Elliott has shown, was equally haunted by the specter of decline.²⁹ Besides bringing such monarchical

28 Jonathan Israel, "The Intellectual Origins of Modern Democratic Republicanism (1660–1720)," *European Journal of Political Theory* 3 (2004): 7–36.

29 J.H. Elliott, "The Question of Decline," in *Spain and its World, 1500–1700* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 211–286.

contexts into the historiographical debate on the republican tradition, this volume also bridges the gap between the early modern period, which remains dominant in republican scholarship, and post-1800 developments, up to the Weimar Republic of the 1920s when Baron coined his concept of *Bürgerhumanismus* in a period during which the theme of decline became, once again, a powerful intellectual narrative.

2 The Many Guises of Patriotism and Politeness

The contributions in this volume have been written as separate essays, but together they deepen and revise our understanding of the different discourses of decline that can be distinguished in the eighteenth-century Dutch Republic and beyond. In her chapter, Eleá de la Porte has revisited the very spectators that are so central to previous analyses of Dutch decline. De la Porte confirms the view that spectatorial writers saw moral degeneration as the main cause of the decay of the Republic and that they considered themselves to be its healers. She follows Velema in his observation that the seventeenth century became for these authors a “golden age of Dutch manners and morals,”³⁰ while the mythological Batavian past lost its relevance, because the Germanic tribe of the Batavians was now considered too uncivilized to serve as an example. However, as De la Porte shows, this trend was reversed towards the end of the eighteenth century. Spectatorial authors writing in the time of the Dutch Revolution (c. 1780–1800) overwhelmingly belonged to the revolutionary camp. For them the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic was less useful as model for the present because of the old-regime connotations it had now acquired. The ancient Batavians resurfaced as uncorrupted, virtuous republicans, even if their incivility remained a source of discomfort.

Jan Rotmans, too, demonstrates that the eighteenth-century Dutch discourse of decline did not develop in a linear way. Like De la Porte, Rotmans takes the work of Velema as his starting point, but unlike Velema and De la Porte he identifies a more orthodox classical republican strand in Dutch political thought that was more pessimistic about the possibility to bring republican decline to a halt than the spectatorial writers. According to Rotmans, late-eighteenth-century authors such as Cornelis Zillesen (1735–1828) and Ijsbrand van Hamelsveld (1743–1812), whom Velema had previously classified with the polite republicans in the tradition of Van Effen, in fact continued to see decline first and foremost as the result of the rise of luxury and presented civic virtue

30 Velema, “Polite Republicanism,” 82.

as its antidote. The introduction of representative government and a constitution, which was the Dutch revolutionary solution to the corrupted political system of the stadtholderian regime, did not strike them as the magic bullet that would help them to escape the inevitable fate of every republican state.

Ida Nijenhuis and Lina Weber juxtapose differing views on decline. In her longitudinal analysis of commercial republicanism in the early modern Dutch Republic, which bears the fruits of a long career that ran parallel to that of Velema, Nijenhuis contrasts the traditional discourse in which decline is caused by luxury with the writings of authors who, following the publication of David Hume's *Of Luxury*, have a less negative view on luxury, such as Simon Stijl (1731–1804), Isaac de Pinto (1717–87), and Elie Luzac (1721–96).³¹ Of those three authors, Weber gives center stage to Luzac, the Orangist theorist to whom Velema dedicated his doctoral thesis, and compares his thinking to that of the famous revolutionary Patriot Joan Derk van der Capellen (1741–84).³² Weber specifically focuses on the problem of debt. According to the classical republican orthodoxy, debt, like luxury, had corrupting effects, and therefore contributed to decline. Weber points out that for Van der Capellen debt as such was not problematic, but in his view Dutch patricians had become corrupted because they had lent money to England. Luzac, by contrast, considered national debt as ruinous, but he reached this conclusion following a modern economic rather than a classical republican line of argument.

Discussions of decline touched upon not only economic issues within Dutch society such as debt, but also upon issues relating to the colonial world overseas. As Freya Sierhuis shows in her chapter, the craze for colonial consumer goods based on slave labor, such as coffee, was increasingly deemed to corrupt republican simplicity and sobriety in the later eighteenth century. Dutch colonial agents, blinded by imperial arrogance and greed, could be considered to have forsaken their republican identity, while freedom-loving Asian princes who tried to resist corrupted Dutch rule embodied a true republican ethos, for example in the play *Agon, Sultan van Bantam* (1769). Nonetheless, the interaction between republicanism and anti-colonial and abolitionist discourse was complex since Enlightenment theories concerning the different stages of

31 See also I.J.A. Nijenhuis, *Een joodse philosophe. Isaac de Pinto (1717–1787) en de ontwikkeling van de politieke economie in de Europese Verlichting* (Amsterdam: NEHA, 1992); and idem, “De weelde als deugd?,” *De Achttiende Eeuw* 24, no. 1 (1992): 45–56.

32 Wyger R.E. Velema, *Enlightenment and Conservatism in the Dutch Republic: The Political Thought of Elie Luzac (1721–1796)* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1993). Cf. also idem, “Generous Republican Sentiments: The Political Thought of Joan Derk van der Capellen tot den Pol,” in *A Marble Revolutionary: The Dutch Patriot Joan Derk van der Capellen and his Monument*, ed. by Arthur Weststeijn (Rome: Palombi, 2011), 39–65.

civilizational progress essentially prioritized a paternalist narrative of moral education towards liberty.

Was there no escaping the notion of decline in the eighteenth-century Dutch Republic? Niek van Sas writes that Joan Hendrik Swildens (1745–1809), in his best-known work *Vaderlandsch A.-B.-boek* (Patriotic A.-B.-Book), did not speak of decline, despite the fact that this abecedarium appeared in the crisis year 1781, which also saw the publication of Van der Capellen's *Aan het Volk van Nederland* (To the People of the Netherlands). Swildens shared with the spectatorial writers the optimistic Enlightenment view that the Dutch people could regain their former glory if they only behaved virtuously. Van Sas suggests that Swildens did not possess the classical republican pessimism of the authors studied by Rotmans. At the same time he does point out that the *Patriotic A.-B.-Book* was intended as a means of moral rearmament, so we may infer that Swildens was ultimately driven by an implicit sense of decline similar to that triggering the spectators' moral critique.

After the revolutionary era, the Netherlands became a constitutional monarchy, in which there was little room for republican thought. In his contribution Remieg Aerts asks why this was the case, and whether there were any continuities between the Dutch Republic, the revolutionary era and 1848. Was there an undercurrent of pre-Restoration republican thought in the Kingdom of the (United) Netherlands? If Aerts is correct in assuming that there wasn't, this also helps to explain why the language of decline hardly played a role in later nineteenth-century versions of republicanism. In the first place nineteenth-century Dutchmen rejected the history of the Republic and equated republicanism with the political discord and party struggle of the revolutionary era. Since the narrative of decline remained central to this partisan and polarized republicanism – as Rotmans convincingly shows – it is perhaps no wonder that it disappeared after 1800. Secondly, nineteenth-century commentators were more future-oriented and geared towards (gradual) development within a constitutional-monarchical order. This outlook did not fit well with the language of decline. Aerts concludes that an upsurge of republicanism in the last quarter of the nineteenth century emanated from socialist ideology and did not reach back to early modern classical republicanism.

The patchy nature of the Dutch republican tradition is perhaps best embodied by Spinoza, arguably the most important republican thinker in the Dutch Republic, whose legacy in the Netherlands was initially modest and did not prove of much importance in later moments of Dutch radical republicanism.³³

33 See Wyger R.E. Velema, "Jonathan Israel and Dutch Patriotism," *De Achttiende Eeuw* 41 (2009): 152–160.

In this volume Wiep van Bunge analyzes in depth how Spinoza tried to come to terms with the instant failure of his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* around 1672, when the Dutch Republic experienced its deepest crisis and the total collapse of the republican system appeared to be imminent.

This volume's emphasis on the Netherlands gains significance when we compare this case to other moments and places. Alessandro Metlica shows in his chapter how in early modern Venice after its Renaissance heyday, the myth of stability was powerful enough to allow for an increase in the display of private luxury without an equally growing sense of decline. By contrast, the notion of decline increasingly gained dominance in the seventeenth-century Spanish monarchy, when rebellions on both sides of the Atlantic, in the Netherlands and Chile, posed a formidable challenge to Spanish authority. Significantly, Spanish commentators essentially adopted and inverted the Dutch narrative of a glorious Batavian republican past to depict their rebellious opponents as uncivilized barbarians. As Lisa Kattenberg shows, the Spanish consoled themselves by maintaining that it was simply impossible to fight rebels who were as liberty-loving as the Dutch and the Chilean Mapuche. The use of the classical republican analogy of the Batavians thus helped the Spanish monarchy to accept its military decline while preserving a sense of political and cultural superiority.

Elements from the classical discourse of decline can also be found in the monarchical contexts of the German lands during the eighteenth century. While Velema has highlighted the political aims of the Dutch spectatorial periodicals, Hans Erich Bödeker, in his chapter, does something similar for the German Enlightenment press. Bödeker shows that the German obsession with the ancient Greeks had not only a cultural but also a strong political component. Athens and Sparta were presented as two opposing models that had not yet lost their political relevance, even if the historical distance between antiquity and the present was increasingly acknowledged. The two Greek polities represented to the Germans contrasting models that, in the eighteenth-century Dutch Republic, were found in the seventeenth century and the Batavian past respectively: civilized and moderately luxurious versus rough and spartan. To the Mainzer citizen Niklas Vogt (1756–1836), who is at the center of Matthijs Lok's contribution, Greece also functioned as a model, but in his case for a pluralistic "European Republic." Writing during the ever-changing political world of the revolutionary era, Vogt found inspiration in a wide array of ancient and modern authors from Polybius to Hume, and wavered between a pessimistic and an optimistic view of the future fate of this republic. In his analysis Lok once again reminds us that conservatism and Enlightenment thought were not

mutually exclusive in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as Velema has set out to demonstrate multiple times throughout his career.³⁴

Wessel Krul's chapter serves to show that two other intellectual traditions, republicanism and Romanticism, should not be seen as incompatible either. Like Vogt, Thomas Mann lived through a time of upheaval, and his thinking likewise evolved during this period, but in a very different direction. Initially Mann was drawn to Oswald Spengler's *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (The Decline of the West, 1918–23), which applied a cyclical rise-and-fall perspective not to states but to cultures, and to the European West in particular. Spengler's dichotomy between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation* can perhaps be considered a modernist version of the opposition between Athens and Sparta, or that between the Dutch Golden Age and Batavian antiquity. Mann finally sided with *Kultur* and increasingly identified this vision with both the legacy of Romanticism and the democratic regime of the Weimar Republic. For a man who had previously, like the eighteenth-century Dutch spectatorial authors, cultivated an image of himself as *unpolitisch*, culture and politics had now become inextricably linked.

Beyond the case of Mann, the context of Weimar Germany merits some closer attention here, because it reveals that changes in the image of the eighteenth-century Dutch Republic can at least partly be ascribed to historiographical trends that transcend the debate over the nature and relevance of the Atlantic republican tradition. Like the Dutch Republic, the Weimar Republic has long been regarded as a paradigmatic case of a state in decline. There are some remarkable similarities in the ways in which historians of both polities have started to depart from this *idée reçue* over the past decades. In both contexts, the state of crisis was first thought to be a *Totalkrisis*;³⁵ a crucial difference was that whilst the Dutch eighteenth century was characterized as an era of the “absolute nothing,”³⁶ it was generally assumed that in Weimar political and moral decline had given rise to an exceptional flowering

34 Velema, *Enlightenment and Conservatism*; idem, “Enlightenment against Revolution: The Intellectual Origins of Dutch Conservatism,” in *Cosmopolitan Conservatism: Countering Revolution in Transnational Networks, Ideas and Movements (c. 1700–1930)*, ed. by Matthijs Lok, Friedemann Pestel, and Juliette Reboul (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 108–30.

35 See De Vries, *De economische achteruitgang*, 7–8, about the work of the historian P.J. Blok; and Rüdiger Graf, “Either-Or: The Narrative of ‘Crisis’ in Weimar Germany and in Historiography,” *Central European History* 43 (2010): 596.

36 Philip de Vries, “De Nederlandse cultuur in de eerste helft van de achttiende eeuw,” in *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, ed. by J.A. van Houtte et al., vol. VII (Utrecht: W. de Haan, 1954), 255; quoted in Mijnhardt, *Een republikeinse erfenis*, 6.

of the arts and sciences.³⁷ For both states the total character of the crisis has subsequently been nuanced. As Kossmann had done – not entirely without problems, as we have seen – for the Dutch vocabulary of decline, historians of Weimar have pointed out that *Krise* had, for contemporaries, a less exclusively negative and more hopeful connotation than it has in German today.³⁸ The idea that both states were consistently underperforming compared to other states of their own time has been called into question.³⁹ The eighteenth-century Dutch Republic was not devoid of intellectual and cultural bloom.⁴⁰ The Weimar Republic was no *Republik ohne Republikaner* and provided fertile soil for republican symbolism and ritual.⁴¹

3 Politics, Culture, and the Transnational History of Republicanism

This interesting historiographical parallel can be ascribed to the influence of the linguistic and cultural turns that have taught historians to critically assess concepts and conceptual change and not to treat politics and culture as strictly separate spheres. The working life of Wyger Velema has coincided with the rise, and what is starting to look like the slow decline of the new paradigm that has emerged after these turns. Throughout his career, Velema has made major contributions to this paradigm, from his role as co-founder of the seminal

37 See most famously Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968); Detlev Peukert, *Die Weimarer Republik. Krisenjahre der klassischen Moderne* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1987).

38 Kossmann, “The Dutch Republic,” 29–30; Moritz Föllmer, Rüdiger Graf, and Per Leo, “Einleitung: Die Kultur der Krise in der Weimarer Republik,” in *Die ‘Krise’ der Weimarer Republik. Zur Kritik eines Deutungsmusters* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2005), 9–41.

39 See for the Dutch Republic above, footnote 19 and also 21. For Weimar: Peter Fritzsche, “Did Weimar Fail?” *The Journal of Modern History* 68, no. 2 (1996): 629–56; *Beyond Glitter and Doom: The Contingency of the Weimar Republic*, ed. by Jochen Hung, Godela Weiss-Sussex, and Geoff Wilkes (Munich: Iudicum, 2012).

40 See for instance Joost Kloek and Wijnand W. Mijnhardt, 1800: *Blueprints for a National Community* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Inger Leemans and Gert-Jan Johannes, *Worm en donder. Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur 1700–1800: de Republiek* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2013).

41 Manuela Achilles, “Reforming the Reich: Democratic Symbols and Rituals in the Weimar Republic,” in *Weimar Publics/Weimar Subjects: Rethinking the Political Culture of Germany in the 1920s*, ed. by Kathleen Canning, Kerstin Barndt, and Kristin McGuire (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 175–91; Kathleen Canning, “Introduction: The Politics of Symbols, Semantics, and Sentiments in the Weimar Republic,” *Central European History* [special issue *Culture of Politics – Politics of Culture: New Perspectives on the Weimar Republic*] 43 (2010): 567–80.

Nederlandse Begripsgeschiedenis book series⁴² – the Dutch response to the German *Begriffsgeschichte* school – to his more recent work, which firmly situates the eighteenth-century political language of classical republicanism in a much broader cultural pattern of classical reception.⁴³

Wyger Velema's scholarly work is unique in its combination of a relentless dedication to the history of republicanism and a wholehearted embrace of the political-cultural approach. It has taught us to bear in mind that the republican worldview could permeate not only the political sphere, but all aspects of life, and invites us to take into account, for instance, literary figures who are not normally considered to belong to the republican political canon, such as Justus van Effen or, for that matter, Thomas Mann. In order to understand crucial aspects of the republican tradition, such as the discourse of decline, republicanism has to be studied through a cultural as well as a political lens, since decline was perceived as having causes and effects that went beyond the realm of politics and touched upon economic, social and above all moral issues. No wonder that many looked at public education as a means to overcome the perceived decline of the *res publica*, or that republican discourses of decline and rise-and-fall narratives can be found not only in political and economic texts but also in historical works, cultural magazines, novels and plays.

42 Wyger R.E. Velema, "Nederlandse begripsgeschiedenis. Ten geleide," in *Vaderland. Een geschiedenis van de vijftiende eeuw tot 1940*, ed. by N.C.F. van Sas (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999), ix–xvii; *Vrijheid. Een geschiedenis van de vijftiende tot de twintigste eeuw*, ed. by E.O.G. Haitzma Mulier and Wyger R.E. Velema (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999). See also Velema, *Republicans*, chapter 7, "The Concept of Liberty in the Dutch Republic," and idem, "'Republic' and 'Democracy' in Dutch Late Eighteenth-Century Discourse," in *The Political Culture of the Sister Republics, 1794–1806: France, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Italy*, ed. by Joris Oddens, Mart Rutjes, and Erik Jacobs (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 49–56.

43 Wyger R.E. Velema, *Omstreden Oudheid. De Nederlandse achttiende eeuw en de klassieke politiek* (Amsterdam: Vossiuspers, 2010); idem, "Introduction: Antiquity and Modernity in the Eighteenth Century: The Case of the Dutch Republic," in *Classical Antiquity in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by A.J.P. Raat, W.R.E. Velema, and C. Baar-de Weerd (Utrecht: Werkgroep 18e Eeuw, 2012), 17–29; idem, "Conversations with the Classics: Ancient Political Virtue and Two Modern Revolutions," *Early American Studies* 10, no. 2 (2012): 415–38; idem, "Classical Antiquity Contested: The Dutch Eighteenth Century and Ancient Politics," in *Vek Prosveshcheniia*, vol. IV: *Antichnoe Nasledie v Evropeiskoi Kul'ture XVIII Veka*, ed. by S.Ia. Karp and G.A. Kosmolinskaia (Moscow: Nauka, 2012), 213–26; idem, "Oude waarheden. Over de terugkeer van de klassieke oudheid in de verlichtingshistoriografie," *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 127, no. 2 (2014): 229–46; idem, "Against Democracy: Dutch Eighteenth-Century Critics of Ancient and Modern Popular Government," in *Ancient Models*, ed. by Velema and Weststeijn, 189–213.

By investigating a wide range of sources in conjunction with one another, this volume aims to give a new impulse to the study of the republican tradition.

Despite its focus on the Dutch Republic, this volume also shows the importance of transnational and comparative approaches to the history of republicanism. As Wyger Velema has taught us, there is little to be gained when one is “obsessed with the need to identify a particularly and exclusively Dutch form of political discourse.”⁴⁴ Although Dutch republicanism shows the marks of its specific local social, economic, and political circumstances, it never developed in isolation and should be analyzed in tandem with republican varieties elsewhere. The approach of this volume allows for a fuller integration of all these varieties of republicanism into the broader framework traditionally focused on Italian and Anglo-American republican theory. The Dutch Republic, after all, produced relatively few hardcore theorists, but many citizens who forged republican identities for themselves and their fellow countrymen, passionately discussing the Republic’s cultural norms and values and their political implications. We cherish the diversity of these intellectual endeavors and refrain from “anachronistically imposing a definition of republicanism,” because we concur with Wyger Velema that “such an exercise is futile.”⁴⁵ Instead, we explore the full breadth of the republican tradition between the poles of politeness and patriotism, Athens and Sparta, Golden Age and Batavian myth, and even *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*, with a renewed focus on the ever-present theme of republican decline.

44 Velema, *Republicans*, 32.

45 *Ibid.*, 28.